CULTURAL CONTACTS

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It is an amazing experience to see, again and again in the course of cultural development all over the world, how suddenly a peak of accomplishment is reached without much indication of such an achievement in previous periods. It is not an evolution step by step—it is like an out-burst, like a revelation. When we review the last three thousand years, we find different nations creating works of the highest beauty in fine arts or in architecture, of deepest wisdom in philosophy, of unimaginable perfection in poetry—at irregular intervals—apparently as products of various economic, political, even geographical factors, but also at times without any obvious reason, just by chance. If one tries to find out whether any common cause could be found for these sudden dramatic developments, one sees that always when two foreign cultures come into intimate touch with each other, the result of their blending is a sudden rise of the cultural level.

The artistic expression of the culturally young, nomadic, colonising tribes tends to geometric ornaments; they do not try to imitate nature and especially the human and animal body; nay, they are definitely hostile to such an enterprise; wherever we find human or animal motives—in spite of this general trend and always indicating that these nomads have been in touch with foreign civilisations—they turn immediately to lifeless though harmonious decorations; they are never realistic or naturalistic. Socially these nomadic civilisations tend to individualism and patriarchy.—Whereas the old civilisations, settled on the soil since times immemorial, as the indigenous cultures of Asia Minor, the Middle East and Dravidian India, are infatuated with the human body; they shape its image and worship it as they worship life in all its manifestations, in boundless devotion to its magic. The sculptures which adorn the gōpurams of Dravidian temples illustrate this. The will of these artists does not try to simplify, to curb God’s creation according to preconceived ideas; on the contrary the aim of old Asia’s creative imagination seems to be to exaggerate the limitless manifoldness of creation. These primeval civilisations, which are definitely non-Aryan and non-Arabic are collectivistic, based on agriculture, living under maternal rule and worshipping female deities—the moon and the snake. As a logical
consequence, the blending of these two opposite tendencies in art, which are of course not confined to sculpture or decorative art, but which find their expression in every manifestation of man's higher aspirations, leads, on the one hand, to an increased liveliness, to a real animation of the abstract, geometric, iconophobe art of the nomads or colonizers, and, on the other hand, to a severe monumentality, to an emphasized lawfulness of the too naturalistic art, characteristic of those inebriated with luxuriant, voluptuous life.

A few examples will explain easily the main trends of the two opposite artistic and cultural currents. All the so-called Aryans in Europe, Germanic, Celtic or Greek nomadic tribes, worshipped their Gods in forests, deified trees or rocks, but did not form any human-shaped idol, except when they got into close touch with influences from the orient; thus the earlier this fundamental change in religious artistic expression took place the nearer the final settlement of these nomads was to Asia Minor and the Middle East, old centres of idolatry or worship of human-shaped deities. In Greece, just opposite the Asiatic coast, orientalization, or the invasion of naturalistic art currents, took place about 700 B.C.; in France, by the Roman conquest about 50 B.C.; and in Germany, after Christianity became dominant in the 8th century A.D., some 1400 or 1500 years later than in Greece. In Greece we find the clearest manifestation of this evolution. Among all the different Greek tribes, who arrived in Greece in two big waves at about 2000 and 1400 B.C., the same strong artistic will was alive, expressing itself in strictly geometric patterns till one of them, the Ionians, expanded beyond the Greek peninsula and settled down in Asia Minor. From this moment onward, however, for centuries efforts become visible among the Ionians to build the human body—still not naturalistic, still ornamental, stiff and severe, but the antagonism against forming natural shapes, against worshipping God in his own image is slowly undermined and weakened. So is the soil prepared for the last creative blending process. As everybody's individual faculties reach the highest achievement when confronted with catastrophies, so was the Greek genius forced to super-human efforts in the Persian wars; thus facing the fateful question, to be or not to be, forgetting all the petty problems of every-day national strife, the Greeks and especially the Ionian Athenians, became wide open to the fertilizing influence of invading Persia, who brought with her armies the seeds of the oldest cultures known up-to-day, of Sumer, Babylon and Assyria, where the sculpture of men and animals had been cultivated for ages. The result of the clash of these two hostile worlds was one of the very few peaks which human genius reached at any time in its long history.
Suddenly, some twenty years after the invasion of the Greeks' own country by the Persian culture, the miracle is born: the Apollo of Olympia, the Parthenon. At exactly the same time occurs the highest accomplishment, in the poetry of Pindar, in the dramatic creations of Æschylus and Sophocles, in the inexhaustible historic revelations of Herodotus, in the work of the giant in medicine, Hippocrates, and, simultaneously with the building of the Parthenon, in the writings of the most impressive prose writer of all times, Thucydides. The highest spirituality which the West has ever achieved, in essential features influenced by India, found expression during this same blessed century in the philosophers Anaxagoras, Democritus, Empedocles, and Socrates, whose teaching has been handed over to us by his devoted pupil Plato, and from Plato and his pupil Aristotle through an endless chain of searchers for truth, deeply influencing Jesus Christ, shaping the schools of Neo-Platonism, resounding in the renaissance, reaching and moving the deepest thinkers of our days. Nobody can say that this highest development of the human genius in all its aspects was due to favourable external conditions; it was a century of endless wars, of political persecutions, of mobocracy and of murderous epidemics—and in spite of all these adverse influences, almost untouched by them, this immortal heavenly flower, classic Greece, was born.

