

# The West's goddess of reason\*

*Daya Krishna*†

What is a civilisation?

Man is distinguished from other forms of life by a very strange phenomenon. When you think of yourself, how do you think of yourself? I was just talking to a girl from Sweden this morning, and it suddenly struck me that we have different names. Imagine!

When a person tells her name, so much is hidden in it, layers upon layers of memory and hope. When you name a child, you are thinking both of the past and the future. You are giving an identity by just naming a person. I was suggesting, both as a joke and seriously, that why not change our names all the time?

Why not? When somebody asks me, 'Who are you?' I can say not just 'Daya Krishna', but give myself other names; and correspondingly, that person will think of me in different ways. Why? Because your name identifies you with a country, with a culture, with a past, with a civilisation. What is this identification?

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If I am William, I am something. If I am Krishna, I become something totally different. If I am a Muhammad, I become different again. Each name contains regions upon regions, provinces upon provinces of hidden meaning. Each name is different. A German's name is different, a Frenchman's name is different, an Englishman's name is different, and a South-Indian's name is again different. What is all this? I want to take you deeper into the problem of identification.

One identifies himself with a culture, and if a culture is embedded in a civilisation, then one identifies also, indirectly, with a civilisation. This civilisation has a long history, so you identify yourself with history. And history has a long, unending past; you identify with that too. But how do you understand yourself? Each human being tries to understand himself, an understanding which is in terms of going into the past.

The search for one's roots—what is this search? Why do I seek an identity in terms of the past? Why can't I be satisfied with just the present? I am here. Why do I have to go back in time to seek my identity?

Even those who talk of timelessness, about identity transcending time, always talk in terms, concepts, images, and symbols which belong to a particular tradition.

To talk of timelessness or atemporality is one thing, but the talk itself is always not merely in time, but rather it is shaped and formed by time. This time is not the time of physics, just as the space in which I live is not the space of geometry. Imagine! The space and time in which I live are not those which can be measured by geometry or physics. It is a strange thing: I live in the past, I get my identity from the past, and this past is in time, and this time gives me identity.

Let me move forward a little. What exactly is an understanding of a civilisation, and what exactly is a civilisation?

Civilisation, friends, is a strange creation of man. It is not a natural thing. It is also not something like culture, which all societies, all human beings build. It is an expression of an aspiration, of hope, of the attempt to realise an ideal, in time, through successive gener-

ations. I have said some of this before, but I would like to repeat it. This civilisation is crafted, built, imagined and stabilised, made visible, by what we would call successive creations of man. How do I understand a civilisation? By what it has created.

This creation takes place on every level. This creation is as much in the realm of politics and economy as it is in art and religion. It is also in the search for spirituality, for the transcendent; and it is, of course, in every human relationship. It is as much in the seeking for love and friendship, as in enmity and fighting. It is a strange kind of thing that we have built. After all, atom bombs and missiles are as much evidence of a civilisation as bows and arrows.

The *Mahābhārata* is full of what people call weapons of war. Everybody goes in search of weapons. Arjuna does. So does Karna. The epic consists of a long reflection on war, and on the justification for war. Civilisations are not merely made by peace, but they are also made by enmity, war and conflict.

Beyond this, civilisations are also built by what we may call 'a search'. What is this search? The search is for knowledge!

When you go to the past, there is a search for knowledge in various fields: in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and so on and so forth. In every field there is a search for knowledge, and this search is a continuous endeavour. Knowledge is not fixed and static; nothing is fixed and static; everything is moving; everything is developing; everything is changing; everything is deteriorating or building up. This story of man's quest is in effect what civilisation is.

How are we to understand a long history of a quest which lasts over at least three millennia? How are we to understand it?

Friends, I would like to draw your attention to a strange situation: How can I understand my own past? I was born, and I grew up, and I am here. When I look back, how do I understand my own self? It is in a sense an impossible enterprise because, whatever I remember and whatever I identify with, I cannot say that I am just this. My days in school and college, family and friends, love, marriage, and friendship; my search for knowledge; what I have written;

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what I have not done; what I have done which I would like to forget—all these things are there. But am I this?

I do not think that anyone sitting here would like to identify himself totally with anything he has done, whether good, bad, or neither. Even in a single day thousands of little things happen, thoughts cross our minds, temptations occur, and something great occurs also.

We are strange beings. We highlight only certain things. We say that ‘he is this’, or ‘he is that’. We pick and choose. We suppress. We want to forget. I want to suggest that suppression and forgetfulness are as much a part of the seeking and the understanding of each of us as a human being, as what is remembered, what is highlighted, what is identified with. Suppression and forgetfulness are as much part of us as the picture that we want to present.

