

# **Contribution of Indian Culture Towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs–2016-30) with Special Reference to Acharya Mahapragya**

## **Introduction**

Culture is the way of life of a particular society or group of people including patterns of thought, belief, behaviour, customs, traditions, rituals, dress and language, as well as art, music and literature. It distinguishes one country from the other and creates a wide diversity across the globe. In the early years of civilization on account of the lack of means of travelling these motley groups mostly remained confined to their regions hence mutual assimilation of each others' values did not begin soon. As civilizations made strides humanity developed a refined understanding of the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement. As a result today we have well-defined cultural and religious traditions on this planet and our libraries are full of fascinating and scholarly works on various aspects of culture.

With the passage of time cultural traditions flourished across the world and man's capacity to think also grew unbounded. The advent of science augmented the pace of human progress and development. It invented wonderful machines which greatly reduced man's hardship and toil. The invention of cars, airplanes, telephones and now internet has radically changed the social life globally. With affluence man's greed multiplied. It gave rise to dishonesty, robbery, exploitation, immorality and a culture of violence and hatred in the global society. The rich became richer and the poor poorer. Thus situation began to affect our environment and eco-system adversely with the result that it has created an unprecedented crisis of unsustainability at global level.

Blinded by lust for wealth and power people have shut their eyes to the harsh reality that their wanton behaviour is likely to cause immense suffering to them. They have become self-centred and are only concerned with their own comforts. When the resources of the earth thus began to replete giving rise to shortages right thinking people of the world were deeply concerned about this looming catastrophe. They created awareness among people by giving talks and writing papers. This led the UN to swing into action. It organized a series of global summits persuading member states to sacrifice their interests and restrict their developmental activities. It has now created an agenda of 17 sustainable goals to be achieved by all the nations.

The present crisis owes its origin to our unrestrained lifestyle. This write-up explains in detail how Indian cultural values have in them a potential to meet the challenge of eco-sustainability of the future with special reference to Acharya Mahapragya's contribution. This great saint shows us the way as to how this challenge can be met. His initiatives have greatly changed the social psyche of India. They also indirectly help us to accomplish the goals of 17 SDGs. The proposed national seminar at Bengaluru to be held in Oct 2019 will discuss these issues and his contribution threadbare.

Before we begin to discuss as to how Indian culture can help the world community to overcome the crisis of unsustainability it will be in fitness of things to give an overview of the problem of unsustainability first.

### **The Crisis of Unsustainability : An Overview**

The advent of science has made human life most comfortable in the sense that man now has an access to airplanes, bullet trains, buses, cars, ships which take him to any part of the world swiftly. The whole world has been reduced to a global village. In order to produce these machines huge industries have sprung up throughout the world. These machines consume billions of tons of coal and petroleum globally. We see roads crowded with cars in cities. It seems every man is on the road these days. This ostentious gaudy lifestyle of human beings often creates not only tormenting traffic jams but also produces poisonous greenhouse gases that pollute our environment beyond imagination. These gases are also responsible for creating wide gaps in our ozone layers. The scientists say that these gaps are so wide that the rays of the sun are adding to global warming giving rise to a formidable problem of climate change. Our glaciers are melting causing untimely floods in all parts of the world. The problem of pollution is so acute that in most cities people are not even able to breathe properly. A large number of poor people are dying slow death on account of the emissions of contaminated smokes in the factories they work at.

The price of all these material comforts that man enjoys today is very heavy. The natural resources like coal, petroleum and water are depleting fast. An unprecedented crisis of unsustainability has been created. If their over-exploitation continues unabated and human lifestyle does not change, very little will be left for the future generations. Moreover by 2050 even the present generation may face the worst crisis of shortages of the basic needs including clean water and electricity which the world produces by thermal or nuclear power. The scale of devastation caused by human activities at all levels including frequent air travelling by millions is so great that the earth's natural carrying capacity has now been destroyed. It is unable to repair the damage on its own as it used to do earlier. Our forests are shrinking and the bludgeoning human population has devoured most of them. As a result many important species essential for our survival have vanished. Their natural habitats have been snatched away by multiplying human population. Appalled by this dismal scenario the celebrated scientist James Lovelock once said, 'The mother earth is critically ill.'