One hundred and fifty years later Hellenistic art, a somewhat effeminate descendant of Greek classic art, reached India with Alexander the Great; and again the stimulating effect of this cultural coalescence was powerful enough to raise the level, to refine the style of the Indian artists within the next two hundred years to such masterly accomplishments as the stupa gates of Sānci, built in early Āndhra times. Another interesting process of the highest importance for the development of Indian art took place in the wake of Alexander's adventurous expedition. Chandragupta had expelled from the Punjab most of the Greek artists whom Alexander had left behind; they settled down in parts of Afghanistan, which became famous through them as Gandhara, flourishing in the last century B.C. and the first two and half centuries A.D. Though the Graeco-Buddhistic sculptures which they created are rather conventional, academic, and not of a very high artistic level, the Gandhara schools kept awake some remainder of old Greek tradition; and when in the first century A.D. the Scytho-Indian dynasty of the Kushans united under their rule Gandhara with the old Indian province of Mathura, the material conditions were prepared for a thorough and lasting intermingling, a real growing together of Greek and India cultures on Indian soil. The result was that almost immediately, within some fifty years, Mathura became the birthplace and centre of a wonderful and truly
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Indian art, which spread from there to Sarnath; both these centres unfolded
their highest blossom, their most sublime accomplishment, under Gupta rule
contributing a good deal to their title of honour: 'The Imperial Guptas'.
None of the provinces of art, neither Gandhara nor Mathura-Sarnath,
achieved anything of the highest order as long as they worked separated from
each other; the divine spark which kindled the sacred fire of immortal
art and culture originated from the peaceful penetration of the West in the
East. Travelling with traders and explorers through the Arabian Sea,
round Cape Comorin the same Greek cultural elements, blended in the
most fortunate way with old Dravidian artistic achievements, succeeded
in beautifying Amarāvathi, the venerable capital of the Āndhra kingdom,
with unique Buddhistic masterpieces of South Indian inspired creativeness.¹

This investigation began with events which had happened in Greece
during the last years of Buddha's life. An attempt has been made to
demonstrate the result of cultural cross-breeding on manifestations of the
human genius materialised mainly in stone. The gigantic spiritual processes
which resulted from the introduction of the Aryan Vedas on Indian
soil will now be considered. Aryan nature worship penetrated in the vast
area of Dravidian idolatry. The oldest Vedic deities like Indra, Agni,
Rudra, Vayu and Varuna are the shapeless elementary powers, wor-
shipped not in temples but under the open sky and without idols.
The difference between the religious conceptions of the Trayī and the
Dravidian or Vratya pandemonium of the Atharva Veda is striking²; we
may well assume that the sublimation of this primeval pantheon to the
creative, preservative and destructive principles of Brahma, Vishnu and
Shiva, who bear human features in spite of their super-human character,
is the everlasting result of the transplantation of Aryan ideas in the Indian
world. The Dravidian conception of varna-asramadharma and karma,
blooded with the stern monumentality of the Aryan Vedas, lead to the
inexhaustible wealth of ideas, the unfathomable depth of Upanishadic
spirituality.