I would like to tell you a story, to introduce a case study of two civilisations. Let us see what the West identifies with, and what we—the Indian civilisation—are doing. What have we suppressed? What don’t we want to remember? What don’t we want to be reminded of, even if it is there? Let us find out what are the things that we simply refuse to be reminded of.

The story of civilisations is a multi-dimensional story. First, what a civilisation dreamt of and aspired to; its quest and the goals it has tried to achieve; not in one field, but in every field.

Second, how did the civilisation build itself successively, century by century, year by year, and millennium by millennium? Just imagine! When we are talking of the past, we say ‘two hundred years this side’, ‘two hundred years that side’. Imagine! Centuries do not matter. I say ‘100 BC’ or ‘100 AD’ as if a hundred years do not matter at all.

Whereas in one’s own life even a decade matters, even a year matters, even a day matters. On the one hand, each moment of life matters to every human being, and yet when we look at the past, there are large blanks which do not matter. Why is it so? Because we pick out the important things; we pick out the significant things; we pick out that which really makes a difference, and which is really worthwhile. The rest we want to forget; it does not matter.

The story of the West and India is interesting in two ways.

First, the West has played a trick, and we must understand that trick. The West has identified itself with Græco-Roman civilisation. Christianity was a break, a radical break in the history of the West. Hence, the West identifies itself with a pre-Christian civilisation.

Islam or the Muslims, as a counterexample, have not been able to identify with pre-Islamic civilizations. Islam has not identified itself with Persia, or Egypt; not even with the Ottoman Turks. The break in the Islamic civilisation is that it has no past before Muhammad. Islam refuses to identify with an Arab civilisation or Arab cultures which existed before Muhammad.

The Indians have no break! They have had radical breaks, but they do not treat them as breaks. We identify ourselves with the most ancient part of our civilisation, *i.e.* the Vedic civilisation. Imagine what a break it was from the Vedic time to the Upaniṣadic period.

The Upaniṣads reject, in a sense, or transcend the Veda. They call the Vedic *vidyā* '*aparā-vidyā*'.<sup>1</sup> They distinguish between '*parā*' and '*aparā*' and identify themselves with the '*parā*'. But what has happened to the Vedic *yajña*, the Vedic sacrifice? And where are the Vedic gods? What has happened to the Vedic pantheon? Most of the Vedic gods have disappeared. We have new gods all the time.

Not merely this, but the emergence of Jainism and Buddhism has challenged the Vedic orthodoxy at every point. And yet, India has accepted both Buddhism and Jainism as a part of its heritage. The West has merely appropriated Græco-Roman civilisation. India, on the other hand, appropriated as its past everything: Buddha and Mahāvīra as much as the ṛṣis of the Veda. Imagine! Even today people are called Bhardwaj, Bhargava, etc. Can you imagine such continuity? Even today people have these surnames, indicating Vedic 'roles' and 'positions'. What does it mean?

I started my talk referring to names. Imagine a culture or a civilisation which still has names, or surnames, belonging to the ṛṣis of the Vedic age. It is unbelievable! Now let us look deeper into the continuity of a civilisation and how it is preserved and kept. We talk of continuity, but what exactly continues?

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Western civilisation established continuity with Græco-Roman civilisation in terms of two things.

First, knowledge. Knowledge of what? Knowledge that was certain, that was indubitable, that could be achieved by pure rational reflection, which means you did not have to open your eyes to obtain that knowledge. And yet, that knowledge was supposed to be more certain than anything you have apprehended, saw with your own eyes, felt with your senses. I am talking of mathematics. Mathematics is the strangest thing in the world. So, the West has identified itself with this great cognitive discovery that man can know a certain universal knowledge through the pure exercise of reason. The Greeks had done it, and it was from the Greek heritage that mathematics was really an exercise of reason and knowledge.

Second, Western civilisation also established continuity with Græco-Roman civilisation in terms of logic. It was mathematics and Aristotle's logic. Both these disciplines have become the paradigm examples of what Western civilisation considers itself to be rooted in. This is what the West puts in the foreground, and it forgets everything else. Imagine!

The last four thousand years of Western civilisation have been built on a vast forgetfulness, a vast act of repression. This act of repression is not merely of Græco-Roman history, of the Stoics and Epicureans, of thinking after Aristotle, but of almost the whole of Christianity. The whole thing has been sidelined by saying that this is 'theology'. No other civilisation in the past has put aside and suppressed so much of it.

