

Understanding Spirituality in Indian Context

Prof. S.R. Bhatt
Former Chairman ICPR

It has been generally maintained that the traditional Indian culture is predominantly spiritual. Some scholars have gone to the extent of saying that Indian thought is only spiritualistic and the Western thought, in contrast, is materialistic, implying as if Indian thought is not materialistic and Western thought is not spiritualistic. Without evaluating these extreme views it can certainly be said that there can be no denying of the fact that Indian sages and saints have always emphasized the spiritual dimension and character of our life and existence. Though we have a large amount of expository literature, both in the vernaculars and in the European languages, highlighting this point, there seems to be little clarity as to what is exactly meant by the term "spiritual": A distinction is usually drawn between spiritual and material using these terms in their Western connotations as mutually exclusive, but there is a good deal of confusion as to the meaning and the nature of relation between the two when they are used in Indian context. The confusion becomes more confounded when some other terms like moral and religious are introduced in the analysis. The situation becomes worst when terms like mystical and idealistic are brought in or when spiritualism, or spirituality, is misunderstood as spiritism, occultism, etc.

The root cause of the trouble is that the Sanskrit word *adhyatma* (*adhi +atma*), which is intended here, is represented by the English word spiritual without clarifying the subtle nuances associated with the original Sanskrit word. That is why whenever the word spiritual is used, most of us claim to understand, or at least pretend to understand, what is meant but when it comes to conceptual clarity and precision, difficulties crop up. The confusion with regard to the meaning of the word spiritual cannot be cleared up so long as either we do not use the original word *adhyatma* or do not disabuse ourselves from the nuances associated with it in the Western usage. There is nothing wrong or infelicitous either in retaining the original as a technical term or in using its English translation but when its English translation is used, there is a need to clarify and specify its exact meaning and it should not be left as vague, ambiguous or amorphous.

Here it may not be out of place to point out that disregard of the dynamics of language and overlooking of the nuances, subtleties and complexities of key culture-specific words of individual languages often result in serious aberrations, distortions and mutilations in conveyance of thought. A great deal of confusion and misunderstanding has been advertently or inadvertently perpetuated by faulty translations of some key Sanskrit words into English and other European languages. English rendering of Sanskrit word *dharma* as a religion is a well-known and glaring example of faulty linguistic operation, destroying its richness, complexity, depth and comprehension. It is high time for us to realize that no culture can grow and thrive if its key concepts get fossilized, twisted or distorted, and its intellectuals lose the capacity of rectification or creative interpretation to suit the new and changing requirements.

In this write up an attempt has been made to rectify the prevailing misunderstanding and to offer a creative interpretation of the word *adhyatma* and its equivalent English word "spiritual" keeping the Indian context in view. In Indian culture the term *adhyatma* stands for a particular view and a way of life and a particular thought that there is one unitary principle which pervades and animates the entire universe and provides its source and sustenance. There are innumerable expressions of this belief such as *etadatmyamidam sarvam* (verily all these are *atman* only). The variegated world of multiple animate beings and inanimate things, the vast, varied and unending cosmic process, all that was, all that is and all that shall be, is enlivened by this Supreme Principle of Consciousness and Bliss, and it underlies them all. There is one *atman* permeating all whatever be their material confinements or embodied status. Of course, in philosophical literature we have varied accounts of this belief and sometimes even a jarring and discordant note, but the dominant trend is that one and the same homogeneous principle finds its expression in heterogeneity (*Kathopanishad* II.9ff). All entities may have individual multiple forms (*anekarupata* or *rupabahulya*) but they have the same essence (*ekatmata*).

Oneness of the entire reality is the basic presupposition and guiding principle of spiritualistic approach and therefore realization of that oneness has been postulated as the *summum bonum* of all existence. Beginning with the Vedic vision of the unity of the entire cosmos as depicted in the Purusa Sukta and coming through the Upanisadic realization of its divinity as expressed in passages like

isavasyamidam sarvam of Isa (all these are permeated by the Divine), this spiritualistic approach has found its highest manifestation in the *Bhagavadgita* VI.29 when it reiterates:

*sarvabhutasthamatmanam sarvabhutani catmani
iksate yogayuktatma sarvatra samadarsanah*

The yogic or enlightened self-experiences oneself as situated in all beings and all beings as situated in oneself and experiences self sameness everywhere.

There are many passages in the Upanisads and the Gita to this effect. The same is echoed in the epics, Puranas and other literature. The Indian spiritualistic vision has enjoined the self in all beings and all beings in the self. It has exhorted us to get engaged in the welfare of all beings, hating none, with malice for none and with friendliness and compassion for all. The *Yajurveda* 36.18 prays:

*mitrasya ma caksusa; sarvani bhutani samiksantam
mitrasya aham caksusa sarvani bhutani samikse
mitrasya caksusa samiksamahe*

May all look at me with friendly eye. May I look at all with friendly eye. May all look at one another with friendly eye.