Wherever such antagonistic worlds come to grips alternating reforma-
tion and counter-reformation are inevitable. In Buddha's teaching
we find the tendency to despise the present life in all its distracting shapes,
to penetrate behind the illusion of the ever-changing, ever struggling and
suffering forms of human activity, to the eternal peace of the shapeless law,

¹ K. A. Nilakanta Sastri: Historical Method in relation to Problems of South Indian
History, p. 34.
² Nagendranath Ghose: Indo-Aryan Literature and Culture, quot. S. Rice: Hindu Customs
and their Origins, pp. 86–103.
ruling above all appearances, to the real truth, to Nirvana. Therefore, Buddha rejected all idols and for centuries his followers used symbolic ornaments only, the Hinayāna, in sharp contrast to the pre-Buddhistic era, which formed divine idols in human shape. But the Indian soil is stronger than the reformer; Mahayāna develops; most beautiful, most accomplished Buddha-statues are created, in their super-human serenity marking another eternal peak of achievement in art, equal to the greatest works of the Greek genius; just as the Brahmanic period, preceding Buddha, shows to what height of realization the human spirit is able to lift itself.

All these immortal monuments, Vedic-epic philosophy, piled up to the Upanishads and crystallized in the Bhagavad-Gīta, Buddhism and Indian Buddhistic art, culminating in Ajanta, are proofs of the immense creative power which arises from the blending of apparently hostile cultural trends.—Just when Indian art and culture had achieved this heavenly perfection, the divine spirit of history took parts of this gigantic structure, like Hanuman from the sacred Kailasa Mountain, and dropped them in Ceylon and Camboja, in Nepal and Tibet, in Turkestan, in Sumatra, Java and the Philippines and everywhere as a result of Indian colonisation, a miraculous bloom of highest beauty, but of widely differing character, sprouted from the mother soil.—In the times of the Han-dynasty already, a current of Indian culture along with Buddhistic missionaries had reached China and spread from there to Korea and finally to Japan, stimulating the development of the Far East for many centuries.

The rathas, the cave-temples with their sculptures, the rock-reliefs and the shore-temple of Māmallipūrām, Kailasanāth and Kodumbalur, belong to the immortal creations of the human genius. Have we got any reason to use the peak which India reached in culture and arts under Pallava rule as a corroboration of the thesis that blending of indigenous with foreign elements stimulates cultural evolution? According to the late Dr. C. Minakshi of Madras it is most probable that the Pallavas are of Scythian or Parthian origin and she points out the stations in U.P. and the Deccān, which they made on their migration to the South. When one contemplates the unsurpassed beauty of “Arjuna’s penance” or “the descent of the Ganges”, unfolding suddenly on Dravidian soil without anything comparable existing previously or afterwards, one will realise what a fortunate event it is in the evolution of the human races when different currents join each other,

\[^3\text{C. Minakshi: Administration and Social Life under the Pallavas, pp. 19–34.}\]
sacred places in history, where beauty grows up like temples on river junctions.

At the same time Islamic culture shoots up with lightning speed in the Middle East, in Spain and North Africa. What had happened was, that the religious and national consolidation following Mohamed’s miraculous appearance opened the spiritual eyes of a whole people to a most precious gift which refugees had rescued and brought to the Middle East some time before. The Nestorians, a Christian sect, were forced to leave Athens by a Byzantine emperor; among them were the leading philosophers, scientists and physicians of this age; and what they brought with them to Baghdad, Edessa, etc. was all the cultural survival of a continent, devastated by the barbarian hordes of Visigoths, Vandals, Huns and Avars, Germanic and Mongolic savages, invading and destroying the old Roman Empire during the dark ages. The Arabs translated, assimilated and preserved all these gems of a thousand years of cultural evolution; and out of this fateful permeation was born the delightful painting and sublime poetry of Persia and Moorish Spain, of Sicily and finally of the Moghul Empire in India, in a period lasting for a thousand years. And when Europe was to recover again from the mortal blows which it suffered through seven hundred years, the world has to be thankful for these seeds, saved by the Greek refugees and spread by the conquering Mohammedans. Thousandfold fruit was destined for them in the proud centuries of the European renaissance.

