
Positive Value of Ancient Indian Culture and World Literature

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Abstract :

American writers especially those with a deep appreciation for Indian philosophy dedicated some of their work to establish the undeniable value of ancient Indian thought.

For nearly three decades, from 1836 to 1866 or the end of the Civil War in America, the United States witnessed the flowering of an intellectual movement. The movement flourished in Concord, Massachusetts and was known as the *Transcendental Club*. Its members were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the Unitarian Minister James Freeman Clark, the teacher and philosopher Amos Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and some clergymen. Their major influence was the Vedic literatures of India.

Apart from Emerson and Thoreau, four other distinguished Americans of the period showed an interest in, or were influenced by, Indian philosophic thought. They are Alcott the Teacher, Whittier the Quaker, Melville the Rover and Walt Whitman the Mystic.

T.S. Eliot, who was born in St. Louis, Missouri, studied at Harvard, the Sorbonne and Oxford and received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948, drew his intellectual sustenance from Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, St. John of the Cross and other Christian mystics, the Greek dramatists, Baudelaire, and the Bhagavad Gita. Over and over again, whether in *The Wasteland*, *Four Quarters*, *Ash Wednesday* or *Murder in the Cathedral*, the influence of Indian philosophy and mysticism on him is clearly noticeable.

The Ancient Indian precious spiritual gems like the *Vedas*, the Upanishads, the *Gita* and India's other literary jewels have been shining and their presence is observed in various parts of the world.

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For nearly three decades, from 1836 to 1866 or the end of the Civil War in America, the United States witnessed the flowering of an intellectual movement. The movement flourished in Concord, Massachusetts and was known as the *Transcendental Club*. Its members were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the Unitarian Minister James Freeman Clark, the teacher and philosopher Amos Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and some clergymen. Their major influence was the Vedic literatures of India.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), "I owed a magnificent day to the *Bhagavat-Gita*. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions that exercise us." Emerson is the first great American literary figure who read deeply and fully the available philosophic literature from India. It certainly shows in his writings. In a letter to Max Mueller, Emerson wrote: "All my interest is in Marsh's *Manu*, then Wilkins' *Bhagavat Geeta*, Burnouf's *Bhagavat Purana* and Wilson's *Vishnu Purana*, yes, and few other translations. I remember I owed my first taste for this fruit to Cousin's sketch, in his first lecture, of the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna and I still prize the first chapters of the *Bhagavat* as wonderful."

By 1856 Emerson had read the *Kathopanisad* and his ideas were increasingly reflecting Indian influence. His poems, such as *Hamatreya* (a poem composed in 1845) showed he had digested his Indian philosophic readings well. *Hamatreya* apparently was inspired by a passage from the *Vishnu Purana* (Book IV). He was concerned with the subject of illusion-maya. He wrote about it. In his essay *Illusions* he said: "I find men victims of illusions in all parts of life. Children, youths, adults and old men, all are led by one bauble or another. Yogavindra, the goddess of illusion, is stronger than the Titans, strong than Apollo."

Some of his stanzas were almost directly quoted from these lines in the *Bhagavad gita*:

"He who thinks that the living entity is the slayer or that the entity is slain does not understand. One who is in knowledge knows that the self slays not nor is slain. (Bg. 2:19)

"O son of Kunti, the nonpermanent appearance of heat and cold, happiness and distress, and their disappearance in due course, are like the appearance and disappearance of winter and summer seasons. They arise from sense perception, O scion of Bharata, and one must learn to tolerate them without being disturbed."(Bg. 2:14)

Brahma was composed in 1856 and represents the maturity of Emerson's comprehension of the fundamental concepts of *Vedic* thought. Emerson also wrote knowledgeably about reincarnation, the theory of Karma and of Fate, in its Indian interpretation: "Fate is nothing but deeds committed in a prior existence."

Emerson and Thoreau are invariably paired as the two leading Transcendentalists. Thoreau was the younger of the two. He was also the more exuberant and impetuous and the more frankly admiring of *Vedic* thought. There is no record that he read any Indian literature while at Harvard but in Emerson's library he found and read with zest Sir William Jones' translation of *The Laws of Manu* and was fascinated. In his *Journal*, he wrote: "That title (*Manu*)... comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindustan. They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted from those old times, and no more to be refuted than the wind. When my imagination travels eastward and backward to those remote years of the gods, I seem to draw near to

the habitation of the morning, and the dawn at length has a place. I remember the book as an hour before sunrise."

