

Relevance of Ancient Indian Social and Economical Wisdom in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Ancient Indian literature is the crowning glory of Indian civilization and its evolution towards contemporary times. No other part of the world has probably produced such voluminous literature of knowledge and wisdom. Indian literature of ancient times entails all the minute details of day-to-day existence through spiritual understanding acting like a talisman, a polestar guiding the contemporary populace. I, personally believe in the awakening of consciousness among individuals to work towards a healthy society. The Bhagwat Gita and Ramcharitramanas have been my talisman in life and I believe man's present crises are more mental than material and that many life's problems would be annihilated if one sought advice in these manuscripts. In many ways, most teachings of the Gita have a universal applicability as they transcend temporal, geographic, and cultural barriers. In my personal life, my actions are dedicate by spiritual morals and a sense of just which are a consequence of my understanding of the ancient Indian texts and spiritual beliefs .

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In seeking to explain why economic growth and prosperity occur in some places and not others, economists have too often overstressed instrumental economic factors. But such factors are not by themselves enough to explain these phenomena. And other dimensions need to be considered. The notion of capital is well understood. Money and other resources can buy tools, pay labour, and build infrastructure, and thereby lead to an increase. To this understanding has been added the notion of human capital, which postulates that human resources, mostly in the form of education and personal betterment, are also key to economic growth and improvement. In recent years, economists and others have begun to argue that for economies to make better use of their reserves something more is also important-spiritual capital. Lord Keynes, it is said, once remarked that for centuries we had kept religion and business in "different compartments of the soul." The notion of spiritual capital seeks to break down this wall. It is an identifiable set of concepts, ideas, beliefs, habits, social engagements, and activities that constitute a subset of human and social capital. Specifically, spiritual capital consists of the human and social capital of knowledge and behaviors that have to do with transcendent concepts and ultimate concerns, and is a critical source of innovation in human thought and society. It can also be understood as a dynamic system that contains human and social capital as subsystems. In other words, as a specific set of knowledge and behavior, spiritual capital is the subset of human and social capital; but from the point of view of dynamics and action, spiritual capital is the comprehensive system containing human and social capital as well as linking them to innovation and to the natural world. Max Weber started a debate on the impact of religion on economic attitudes by stressing that religion affects the economy through its influence on individual traits that make people more or less economically productive. Today much of the existing evidence in support of this idea is based on cross country studies that try to distinguish this impact from other factors. Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary have used the World Values Surveys to identify the relationship between economic attitudes and intensity of religious beliefs, controlling for country fixed effects. They studied religious and economic attitudes towards cooperation, government, working women, legal rules, thriftiness, and the market economy. They also distinguished between and across religious denominations, and according to whether a religion was dominant in a given country. They found that many religious beliefs were associated with good economic attitudes, where 'good' is defined as conducive to higher per capita income and growth. These effects differ across religious denominations, but overall, their studies found that Christian religion have been particularly positively associated with attitudes conducive to economic growth.

“India has believed in the domestic system in both industry and education, and not in the mechanical methods of large production in institutions and factories turning out standardized articles”.

“A most wonderful thing was noticed in India is that here the forest, not the town, is the fountain head of all civilization. Wherever in India its earliest and most wonderful manifestations are noticed, we find that men have not come into such close contact as to be rolled or fused into a compact mass. There, trees and plants, rivers and lakes, had ample opportunity to live in close relationship with men. In these forests, though, there was human society, there was enough of open space, of aloofness; there was no jostling. Still it rendered it all the brighter. It is the forest that nurtured the two great ancient ages of India, the Vedic and the Buddhist. As did the Vedic Rishis, Buddha also showered his teaching in the many woods of India. The current of civilization that flowed from its forests inundated the whole of India.”

“In order to preserve the continuity of this national heritage and add to its richness, India built large institutions of higher learning from time to time. They served as the repositories of her large spiritual, philosophical, scientific, artistic and literary achievements and as the media of transmission of this heritage to the future generations. But it was realized by the early Vedic seers that the educational institutions could only discharge their functions properly if they were isolated from the conflicting demands of the rough and tumble of the world. They, therefore, built their universities in forests, or in places of natural beauty. Nature softens the instincts of body and mind, which otherwise become harsh and aggressive when man lives in houses of brick and mortar. When man lives in the lap of nature, his emotional and mental life becomes pure and harmonious; he grows as a part of life that surrounds him. His inner strains and stresses are reduced to minimum, his mind is alert, his intuition awake. Ancient India, therefore, selected spots of natural beauty for locating its educational institutions.”

“Is it possible to find, in our human annals, words more majestic, more full of solemn anguish, more august in tone, more devout, more terrible? Where, from the depths of an agnosticism, which thousands of years have augmented, can we point to wider horizon? At the very outset, it surpasses all that has been said, and goes farther than we shall even dare to go. No spectacle could be more absorbing than this struggle of our forefathers of five to ten thousand years ago with the Unknowable, the unknowable nature of the causeless Cause of all Causes. But to this cause, or this God, we should have never known anything, had He remained self-absorbed, had He never manifested Himself”. Thus it is, say the Laws of Manu, “that, by an alternation of awakening and repose, the immutable Being causes all this assemblage

of creatures, mobile and immobile, eternally to return to life and to die.” He exhales Himself, or expels His breath, throughout the Universe, innumerable worlds are born, multiply and evolve. He Himself inhales, drawing his breath, and Matter enters into Spirit, which is but an invisible form of Matter: and the worlds disappear, without perishing, to reintegrate the Eternal cause, and emerge once more upon the awakening of Brahma- that is, thousands of millions of years later; to enter into Him so it has been and ever shall be, through all eternity, without beginning, without cessation, without end”.