What fortunate consequences may arise even from tragic and deplorable historic events when they bring different civilisations in close touch is illustrated by the highly stimulating activity of Hellenistic refugees in England. During the Mohammedan conquest of Alexandria in 642, the world famous library there was destroyed by fire. Artists and scientists from Alexandria found shelter and settled down on the Anglo-Saxonian island where they initiated the so-called first English renaissance, characterised by a quite singular flourishing of fine arts, like gospel illustrations, historical and bible studies and the sudden appearance of universally cultured Englishmen like the venerable Bede.  

Before we return to India, a few words only about one of the most wonderful results, created by eastern magic on European soil: the magnificent Gothic art of the late XII and the XIII century. Throughout the XI and a good part of the XII century, wherever Aryan Christianity found an expression in fine art, especially in sculpture, a deep contempt of human

4 C. Dawson: The Making of Europe (German translation), p. 209.
beauty, of the perishable flesh, was emphasized; the artist of this time leaves no doubt that human features are shaped only to manifest the spiritual longing for God; the human body is almost transformed to a geometric ornament, denaturalised beyond imagination. Quite suddenly this picture changes entirely; a world of beauty, of perfect loveliness, blossoms on all cathedrals, such as had not been seen in Europe since the golden age of Greece and never seen before on Germanic soil. With the returning crusaders old Asiatic culture, oriental, colourful, optimistic, ecstatic life assertion pervaded young Europe again as in the time of the Persian invasion. The necessary reaction against this un-Aryan adoration of the human body was the protestantic breaking of images throughout Europe. This hatred against the shaping of human features, which is reserved to God, animates all religions of nomads: Jews, Mohammedans and Protestants who had settled down only a few centuries ago.

Exactly simultaneously with this peak of Gothic art, we find here in our beloved Mysore a cultural period of equal level, creating master-pieces second to nothing, comparable only with the highest artistic achievements in the world, the Hoysala temples and their sculptures; Talkad, Belur, Halebid, Somnathpur mark their development and make it immortal. Do we find a clue in history that this unique blossom is also consequent on a confluence and linking together of different cultural offsprings? We do find it unmistakably; the Western Chalukyas built temples of northern style, taken over from the Gupta Empire, and South Indian temples, originating in the Tamilian country, at the same time, close to each other⁵; when they were overthrown by their feudatories, the Hoysalas, a marvellous union took place between North and South, a miracle grew out of the Kanarese soil: the star-shaped Hoysala temple.

As I do not attempt any completeness of this representation, I omit even so striking witnesses for my thesis as Moses, Jesus Christ and Shakespeare, I pass over the Rashtrakuta and Chalukya kings, the Cholas and Pandyas, the Gangas and Cheras, the Naiaks and Vijayanagar rulers. I chose examples almost at random out of an unlimited material, trying to select convincing ones. To come nearer to our times, we have to ask whether the Mohammedan conquerors have been benefited by their penetration in the area of the incomparably older Indian culture. Without entering in controversial questions, it suffices to see Fatehpur Sikri and above all the Taj Mahal to realise what a tremendous impetus Moghul art received by the eternal vigour of India.