This has been the quintessence of the Buddhist, Jaina and Sikh traditions also and this has been the perennial message of all the saints and sages at all periods of time throughout the country. In modern times, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Deendayal Upadhyaya and many others highlighted this truth.

Only a heightened spirituality of Indian seers could make them project the lofty ideal of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the entire world is one family) and the pious longing of *sarve bhavantu sukhinah* (let everyone be happy). Could there be a better expression of spirituality than the Vedic prayers of the *Rgveda*:

*Sam gacchadhvam sam vadadhvam sam vo manamsi janatam,
samani va akutih. samana hridayani vah
samanamastu vo mano yatha vah. susahasati*

We may march together and speak in harmony. Our minds be in unison. Like sages of yore experiencing oneness with all we may cherish mutual care and share prosperity. We may have commonality in thought and peaceful corporate existence. Our minds and intellect may move with one accord. We may be inspired by one common goal and strive

for that. We may have common resolve with one accord and unison of hearts. Our thoughts be in harmony so that we may live together in happiness and hilarity. - X.190.2,4

Could there be a more enlightening message to humanity to emulate? The same is reiterated in the invocation in the *Kathopanisad*:

*aum saha navavatu
saha nau bhunaktu
saha viryam karavavahai
tejasvinavadhitamastu ma vidvisavahai*

Let us live together well protected, let us be nourished together in cooperation, let us work together, let our intellect be sharp to know the truth and let us not have mutual jealousy.

What a sublime message of peaceful coexistence and cooperation with mutual caring and sharing! Could there be any better vision of universal peace and plenitude than the famous *santipatha* of *Yajurveda Samhiia* (36.17):

*aum dyauh santirantariksam santih prthivi santirapah
santirausadhayahsantih vanaspatayah santirvisve devah
santirbrahma santih sarva gum santih santireva santihsa ma santiredhi*

May there be peace and prosperity in the outer space and inner space, on earth, in the waters, in the life- giving vegetable kingdom, in plants and trees, in the entire cosmos, in the entire Reality, everywhere and at all times. May there be peace and prosperity, peace and prosperity alone (never otherwise). May everyone attain and experience peace and prosperity.

These expressions of spiritual unity and universal peace and prosperity are not mere lofty ideals of utopian dream or empty talk. There have been examples of great souls who have practised this way of life. If some persons could practice it why others cannot do so? Even if it is a view of life, it is at the same time undoubtedly a desirable way of life. It may be difficult to practice it but it is not impossible to do so.

It is unfortunate that it has by and large remained a vision only but this in no way diminishes its viability or desirability. Hypocrisy, deceit and contradictions are inherent in human nature but they are not incurable. Through proper education, it is

possible to bridge the gulf between the theory and its practice.

In order to properly understand and appreciate the spiritual approach to life and Reality one has to adopt an organismic viewpoint which can have several forms like Sarvatmavada, Anatmavada and Anekantavada which are all alternative formulations of the same vision (*dristi*). Various traditions, thinkers and scholars have used different expressions to verbalize this unique perception. This is spiritual vision (*adhyatmika dristi*). This is not available to the materialistic worldly beings like us who are conditioned by a divisive mentality of "I" and "thou". It requires a specific frame of mind, a *bodhicitta* (an enlightened consciousness) which can be cultivated by a proper training of body, will and intellect. Different spiritualistic traditions have prescribed different schemes of *sadhana* (spiritual practice) for this. All mean to say the same thing but diversity of language and interest has created conflicts among them.

The spiritualistic view can best be explained in terms of three-fold approaches to Reality, i.e. *adhyatmika* (spiritual), *adhidaivika* (mental) and *adhibhautika* (physical) which have existential but no valuational hierarchy. They have distinct status and role to play but each succeeding one is enveloped and accommodated in the preceding one. Here there is no incompatibility or conflict. There is gradual widening of the latter in the former. The *adhyatmika* is the most comprehensive. The Vedas have referred to it as *tadekam*. The Upanisads have named it as *Brahman/ Atman*. The Jainas have called it as *anantadharmatmakam sat*. The Buddhists have called it as *paramartha* or *sunya*. In the ultimate analysis all mean the same.

In a spiritual framework the material and the mental have an important place and function. In spirituality there is no denial of matter and material prosperity. Matter is the base and very precondition of all existence. As the *Taittiriya Upanisad* III.2 says, *annam brahmeti vyajanat* (know matter to be *Brahman*). But matter is not the sole reality or the apex reality. Further, matter needs to be refined and transformed into that which is compatible with the spiritual. This is because matter is exclusive, divisive and competitive, whereas the spiritual is unitive, shareable and cooperative. Matter is confinement in space and time but spirit is expansion beyond space and time. The same existence can be material or spiritual, or more material or more spiritual. Narrowing of the self is material and widening of the self is spiritual. To be spiritual is not to renounce the body; it is only to renounce the sense of "I" and "mine". It is self-opening, *paratmasamata* (self-sameness with all). This is what should be meant

by culture and civilization. The point is that denial of matter is lopsided and harmful but equally lopsided and harmful is denial of spirit. But one wonders how far this would be acceptable to our vision blinded by the dazzling light of materiality and scientism.