The problem of unsustainability revolves around two words 'production and consumption'. Developed countries have already reached the zenith of development at the cost of developing and under-developed countries. They consume 85% resources of the earth leaving behind a meagre 15% for the rest of humanity. Big industries, which manufacture consumer goods, ask people to consume more and more so that production may go on uninterrupted. They threaten that if consumption is less there will be a slump

in economy resulting in a great recession. It will create a huge problem of unemployment. Thus the vicious circle of more consumption and more production goes on. The culture of consumerism is taking a heavy toll on humanity.

The situation in developing and underdeveloped countries is extremely bad. On the one hand they need roads, bridges and industries to fight poverty and hunger, on the other hand developed nations pressurize them to cut the emission of greenhouse gases. The irony is that America does not support UN efforts to control climate change because it needs both production and consumption to continue to meet the challenge of unemployment. It has withdrawn itself from the Kyoto agreement. It only shows its haughtiness and arrogance. Notwithstanding the non-cooperation of America to fight the problem of climate change and overcome the crisis of unsustainability United Nations has been creating global awareness of the crisis of unsustainability for the last many years. First of all it concentrated on educating people in sustainable development and now it has set apart 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). They address the global challenges we face including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace and justice. It is important that we achieve each Goal by 2030.

The seventeen goals set by the world body are as follows :

1. No Poverty
2. Zero Hunger
3. Good Health and Well-Being
4. Quality Education
5. Gender Equality
6. Clean Water and Sanitation
7. Affordable Clean Energy
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
10. Reduced Inequalities
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities
12. Responsible Production and Consumption
13. Climate Action
14. Life Below Water
15. Life on Land

16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

17. Partnership for the Goals

Broadly speaking Indian culture encompasses the spirit embodied in the above goals. We now proceed to explain how Indian Culture contributes to the fulfilment of sustainable goals.

### **Contribution of Indian Culture Towards Sustainable Development Goals**

The distinguishing characteristics of Indian culture include many things. One can say that it is a blend of various thoughts and ideologies and is rich in knowledge, devotion, deeds, emotions and feelings. Tolerance is its hallmark which is assimilated in all those characteristic features to which it was exposed from various other cultures and it moulded them in its own way. India does not believe in invasion or war to propagate its culture, religion, ideology or any other thing. It treats all with equality and compassion. India is a multicultural and multi-religious society. Though the broad spectrum of Indian cultural heritage is commonly shared by all the states of India, each state has a different language, dress and festivals. The Hindus are the majority community followed by Muslims who constitute the second largest religious group. Besides, there are Jains, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists. This multi-lingual and multi-religious character of the Indian nation makes it an extremely complex society.

The Indian culture, often labelled as an amalgamation of several cultures, spans across the Indian sub-continent and has been influenced and shaped by a history of several thousand years. It carries with it a deep imprint of Indian religions which play an important role in constructing Indian culture. India is a secular Hindu majority country. Except for Jammu and Kashmir, Panjab, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Lakshadweep Hindus form the predominant population in all 29 states and 7 union territories. Muslims are also present throughout India, with large populations in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Kerela but only Jammu and Kashmir and Lakshadweep have majority Muslims.

The following are its salient features :

- Longevity and continuity
- Unity in diversity
- Tolerance
- Amalgamation of Spirituality and Materialism

In addition to these features Indian culture is deeply rooted in the spirit of the dictum 'Simple living and high thinking'. It is the quintessence of Indian culture. If we have to summarize all the features of Indian culture in one phrase it will be 'Less is more'.

The very fact that all other famous civilizations including the Greek, Egyptian and Roman ones have vanished but Indian culture continues despite three hundred years of Mugal and British rule makes it very special. It shows that despite heterogeneity it has remained united. It has made a long journey from the Vedas to Upanishads to Lord Mahavira. Its strong foundations are discernible in this sloka :

*sarve bhavantu sukhinaha sarve santu niramayaha*

*sarve bhadrani pashyantur ma kaschid dukhabhaga bhaver*

(May all living beings be happy, May all be free from diseases, May all prosper and attain salvation, May no one suffer.)