It remains to investigate from our point of view a most attractive problem of the greatest actual interest and importance: the modern Indian renaissance, which permeates, animates, rejuvenates and ennobles all provinces of Indian life, material, intellectual and spiritual. World famous names are the initiators and leaders; a few only may be mentioned: Ram Mohan Roy and Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi and his great friends C. Rajagopalachari and Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu; in the South the founders of modern Kannada and Telugu literature; in the realm of science, finally, men like Brahmachari, J. C. Bose and C. V. Raman. Let us contemplate attentively this galaxy of great representatives of a great country. They are natives of Bengal and Gujarat, of Kashmir and Andhra, of Madras and Mysore, they speak different languages and belong to different castes—what is the characteristic feature which all of them have in common? All of them are citizens of two worlds; they root deeply in Indian soil, their whole being is imbued with Indian spirituality and yet, they have accepted gladly and gratefully all that the West had to give, achieving a complete synthesis of the world’s spirit in their own self. I do not doubt that many of these great leaders have surpassed their teachers and yet, without the creative stimulus of their very foreignness, of their being entirely different, this miraculous awakening of India could not have happened so suddenly and thoroughly.

If it is true that cultural contacts are one of the main factors, essential to achieving the highest aims of national development, it is equally certain that no nation, no society in history, was capable of maintaining the highest cultural achievements as a living property for more than a few generations. On the other hand, the results of these gigantic evolutions hardly ever were lost completely, except when barbarian invaders annihilated the culture-bearers as it happened when the Spaniards conquered Mexico and Peru. Usually a good deal of that which the spiritual leaders, the thinkers, poets and artists had created was absorbed into the body of their society. That part of culture which is assimilated by a society, the social atmosphere which is common to all members of it, binding them together, deciding their individual and their collective reactions, the unquestioned guiding laws, form one of mankind’s most precious properties: tradition. A society is sane and balanced, safe against violent upheavals and against losing its way, as long as it is guided by a strong and healthy tradition. Tradition determines our relationship to the family as child or parent, to the opposite sex as lover, as husband or wife, to the state as a citizen and to God as a worshipper and believer.—Social and political development is invariably
accompanied by some modification of tradition; the preservation of a healthy society is guaranteed only when these modifications do not threaten the traditional fundamentals though some less important super-structures may have to be removed to allow for an organic evolution. It is always difficult for the contemporary of a historical event to estimate how far the social structures are essential, where the reformer's knife has to cut to remove overaged, unhealthy social, political or religious overgrowth without damaging vital organs. Historical investigation shows that the first severe blow to European tradition was due to the religious reformers in the sixteenth century; Luther and Henry VIII destroyed one of the oldest and most sacred links of Western humanity, that of the common religion; increasing nationalism and religious hatred, accompanied by quickly diminishing religiosity mark the beginning of the end of European society. The French revolution marks the first attempt to abolish tradition entirely, denying every kind of authority: God, king, society and family at the same time. The history of the last hundred and fifty years demonstrates clearly that the highest development of civilisation, the most rigid conventions of family life, the most elaborate international treaties, the strongest efforts of the best brains towards humanization and cosmopolitanism are unable to replace a living tradition, active in the mind of the masses, rooted in spirituality. A so-called scientific picture of world or life puts the mind at ease as long as the political, social and economic conditions are favourable and balanced. But it is useless as a shelter when a catastrophe like World War I puts it to a serious trial. After the war nothing remained but the strife for material success, because in a society without a spiritual anchorage, money is the only security. That no human society is able to exist based on complete individualism, complete selfishness, complete materialism without any collectivistic obligations, without tradition and especially without any spiritual fundament, the history of the continent during the last twenty years proves beyond doubt. Fascism and nazism are the necessary consequences; they replace the unrestrained individualism by extreme national collectivism, they give instead of tradition the military order, so that every step and every word of the subject are dictated by minute regulations and they satisfy the deep longing of the masses to worship something, to believe in somebody by glorifying, not to say deifying, the infallible dictator, the leader. The amazing speed and completeness of the fascist and nazi conquest in their own countries is explained by the previous elimination of every other authority who could have opposed them. Neither church, nor ruler nor state authority, neither family nor any kind of spirituality, no kind of tradition whatsoever, united any groups of individuals; helpless and defenceless, they have been exposed to the
onslaught of this barbarian magic, the glorification of the own nation, represented by the Führer, the nullification, nay, vilification of everybody and everything else.

