

**TOLERANCE  
IN INDIAN CULTURE**

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First Published 1992  
Reprinted 2004

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Published by Member-Secretary for  
**INDIAN COUNCIL OF PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH**  
Darshan Bhawan,  
36 Tughlakabad Institutional Area,  
Mehrauli-Badarpur Road, (Near Batra Hospital),  
New Delhi-110 062

ISBN : 81-85636-01-X

Printed in India at  
**Durga Print-O-Graph**  
Delhi-110 091

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## THE CULTURE OF PEACE AND INDIA'S TRADITION

Ramakant Sinari

Like freedom, peace as an attitude of the human mind has the unique quality of being both the prerequisite and the end of the whole process of development. Despite the fact that man has at all times in history manifested destructivity and violence, there are hardly instances when he has unqualifiedly extolled them and regarded them as values *par excellence*. Violence has crept into human history and on numerous occasions shrouded it (as in the times of invasions, wars, and mass genocides) as the expression of the ignoble, the ugly, the bizarre, the savage in man. There is great truth in the presupposition of religions that man is essentially good, gifted with the power of self-understanding and empathy toward others, and that the presence of conflict and hostility in the world is due to his being crushed under a transient force demoniacal to, and interfering with, the divine, the harmonious, and the beneficent in him.

Man the holy and man the masochist-sadist, man the saintly and man the profane, man the amicable and man the hostile, are two facets of the same human reality. However, history has always celebrated the liberal, the peace-loving, and the peace-maker in man and received from that aspect of his being the stimulus to move ahead.

The culture of peace is at the root of the tradition, the

philosophies, and the religions in India. In its two distinguishable but interrelated roles, *i.e.* as a transcendentalist discipline emphasizing the attainment by the self of its highest state of composure and tranquillity, and as a *dharma* or ethics that advises everyone to abstain from doing harm to others, the culture of peace has had unique influence on the Indian personality.

The Hindu, the Buddhist, and the Jaina faiths in the Indian tradition have consistently emphasized the value of self-realization, *i.e.* the calmness of the self attainable through meditation. They have mentioned *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-intelligence-bliss), *mokṣa* (liberation of one's inner spirit), *nirvāṇa* (peace), and *kevala-jñāna* (absolute knowledge of reality) as the final goal of our existence in the world.<sup>1</sup> According to the Indian religio-philosophical approach to man's life, nothing short of the total abolition of the distinction between the individual consciousness and the universal consciousness, the worldly self and the absolute self, the temporal ego and the eternal ego, is the final ideal of man's being in the world.

In Indian ethics, man's spirituality, in other words his destiny as one in whom *Brahman* or the Cosmic Consciousness has found its most spontaneous expression, consists in his attaining the stillness of his total being. This stillness is untainted by the passion for living in *samsāra*, *i.e.* the worldly state enmeshed in the incidents of birth, death, and rebirth. To lead a spiritual life or to remain attuned to the quietude of one's transcendental self is to be in a state of consciousness from where the earthly, mutable, and transitory impressions of one's day-to-day existence are perennially bracketed.

It is not always possible to show the exact manner in which the religio-philosophical assumptions (or the ideology) of a given community control its way of life, its praxis so to say. And yet, one cannot deny that such a control does operate. Through their specific life-styles, histories, decisions, and choices, all civilized societies represent a kind of

philosophy of existence, a not always accountable *Weltanschauung*, an ontologically set value scheme. Of course, this philosophy of existence is not something isolated from the practical life of a people. In fact, there is a relation of complementarity and a continuous interaction between the two. The process of interaction between ideology and practice, the ontological postulates and the actual conduct of life and action of a people, appears to be true of the very growth of human civilization.

As a system of salvation the peace culture of ancient India has percolated through her literature, morals, fine arts, and through the careers of her reformers and men of faith. One of India's most significant contributions to the science of mind is *yoga*; and *yoga*<sup>3</sup> is a technique for the silencing of our inner self, for the generation of a harmony between our entire make-up and the cosmos.

Indeed, the peace culture is responsible for having cultivated a notably world-negating, fatalistic, ready-to-suffer, indifferent-to-the-worldly-affairs, ascetic and somewhat escapist attitude in the Indian people. This attitude has not always been a boon to India, for it has many a time hindered her planning and material advancement. And yet, this attitude has always been lauded as the mark of one's inner enlightenment. Indians project this attitude, while selecting and evaluating not only their spiritual guides, but even their political leaders. Disinterestedness in the worldly pleasures amounting to extreme stoical austerity, self-denial, simplicity, and renunciation are looked upon as the indicator of one's having advanced toward the goal of inner tranquility.

In India's tradition (as undoubtedly in early Christian tradition), a person's spiritual enlightenment is measured in terms of his capacity to lead a life of calmness, desirelessness, non-attachment, self-control, *nirvāṇa* (peace) — all these qualities mirroring his achievement as a *yogi*.

The culture of peace, as a *dharma* teaching people to practise total abstention from violence even when they have

to deal with the perpetrators of injustice in society, found its unique expression in Mahatma Gandhi, the most revolutionary moral force in human history after Jesus Christ. In the political history of India and of the world in this century, Gandhi made the unimitable attempt to establish the inter-communal, the inter-religious, and the inter-national relations on peace. The model which Gandhi introduced in what is otherwise known as the science of diplomacy, and even in the running of a government, was Hindu-Buddhist-Jaina-Christian in the primordial sense of this expression.

An unqualified insistence on pursuing truth (*satyāgraha*) and justice (*nyāya*), not by hook or crook, but by means of the method of absolute *ahimsā* or non-violence, is the essence of Gandhi's message both in the moral and political movements he and his followers led in modern India. In whatever way one might finally assess the effectiveness of this message, it cannot be denied that, by personifying the best from the traditional culture of peace in him, Gandhi opened up a new cult in the politics of the world. He insisted on the realization of truth by the policy of *ahimsā*, *ahimsā* as the sole practical ethics, the only guide we could humanly follow in our personal and inter-personal behaviour.

The method of violent militancy does not have an appeal to the Indian conscience. The tradition of peace as a *dharma*, teaching people to practise *ahimsā*, is implicit in the very salvationistic metaphysics of ancient India. Gandhi could see this and put it across, through word and deed, much more forcefully than any of his contemporaries.

Thus, the culture of peace is the foundation of the highest spiritual and ethical values in India. It has governed India's several decisions and policies within and without the country. Of course, the path of transcendental peace, when taken to its extreme limit, does and did interfere with the Indians' endeavour for bringing about their material prosperity. But when cultivated as a perspective, a most creative and synthesizing dimension of our consciousness, as the ultimate meaning of the whole human phenomenon, it can give

rise to a refined, all-embracing humanism.

The culture of peace as a norm of conduct, an ideology at work, can be the basis of the highest democratic and liberal values, viz. the coexistence of the diverse points of view, the habit of understanding and tolerance in one concerning the other's paradigm and value scheme, the unconditional rejection of force in all inter-subjective, inter-communal and inter-national dealings, and the brotherhood among all without any injury by one to the dignity of the other.

#### NOTES

1. See Abraham Kaplan, *The New World of Philosophy*, New York, 1963, pp. 208-9.
2. See my "Phenomenological Reduction and Yoga," in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. XV, 1965, pp. 217-28.