I am not talking at the level of culture. Civilisation is different from culture. Civilisation is understood in terms of concepts, not images, symbols, rituals, nor even art. Civilisation is understood primarily in terms of concepts. A concept is a theoretical thing; you are building a conceptual net, and through it you are trying to understand experience and reality. This is concept; but what does it mean 'to understand'? Understanding takes place in terms of a question or a problem. Something arises in your mind, some problem wants to be solved, some question wants to be answered.

What are the questions and the problems of a civilisation? You superimpose on the human past a pattern of understanding in terms of concepts and problems. The problems and concepts have been given to you by the past. Who had set the problems in the West? Aristotle, Plato, the Pythagoreans. They had set the agenda. They had set the concepts. Imagine! There has never been a person like Aristotle, who wrote fundamental *śāstras*<sup>2</sup> in almost every field. Parenthetically let me just say, without elaboration or explanation at this point, that the creator of logic is not the creator of mathematics.

Therefore, any attempt to understand Western civilisation must take into account the long suppression mentioned above, as well as the relationship with a pre-Christian past which has been owned and appropriated. Any attempt to understand Western civilisation should also be in terms of what may be called 'reason', acknowledging reason's power to know everything and to determine action.

What, on the other hand, is the story of India? It is a totally different story. Has not India had a long tradition of science, astronomy, medicine, linguistics, everything? We have built temples. Temples cannot be built without knowledge of engineering, knowledge of materials, knowledge of metals, knowledge of everything. But for some reason, we ourselves do not regard this knowledge as important. Have we not contributed tremendously to the field of mathematics? It is amazing that this civilisation does not think of itself in terms of its past or knowledge of any kind.

I would like to ask my friends around this table who are interested in the Indian civilisation why it is that any product of reason, any product of intellect, any conceptual network for understanding man, society, or polity is just not there when we think of our own civilisation?

We are not interested in our very own *śāstras*! The *pramāṇa-śāstra*,<sup>3</sup> developed in India, is not a subject of our interest. Even grammar or language is not a subject of our interest. Some of us may talk of Pānini, but we are not interested or not interested enough in his work. Imagine! We are not interested in the millennia-long thinking which took place in this country on understanding language through language. I am sorry to say that we are simply uninterested.

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India's picture, as it has been built, is a picture of huge suppression. We are spiritual people; we believe only in *parā-vidyā*; we are seekers of *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa*; we are not interested in this world. This world is unreal to us; it is *māyā*, or it is *lilā*,<sup>4</sup> and it does not matter. Imagine! This civilisation has been referred to in phrases like, 'The Wonder that was India'. This wonder was not merely in the realm of the spirit, but in every realm whatsoever.

You go to a temple and see the invisible behind the visible; but friends, the creation of the visible is not easy! It requires knowledge, and this knowledge has to be learnt through hard work. You cannot obtain the knowledge of mathematical relationships, or measuring, or watching the heavens without real observation. But you denigrate observation. You denigrate the senses. Can you imagine! So much observational material is reflected in Indian literature, art, everything, and yet we say that the senses do not matter.

So much thinking has taken place in India. You will be absolutely surprised. India is a land where reason and argumentation were so central to the civilisation. And yet, we identify the West with reason; we think the West is rational, that it's reason-centric, that we are not. Imagine!

In this country you had to always present a *pūrva-pakṣin's* stand-point<sup>5</sup> to establish anything, even in the so-called spiritual traditions of India. I want you to understand it and think about it. Let us not suppress anything. Take for example the whole development of Buddhism from Buddha onwards. Take the whole development of Jainism from Mahāvīra onwards. Take the whole development of the Upaniṣads. Take the development of the Sāṅkhya tradition. You will be absolutely amazed.

Thinker by thinker and text by text are full of arguments, and not merely of arguments but of conceptual formulations put together to understand experience. Experience was not the central thing, but it was one of the things, as it always is. Experience must be reflected upon, must be pursued. Experience is not sitting there like anything. You have to do something to have an experience. You have to imagine it; you have to close your eyes; you have to concentrate.



You have to do something! And yet doing has been denigrated in this country.

I'm telling you, there has never been a civilisation like the Indian! And yet, we know very little, too little about it. I am saying this with full responsibility and humility. We do not know our own civilisation. We have built a false picture of it. I believe that this false picture has been built as a response, a reaction and a defence-mechanism to the West.

If the West has formulated a picture according to which 'we are rational', 'we are logical', 'we believe in mathematics', 'we believe in measurement', 'we believe in objectivity', 'our heart is in logic and mathematics', emphasising observation, experiment and a continuous formulation and reformulation, we have formulated just the opposed picture.

We find the truth once and for all; we just repeat, we do not innovate; reason is not important to us; observation is not important to us; experiment is not important to us; senses are not important to us; mind is not important; *buddhi*<sup>6</sup> is not important; only *prajñā*<sup>7</sup> is important, or so some may think.

