

Whither India? *By Ganesh Lall*

Today India stands on the threshold of economic and industrial achievement that is the envy of many. She is the fastest growing economy in the world and her performance is nothing short of impressive. But this comes at a price. There needs to be a balance.

The rising tide of material success needs a counterweight which India is capable of providing and without which moral and spiritual degeneracy will find a fertile soil. But first we must reconnect with our ancestral culture which is the source of our strength and which gives our lives meaning and purpose.

The author of this article has lived all his life in the West. The grandson of indentured Indian labourers who went to British Guiana in the 19th century, he is witness to the strength and power of his ancestral culture which lifted the elders from colonial neo slavery to prosperity and to become the economic engine of Guyana and the Caribbean. He has lived for 50 plus years in London, UK, where he is a founder of the Caribbean Hindu Cultural Society in 1959, reputed to be the oldest Hindu Society in the United Kingdom. He holds a BA Hons degree in the Study of Religions from the prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London.

There was a time when the East was synonymous with wisdom and India was the ultimate East. Scholars came from far and wide in the then known world to seek wisdom and knowledge in India. Not any more.

The reason is that India is now worshipping at the altar of mammon. We have lost not only our moral compass but also the map. So we now find ourselves groping in the moral and spiritual darkness. Such is the state of our degeneracy that it is no longer enough for the rich to be wealthy; they must be seen to be wealthy. We acquire huge mansions and fast foreign cars with the sole purpose of feeding envy. Greed is at a premium and we have become an insubstantial remnant of empire, an appendant to foreign tastes and habits. The British Raj died in 1947 but it continues to rule us from the grave.

From the age of Mohenjo-daro to that of the Vedas, from Vedanta to Bhakti and from Buddha to the Mahatma, India has offered a kaleidoscope of cultural and spiritual traditions which not only inspired us for millennia but which has also given us a powerful sense of identity and self –worth. We have a sacred duty to hand down this rich legacy to posterity.

We, the children of Mother India, are nourished by the sacred waters of the mighty Ganga and which courses through our veins. We have a corresponding duty to protect her. Instead India is rapidly being perceived as the rape capital of the world. Every incident of rape is an act of violence against Bharat Mata. Indian culture places women on a pedestal and are given precedence before men. A popular greeting is 'Sita-Ram.' The respect for women is embedded in the national consciousness. When Swami Vivekananda addressed the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, in 1893, he started with the words 'Sisters and Brothers of America'. The audience spontaneously rose to their feet and clapped, having never before heard brother being preceded by sister.

Indian culture is the oldest continuous living culture in the world. She has never invaded any country because she has no wish to dominate the world. Without firing a bullet, without lifting a sword and without the backing of an invading flag, Indian culture spread to neighbouring countries of South Asia, South East and East Asia and became an integral part of the daily lives of the people.

For centuries India's wealth attracted raiders and conquerors. They ravaged and plundered but India never lost possession of her soul. India's concept of greatness is not based on military might or territorial conquest but on strength of spirit and her national dharma which promotes peaceful co-existence in international relations.

India has the distinction of being the only country in the world that has not persecuted its Jewish minority. They sought protection in India in AC 70 after being expelled from Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus. Their descendants returned two thousand years later under the rule of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Exactly the same protection was offered to the Parsis who fled persecution in Persia in the tenth century. And in 1959 when the Buddhists escaped Chinese oppression in Tibet, they were welcomed in India where they were given a permanent home in Dharamsala.

India represents an island of democracy surrounded by a sea of dictatorships. The reason is that Indian culture shares many values with liberal democracy – toleration and listening to the other side. The freedoms of religion, expression and thought have inspired Indian life throughout the ages. Indian culture is primarily, but not exclusively, concerned with spiritual development. India gave the world the decimal system, the Hindu numerals and the zero.

The values that make India great are timeless and universal. The Upanishads tell us that we are part of the infinite spirit, 'Tat tvam asi - That thou art'. Our rishis and sages have found solutions to some of the greatest problems of life and our scriptures have attracted and enlightened great minds the world over. Schopenhaur paid a high tribute to the Vedas when he said that "access to them is the greatest privilege this century may claim over previous centuries". The poet Rabindranath Tagore proclaimed that "India is destined to be the teacher of all lands." Sri Aurobindo, in similar vein predicted that Mother India will be the moral leader of the world. Thousands of years ago India proclaimed that the world is one family. What makes us one, according to Swami Vivekanand, is that God is present in all beings.

Our prayers are not transactional. We pray for peace and harmony in the three worlds. God is identified with the poor (daridra narayan). The environment is sacred, so we protect the rivers, the mountains, the trees of the forest and the birds and animals that live there.

Indian culture is a living evolving system that continues through the ages to produce great souls. In the modern age we have Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj, Ranade and the Prarthana Samaj, Swami Dayanand and the Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekanand, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, and Dr Savapalli Radhakrishnan.

If India is to reverse this trend of self-destruction, it must re-engage with the teachings of the great souls. It is a condition of our survival that we inculcate in the youths the discipline of self-restraint and the habits of simplicity.

The British historian, Arnold Toynbee, observed "a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self destruction of the human race." He continues that "the only way of salvation for mankind is the Indian way." We must educate our youth for leadership the Indian way.

India will fulfill her destiny and be the society the world will look up to when she follows the path of her own genius in moral and spiritual values.

27th July 2017

Ganesh Lall is the grandson of indentured Indian labourers who went to British Guiana in the 19th century, he is witness to the strength and power of his ancestral culture which lifted the elders from colonial neo slavery to prosperity and to become the economic engine of Guyana and the Caribbean. He has lived for 50 plus years in London, UK, where he is a founder of the Caribbean Hindu Cultural Society in 1959, reputed to be the oldest Hindu Society in the United Kingdom. He holds a BA Hons degree in the Study of Religions from the prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. He is a founder of the Caribbean Hindu Cultural Society in London reputed to be the oldest Hindu society in the UK. He holds the BA Hons degree in the Study of Religions at the prestigious School of Oriental and Africans Studies of the University of London.