In this context, it may not be irrelevant to point out that the modern model of development has originated in the background of materialistic and competitive, rather mutually conflicting conception of human beings and the universe. In the mechanistic, reductionist paradigm, not only is the spiritual dimension of human and cosmic existence discarded, it has also been wrongly assumed that the goal of human endeavor should be to have mastery, victory, domination and control over Nature. In zeal to conquer and subjugate Nature there have been abuse, exploitation and defilement of Nature. The arrogant human being thinks that Nature must be bent to the will, benefit and use of human kind. Nature is of great value to us. It is kind and benevolent. It is grand and gracious. It is rich and bountiful. It delights in serving us and does so dispassionately. But Nature is also very tender and delicate. It feels shy of exploitation and reacts. When it reacts it does so to make us rectify the wrongs we do to it. What Nature wants us is judicious use of its resources for progress and prosperity and not its uncared exploitation and destruction. It will provide us nourishment and peace only if we live in peace with it. Worship of Nature is the keynote of spiritual way of life.

The materialistic-consumerist outlook has resulted in loss of harmony between human beings and Nature, disturbance of balance between human needs and natural resources, lack of coordination between the material and the spiritual dimensions of development, and finally in the overall deterioration in quality of life. It has given rise to disparity and deprivation, imbalance and inequalities. There is no denying of the fact that due to science and technology there has been tremendous material progress but the fruits of all this progress have not only been inequitably distributed, and they have also been counterproductive.

In the context of material development, spiritual perspective is positive and helpful. It embraces the vital concerns of life, i.e. *kama* (psycho-physical wellness) and the means to secure them i.e. *artha*. It is *abhyudaya*, i.e., all-round development which sustains and which is sustainable, because it is regulated by *dharma* through which there is proper management of all assets. available to us both in terms of human resources and material resources. Acquisition of material resources (*artha*) and their

enjoyment (*kama*) always require proper management through *dharma*. This is because, as we said earlier, matter is exclusive, non-divisible and non-shareable. So it stands in need of regulation by *dharma* for its balanced shareability. Indian culture has always denounced pursuit of *artha* and *kama* without being regulated by *dharma*. This may be spoken as dharmocracy. The Indian response to Carvaka ideology and its total rejection is a glaring example of this fact. The present-day consumerism is an unabashed revival of the discarded Carvaka ideology which has been doing immense damage to human psyche.

There is a widespread misconception that spiritual experience is realizable only through scriptural statements (Sruti) or divine revelations or miracles, or that it is anti-reason and cannot be expressed in human language, etc. Let it be made clear that almost all schools of thought in India have pointed out that Sruti is only informative and not revelatory. Only through proper experience one has to realize spiritual unity. Sruti may provide the ground for its realization but cannot be of avail in the ultimate analysis.

Spiritual experience is not realizable through discursive reason also. It is supra-rational but this should not mean that it is anti-reason. How can any talk about unity of existence be anti-reason? Reason functions through analysis whereas spiritual experience is integral but why should analysis and synthesis be regarded as antagonistic or working at cross purposes? Of course, discursive reason can have no role in spiritual experience but this does not mean that we have to decry or deny the role of reason altogether. In the classical literature there are statements in support of or against reason; but they are to be understood in their proper context.

Notwithstanding what is stated above, it must be stated that spiritual experience is extra-empirical in origin though it is very much applicable to the empirical realm. It is available to enlightened and realized souls only. In this sense it can be regarded as *arsa-jnana* or *pratibhatibha-jnana*. In this sense again it can be regarded as *apauruseya* meaning thereby that it is extra-empirical and not amendable to human senses and reason. Empirical knowledge is description of facts and this description can be true or false or doubtful. Its veracity is contingent upon empirical verification. Spiritual experience, on the other hand, is prescriptive. It is an enlightenment about and realization of values. It cannot be evaluated in terms of empirical categories of true, false or doubtful as it does not describe facts. It can only be evaluated in terms of its desirability or otherwise in terms of what ought to be practised. It is not *purusa tantra* (dependent on human sense cognitivity). But its realization is dependent upon human

will and endeavour, i.e. *purusartha*.

Spiritual experience is a value not in the empirical sense. It is a value par excellence. All other values are comprehended under it but they do not exhaust it. One may acquire all other values but absence of spiritual value makes one feel imperfect. This is what Yajnavalkya meant when he averred: *atmanah; kamaya sarvam privarm bhavati* (*Bṛhadaran; yaka Upanisad II.4*). This is the philosophy of universal love rooted in the premise of essential non-difference of all existences. It alone provides the stable and solid foundation to all other values. It alone is the intrinsic value, the *summum bonum*; all other values are only instrumental. It alone is universalizable as it is an end-value, an absolute value, which can be prescribed unconditionally without exception.