We do not believe in the distinctions between good and bad, truth and falsity, the beautiful and the not beautiful. Imagine the picture that we have built of ourselves. I suggest that this picture, taken by some as self-evident, is a build-up of the eighteenth century onwards. In the nineteenth century it was built both by the West and by us. These so-called contrasts between India and the West are presented by S. Radhakrishnan in his book *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*.<sup>8</sup> Imagine! We have no thought at all!

What a condemnation of our civilisation, what a suppression; India is full of thought! If anybody says that India is not full of thought, there is something wrong with him. And if someone says that the West has no religions, he does not know the West. I am absolutely surprised that a man of the stature of Radhakrishnan contrasts eastern religions and Western thought. He should have contrasted Western thought with Indian thought. There is power in Indian thought, and it has the capacity of confronting Western thought. It should!

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The picture that we have built is a picture of a vast suppression, as if India did not have an intellect; as if it did not have reason; as if it did not have senses and observation. This is absolutely unbelievable. And contrasted with the West—the West's suppression is as vast a suppression. The West has no religiosity? Imagine! The Greeks used to worship gods like us. They had gods and goddesses in plenty. Forget about mathematics and logic!

Large parts of Græco-Roman civilisation, including at the intellectual level, have nothing to do with mathematics and logic. It was practical reason, not theoretical reason which dominated. It was the concern with the emotions and passions, and their control, which occupied both the Stoics and the Epicureans. After the coming of Christianity, reason was 'at a discount'. It was the era of faith; millennia, thousands of years of faith; and yet we suppress it from our consciousness. I want to suggest that the understanding of civilisations, like the understanding of the 'personal past' of a human being, is full of suppression. It is all about what we want to highlight and what we do not want to highlight.

The history and historiography of Western civilisation, as it is told, conceal large aspects of this very civilisation. Take as another example the fact that churches were built, marvellous churches, as wonderful as our temples and sometimes even more wonderful. But the West itself suppresses it, and only talks of the external architecture, and not the internal experience that occurs when you go into a church.

What I am trying to suggest, unpleasant or unacceptable as it may sound, is that the understanding of civilisations is a strange enterprise. Man has built so much, and yet, when we look back at the past, we do not see it as it really is. We pick and choose, and identify ourselves only with certain things, thus rejecting, forgetting, or suppressing all the rest.

I would like to reinforce my previous suggestion and argue that the West has consolidated its own picture by rejecting, almost totally, at the intellectual level, the whole history of its past. It has identified itself so much and so deeply with the story of merely the

last four hundred years and with some parts of Greece, that it is not able to give it up.

Moreover, in the present day the West sees the necessity of repudiating even these last four hundred years. The West is in a moment of crisis, where it finds that the 'safe' and 'beautiful' house it has built in terms of conceptual structures is no longer adequate. Therefore, the question the West must now deal with is what to do with it? How to go forward when every concept and each methodology has been questioned, when all the past formulations of the problems are no more relevant and valid? The Indians must address the same problem.

The Indian dilemma is different from the Western dilemma. The Western dilemma is how to repudiate, how to cope with the questioning of its own concepts, its own old methodology; how to cope with the questioning of reason itself in its traditional formulation. Both mathematics and logic, as I argued, are facing this dilemma.

I jokingly told a friend that there is a scandal in the temple of the Goddess of Reason in the West. One simply cannot believe in mathematics and logic in the same way one did for the last more than two thousand years. What do we do with it? After all, these are the foundations: mathematics in relation to what we may call 'the objective world', and logic in relation to thought itself. Both are in ruins, both are shattered. What do we do?

Let us go back to the history of Indian civilisation, taking inspiration from it in order to figure out what to do in the present for the future. The West must do the same but let us focus on India.

## Notes

- 1 *vidyā* – knowledge; *aparāvidyā* – lesser, fragmented, worldly knowledge; *parā* – ultimate; *aparā* – not ultimate, lesser.
- 2 *śāstras* – scientific or critical texts.
- 3 *pramāna-śāstra* – philosophical, knowledge-centered texts.
- 4 *māyā* and *līla* – ‘cosmic illusion’ and ‘master-game’; terms used to derogate the phenomenal, daily, worldly aspect of the human life, thus indicating a clear preference for the metaphysical or the trans-worldly experience.
- 5 a *pūrva-pakṣin*’s standpoint – a counter-perspective; the perspective of ‘the other’ or, more accurately, others in the plural.
- 6 *buddhi* – intellect.
- 7 *prajñā* – insight, enlightenment, the noetic dimension of spiritual experience.
- 8 See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).