The ideals enshrined in it address the third, eighth and sixteen SDGs which include good health and well-being of the people, their economic growth through decent work opportunities. Peace and justice must prevail in order to enable them to live happily. Indian culture is embedded in this message which seeks happiness, well-being, prosperity and good health for all. India is a land of Lord Krishna, Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira, Mahatma Gandhi and Maharishi Aurobindo. These legendary personages fortified Indian culture with basic human values. The Gita and Ramayan, the two sacred treatises of the Hindus have influenced Indian culture tremendously. Lord Buddha and Mahavira's discourses emphasize ethical living in society. Their greatest contribution to Indian culture is their message of ahimsa or nonviolence. Apart from them the advent of Mahatma Gandhi and Maharishi Aurobindo has left a deep imprint on Indian culture.

Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by Lord Mahavira's message of ahimsa which lays stress on pure means and pure ends. He used nonviolence as a weapon to drive away the Britishers from India. His 'salt satyagraha' galvanized the nation. His historic Dandi March electrified the masses. Gandhi demonstrated that nonviolence is a weapon of the brave. He exhorted the people to resort to nonviolent resistance against atrocities perpetrated by the British Govt. Non-cooperation and nonviolent resistance were his two unique gifts which have been assimilated by Indian culture. He stood for Hindu-Muslim unity and sacrificed his life for this noble cause. His autobiography entitled Experiments with Truth has left indelible impression on young minds not only in India but across the world. Gandhi not only led the freedom movement but also launched a Swadeshi movement which encourages people to depend on home grown goods and products.

The other important personality that has created a great impact on Indian culture is Maharishi Aurobindo. The evolutionary philosophy underlying Aurobindo's integral yoga is explored in his main prose work, The Life Divine (1939). Rejecting the traditional Indian approach of striving for moksha (liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, or samskara) as a means of reaching happier, transcendental planes of existence, Aurobindo held that terrestrial life itself, in its higher evolutionary stages, is the real goal of creation. He believed that the basic principles of matter, life, and mind would be succeeded

through terrestrial evolution by the principle of super mind as an intermediate power between the two spheres of the infinite and the finite. Such a future consciousness would help to create a joyful life in keeping with the highest goal of creation, expressing values such as love, harmony, unity and knowledge and successfully overcoming the age-old resistance of dark forces against efforts to manifest the divine on earth. Aurobindo's voluminous literary output comprises philosophical speculation, many treatises on yoga and integral yoga, poetry, plays, and other writings.

In this write-up we will dwell on the contribution of Acharya Mahapragya to Indian culture. Acharya Mahapragya was a leading light of the Jain tradition. Besides being the head of a Jain sect called Terapanth he was also a Jain ascetic known for his transcendental wisdom and erudition. He rose above the narrow sectarian boundaries and concentrated on evolving spiritual devices which could diminish the woes of all the sections of society and help them to experience inner joy. He was the brain behind the advent of Anuvrat Movement launched by his revered Guru Acharya Tulsi. The movement aims at creating social excellence by securing individual commitment to eleven small vows which include abstinence from killing innocent living beings, from aggression and violent agitations. The other small vows enjoin an aspirant to believe in human unity, practise religious tolerance rectitude in business and behaviour. Besides an Anuvrati (one who takes vows) must set limits to possessions and wealth, remain free from addictions. One most important small vow is that an Anuvrati will not cut tress and waste water. Anuvrat Movement continues to inspire people to live the good moral life. It addresses most of the SDGs.

Acharya Mahapragya's significant contribution to Indian culture is his global campaign to inspire people to switch over to nonviolent lifestyle. He laid stress on imparting a systematic training to the young and old in nonviolence. He developed a special course and organized a large number of nonviolence training camps which brought about attitudinal changes in the participants. Another contribution of Acharya Mahapragya is his Jivan Vigyan which explains the art of living. Thousands of students across the country have benefitted from Jivan Vigyan. His gift of Preksha Meditation has helped thousands of people to overcome stress and depression. Acharya believed that for a healthy society the inner transformation of individuals is imperative and Preksha Meditation is the most effective way of living a disease free healthy life.

He believed that it was imperative to redefine the modern principles of economics which ignores ethical norms in business practices. He evolved a new economic system called relative economics which lays emphasis on moral imperatives in business.

The Oct seminar will deal with his contribution to Indian culture in the light of the above framework.