Comparing these conditions with those prevailing in India, we find here during the last 1500 years an almost undisturbed development of tradition. Since the days when the Brahminic counter-reformation defeated Buddhism no general movement arose again which questioned the religious or social fundamentals of India. The great reformers Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva contributed to the spiritual fixation of tradition; they never tried to break away from the sacred common ground in which the deepest roots of the nation are embedded. Basava’s attempt to destroy the caste system succeeded locally and temporarily only. The foreign conquerors on their part, imported their own tradition, so utterly different from the Indian one that hardly any possibility of reciprocal influencing existed as long as the Indian was sure of the incomparable value of his spiritual inheritance, apart from the fact that tradition is destroyed always from inside, not by outside oppression. The result of these peculiar conditions is that up to this day every word, every thought and every deed of the average Indian is ruled by invaluable laws which originate in ancient spirituality of the highest standard mankind has ever achieved. The totality of them forms a most precious code of behaviour in every possible situation in life which fills the air you breathe and pervades the soil out of which you grow.

The teaching of history is that no nation is able to attain the culminating point of cultural development without assimilating foreign elements; we have seen that the blending of opposite cultural trends yields immortal masterpieces, leads to the peaks of man’s achievement; but I emphasise assimilation, not imitation; assimilation means literally “making similar”; thus the foreign cultural elements have to undergo a process of digestion to make them fit to enter the system of the indigenous culture. Only after losing the character of a foreign body they will exert their beneficial stimulating influence. Therefore, one should beware of the two common fundamental mistakes: narrow-minded nationalism, which preaches that India has nothing important to expect from the West, and on the other hand, underestimation of India’s own spiritual treasure, the paramount value of Indian tradition, which is ridiculed as old superstition by the young and middle-aged free-thinkers, by westernized progress worshippers, blind and deaf to the unique wealth of their own people.

In conclusion a few words may be devoted to explaining what makes Indian spiritual tradition so very precious that every attempt should be made
to preserve it. Dharma and Karma: the right understanding, the constant keeping in mind and truly taking to heart of these two fundamental ideas is all that an individual and all that a nation needs to realise which way to go. The totality of our duties, determined by our place in society and by our abilities, is our dharma. It is a dominant feature of true Hindu tradition, and one of the greatest importance, that the fulfilment of one’s daily duties with devotion and in the right spirit is divine service in the highest sense, irrespective of the place and sphere in which one acts. An old simile calls the four castes the four pillars on which the Universe rests, each of them of equal importance; whoever fails in his duties, whoever indulges in caste pride, despising others, endangers the harmony, the balance of the whole creation. When, on the battlefield, Arjuna expressed his desire to become a Sannyasi, Lord Krishna blamed this longing severely and said: “Looking at thine own Dharma also thou oughtest not to waver, for there is nothing higher for a Kshatriya than a righteous war.” To perform one’s own dharma imperfectly is better than to do another’s perfectly; but it has to be done in the spirit of unselfishness and not for the sake of advantage or profit. As the Gita says: “He that performs such action as is his duty, not looking forward to the fruit of such action, is a Sannyasi as well as a Yogi, not he that gives up the household fire and is inactive,” and again in adhyaya II: “Your duty is but to act, never to be concerned with results; so let not the fruit of action be your motive. Do not let yourself be drawn in the path of non-action.”

If anything remains which is not comprised in the conception of Dharma, if anything else should be necessary to regulate, to bind our entire behaviour as members of a truly human society, the idea of Karma contains it, Karma, the self-created fate, the self-caused destiny. Whatever we think or do has its everlasting consequences; we have to account for every thought, for every deed of ours in this life and throughout the chain of future existences. The highest sense of responsibility, the moral code of all religions on earth, is contained in it.

The eternal question of mankind, which way to go, was answered by Vyāsa Maharshi thousands of years ago: “I have written crores of stanzas; but I am able to express their whole meaning in half a stanza. If you want happiness, help others; if you want sorrow, harm others.”

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6 Bhagavad-Gita, II–32; III–35; VI–1; II–47.