Later, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) he was again writing about the same work, "Most books belong to the house and street only, and in the fields their leaves feel very thin...But this, as it proceeds from, so it addresses, what is deepest and most abiding in man. It belongs to the noontide of the day, the mid-summer of the year, and after the snows have melted will have a place of significance as long as there is a sky to test them [the sentences of *Manu*] by."

Thoreau read the *Dharma Sastra* in 1841, when he was twenty-four, and the *Bhagavad Gita* when he was twenty-eight years of age. Of the latter he wrote: "The New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality, the best of the Vedic Scripture, for its pure intellectuality. The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a bigger, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita's* 'sanity and sublimity' have impressed the minds even of soldiers and merchants." He had the *Gita* with him during his stay by Walden Pond.

"What extracts from the *Vedas* I have read fall on me like the light of a higher and purer luminary, which describes a loftier course through a purer stratum," he remarked in 1850.

"The religion and philosophy of the Hebrews are those of a wilder and ruder tribe, wanting the civility and intellectual refinements and subtlety of *Vedic* culture." He writes in Chapter Sixteen of *Walden*: "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial."

Thoreau died very young but during his mature years he read a great deal of Indian literature, perhaps more than Emerson. In 1855 he received from an English friend an entire treasure-chest of 44 volumes dealing with Vedic literature. For them he fashioned a new case from driftwood found in a New England river "thus giving Oriental wisdom an Occidental shrine."

The extent of Thoreau's reading of Indian literature is astounding. He read Jones' translation of *Shakuntalam*; Wilson's translation of the *Sankhya Karika* and of *Vishnu Purana*; Wilkins' translation of *Harivamsa* (which he later put into English) and Garcin de Tassy's *Histoire de la Litterature Hindoui et Hindostan*. In his *Journal*, he wrote: "One may discover the root of an Indian religion in his own private history, when, in the silent intervals of the day and night, he does sometimes inflict on himself like austerities with stern satisfaction." No wonder Gandhi loved and revered him and accepted Thoreau as his teacher. In another time and place, he would have been considered the ideal Yogi-ascetic, seeker after Truth.

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Eliot was a twenty-three year old student at Harvard when he first came across eastern philosophy and religion. What sparked his interest in Vedic thought is not recorded but soon he was occupied with Sanskrit, Pali and the metaphysics of Patanjali. He had also read the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* as is clear from the concluding lines of *The Waste Land*. *The Waste Land* ends with the reiteration of the Three Cardinal Virtues from the second Brahmana passage in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: *damyata* (restraint), *datta* (charity) and *dayadhvam* (compassion) and the state of mind that follows obedience to the commands is indicated by blessing *Shantih shantih shantih*, that Eliot himself roughly translated as "the peace that passeth understanding." But it is the *Gita* that evidently made a more permanent imprint on Eliot's mind. It will be found relevant not only to *The Waste Land*, but to *The Four Quarters*, *The Dry Salvages*, and *The Family Reunion*. The tolerance preached by the *Gita* is echoed in Eliot's use of imagery drawn from several religions. As Prof. Philip R. Headings has remarked in his study of the poet, "No serious student of Eliot's poetry can afford to ignore his early and continued interest in the *Bhagavad Gita*." In a sense Eliot follows in the giant footsteps of Emerson and Thoreau and the early Transcendentalists, but, it would seem, with a greater sense of urgency and relevance. There is a sharper, keener perception of what endures and should endure, and incessant demand that all traditions of literature, music, painting, architecture and philosophy be put to their proper psychic or religious use. In that sense, Eliot's message is the message of the *Gita*, of the essential utility of all activity: a message for all time, though it is harder to understand because it must be united from the materials, tone and perspective of his poems.

In modern times the influence of India's spiritual thought in America has taken leaps and bounds. Turbulent peace-seeking days of the sixties and seventies opened the doors for alternative thinking, and Spiritual India was welcomed with open arms.

In music, in art and in literature, as well as the political arena, the serenity of transcendental thought is visible.

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Referemces

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