“When the world had emerged from the darkness,” says the Bhagvata Puranam, “the subtle elementary principle produced the vegetable seed which first of all gave life to the plants. From the plants, life passed into the fantastic creatures which were born of the slime in the waters; then, through a series of different shapes and animals, it came to Man.” They passed in succession by way of the plants, the worms, the insects, the serpents, the tortoises, cattle, and the wild animals- such is the lower stage”, says Manu again, who adds, “Creatures acquired the qualities of those that preceded them, so that the farther down its position in the series, the greater its qualities.

“Have we not here the whole of Darwinian evolution confirmed by geology and foreseen at least 6,000 years go? On the other hand, is this not the theory of Akasa which we more clumsily call the ether, the sole source of all substances, to which our science is returning? Is this true that the recent theories of Einstein deny ether, supposing that radiant energy- visible light, for example-is propagated independently through a space that is an absolute void. But the scientific ether is not precisely the Hindu Akasa which is much more subtle and immaterial being a sort of spiritual element or divine energy, space uncreated, imperishable, and infinite .”

The history of the most of the known civilizations show that the further back we go into antiquity, the more unsatisfactory is found to be the general position of women. Hindu civilization is unique in this respect, for here we find a surprising exception to the general rule. The further back we go, the more satisfactory is found to be the position of women in more spheres than one; and the field of education is most noteworthy among them. There is ample and convincing evidence to show that women were regarded as perfectly eligible for the privilege of studying the Vedic literature and performing the sacrifices enjoined in it down to about 200 B.C. this need not surprise us, for some of the hymns of the Rig Veda are the composition of twenty sage poetesses.

Cultural explanation have been a vigorous industry in India for more than a hundred years. Colonial officials routinely blamed India’s poverty on the otherworldly

spirituality of Hindu life and its fatalistic beliefs. Max Weber attributed the absence of development to the caste system. Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist, found that India's social system and attitudes were an important cause of its "low level equilibrium" of low productivity, primitive production techniques, and low levels of living.

Deepak Lal, another economist, similarly explained economic stagnation in a low level "Hindu equilibrium" around caste system, which bought stability in the context of political warfare, monsoon failure and climatic uncertainty, labor shortage, and an under-valued merchant class. David Landes, the historian, blames the enervating heat, which is deleterious to work. For this reason, rich countries lie in temperate zones and the poor in the tropics and semi-tropics .

While institutions and culture do matter undoubtedly, we are all skeptical of national stereotypes and easy cultural explanations of the sort that were common hundred years ago. In my experience, successful Hindu entrepreneurs can be both extremely otherworldly in religion and aggressive in business. The Indian farmer, despite being caught in the caste system, responds quickly to market based incentives, as the Green Revolution testifies. Brahmins, who are supposed to have contempt for manual labor, will plough their land vigorously if they have to. And Rajput Thakurs, who never worked for a living, will shed their feudal ways for the sake of a commercial opportunity. Moreover, there are substantial non-Hindus in India and these communities had also been stuck in the same rut of stagnation .

Other Asian countries were equally backward, but they had no "Hindu equilibrium" to explain away their stagnation. Finally, the same Indians when they migrate to other countries perform better .

Thus, I am uncomfortable with the "otherworldly values of the Hindus" or the "immobilizing effects of the caste system" and the "conservative habits of the merchant caste". I believe that Sir John Hicks' Economics Principle does trump in most cases. It states that "people would act economically; when the opportunity of an advantage was presented to them they would take it." It explains not only the diffusion of the Green Revolution across India but also the demographic transitions currently underway in many states .

When seeking an explanation for a nation's wealth and poverty, my preferred method is to begin with economic factors as proximate causes that motivate a businessman to invest-the size of the market, the capability of suppliers, distribution hurdles, and the state of competition. If this does not satisfy, I seek answers in institutions, some of which are, of course, intimately tied to culture. I have found that

institutions, some of which are, of course, intimately tied to culture. I have found that institutions can evolve rapidly as incentives change in society and can be transferred fairly quickly; for example, during the 1990s India was able to dismantle many of the institutions of Nehruvian socialism and replace them with capitalist institutions. Finally, if none of these factors provide a satisfactory explanation, then I turn to attitudes and social structure.

I find Deepak Lall's distinction between material and cosmological beliefs useful. The material beliefs of a civilization are about ways of making a living and are the subject of economics; cosmological ones are about how to live and are in the realm of 'culture'. The rise of the west was accompanied by a change in both sets of beliefs, but East Asian's success has needed mainly a change in material beliefs- it has become prosperous without losing its soul. In other words, it is possible to modernize without westernizing. Ever since the British Raj material beliefs have been changing in Indian unlike our cosmological beliefs.

Our continuing inability to distinguish between the "modern" and the "western" in India is surely the cause of some of our grief. If we could only accept that a great deal of modern western culture, especially its material beliefs, are not the West's property, but are a universal, critical way of thinking, which belongs to all rational human beings. We would not waste our energies on swadeshi (protectionism) hindutva (preserving the ancient Hindu civilization), and futile language debates ("remove English from primary schools"). The debate between modernization and westernization, begun in early nineteenth century by Ram Mohan Roy, continues to rage in India. At the root is a fear of the loss of the Indian way of life. The older generation fears it more than the young, whose minds are more decolonized and who are more confident in adopting the West's material beliefs without fearing the loss in its cosmological ones.

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