‘Glimpses of Indian Culture and History of Indian Christianity’.

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“India has to her credit a vast history of more than 6,000 years of civilised life and is eulogised as the cradle of four classical religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. One of the ancient civilisations – The Indus Valley civilization – flourished on the bank of the river Indus also known as ‘Sindhu’ in Sanskrit, an ancient language in India. The Indus River is the most important river in Pakistan and also the longest. It begins in Tibet and flows into the Arabian Sea. The major cities of Indus River Valley Civilization date back to around 3300 BC. Palaeolithic sites have been found with the stone tools of cave dwellers dating back 15,000 years. Indus was part of ancient India until the partition of Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan.

From time immemorial, India was a prized trade destination thanks to its rich natural resources. The annals of the holy Bible as well as the writings of the early historians such as Marco Polo, Huen Tsang etc prove beyond doubt that India had brisk trade with the Arabs, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, the Israelites, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Chinese and so on and so forth. India had been famous for her spices like Cardamom, Cinnamon, Ginger, Turmeric and Pepper and her fame as the land of spices brought peoples and cultures to her shore even in the third millennium BC, if not earlier.

We read in 1 King’s chapter 9 of the Old Testament that King Solomon’s tradesmen in the company of the Phoenician merchant Hiram traded with Indian sea ports. “And they came to Ophir and fetched from thence, gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to King Solomon.”Ophir has been identified by some scholars as a place in India. It is natural that Solomon’s tradesmen got ivory, apes, and peacocks from Indian ports. It included logs of Indian teaks, acacia, for the use in the temple construction in the Middle East.

The Indian subcontinent forms part of Asia and spreads towards the south from the foot of the highest peak in the world –the Mount Everest. The Himalayan ranges border the North of India and the peninsular South is surrounded by the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. These natural barriers have provided a degree of seclusion which has moulded a distinct culture for India.

India has diverse geographic features with dense rain forests, barren deserts, plains, hills, High mountain ranges, swamps and mangroves breeding a vast array of flora and fauna. The Indian Tiger is the King among animals and Lotus, the Queen of Flowers. Large plantations of different crops, such as tea, rubber, Mango, cashew nut, coconut, cotton, mulberry to breed silk worms, etc and fields of wheat, paddy, chilli, peppers, saffron, millet, vegetables, and strawberry abound. Apples of Kulu and Oranges of Nagpur are famous. The sweet Lychees of Himachal tempt everyone with their cool sweet taste. Although a tropical country lying close to the equator, there is most of the time a hospitable climate.

But in the course of time, somehow, many foreigners came to India for trade and other purposes eventually leading to dominating the innocent people of India. From the very beginning of its history, India showed a very tolerant nature towards the strangers.

Since the term ‘Culture’ means ‘a way of life’; to understand ‘What is India?’ one must know of the art, literature, customs and values prevailing in that country. India stands second in terms of world population and, to her credit, the largest democratic country in the world. Culture is a complex whole that social scientists can break down into simple units called cultural traits. A
trait may be a custom, such as burial of the dead, a device, such as a plow; a gesture, such as a
handshake or an idea, such as democracy. In that sense, you can imagine the magnitude of
Indian cultural traits for India being the largest democratic country. It is still a miracle to the
political analysts that, on every 5 years, India could conduct parliamentary elections peacefully
and meticulously with the involvement of a large section of people with different views and
attitudes.

It is a multi lingual-religious state but exists as a union proclaiming the slogan “One India,
One People, Unity is strength”. Currently, India has a population of about 1.15 billion people and
has a geographical area of around 100 folds bigger than Ireland in size. It maintains Religious
harmony by giving equal importance to every other religion, though it is predominantly a Hindu
state. It is secularism that prevails there rather than theocracy. The hallmark of Indian polity is
‘Unity in diversity’.

In India, there are 22 languages widely spoken. 80 % of the Indian populace are Hindus,
13 % are Muslims and 2.4% are Christians and the others constitute the rest. The majority of
people are highly religious and are hilarious of celebrating festivals. Large events of pilgrim-
gathering are common. Pilgrimage, of course, is part of their life. It is customary to have
ceremonial bathing (ablutions) before every religious activity. The prayers are often conducted in
temples invariably before the dawn of the day and soon after the sun set.

I am proud to state that Indian people, to the core, always upholds the Principle Ahimsa
and the policy of Non Violence and are, therefore, generally very peace loving people like the
people of Ireland. It was with these great weapons of mettle that Mahatma Gandhi fought for the
freedom of India. But, I admit with all the humility, that now the social values have gone down
considerably. The decadence and the deterioration in social values seen in the present India is
mainly because of the negative impacts of the
globalisation.

It is worth noting that the name ‘India’ has a special reference in the book of Esther of the
Holy Bible. The very name ‘India’ and the term ‘Hindu’ have been derived from the word ‘Indus’
an English version of the Persian word ‘Sind’. Hinduism, -the ‘ism’ developed in this subcontinent,
is not a particular religion as some of you may presume but it is, in fact, a ”culture”. Hinduism, in
a nutshell, is a common wealth of different cultures. The uniqueness of Hinduism is its all-inclusive
nature.

In fact, true Hinduism also upholds Monotheism. The polytheism attributed to Hinduism
shows the complex structure of its amalgamation of different schools of thought. Unlike the
patristic tradition of the Semitic religions of the Middle East, the chief deity of the archaic
Hinduism happened to be the Mother Goddess. As a result, the idea of venerating mother and
motherhood over and above everything has become the rule of the day in India.

Indian philosophy, I must say, to a certain degree stand aloof to the Greek philosophy, so
much so is its riches. When the Greeks say that the Universe and everything in it is composed of 4
elements such as earth, water, air, and fire, the Indian philosophy goes to the extent of the 5th
one –the ether (aakasham).

The fabric of Indian culture is made of familial ties bound by love. It was the custom of
Indian people to live under the same roof as large family consisting of Father, mother, children, in-
laws, grandchildren, and great grand children by sharing and caring mutually. The Indian
Cuisines-the mouth watering dishes and curries- are the by-products of such sharing that
developed as part of family culture.

Indian philosophy is all about humanism. There is a celebrated prayer in Sanskrit, “Loka
Samastha sukhino bhavanthu, meaning “let the whole world be blessed” Sanskrit is the divine
language of India and one of the ancient languages existing in the world at present. This prayer is
born out of the Indian approach to the rest of the world which is summed up as
Vasudiavakudumbam. (The family of God where God as head and humans as the children of God.)

Another, teaching of Indian tradition is, “Adhidhi devo bhava” which means, ‘A Guest is
God’. It was customary to offer water to wash their feet at their arrival and to offer sumptuous
food for them with the belief in mind that ‘Annadanam sarvalad pradhanam’, meaning offering
food to the fellow beings is consired to be the most important offertory one can offer to God.
They believed that whatever services rendered to human kind, was done to God. Thus there
evolved the slogan “Manava seva, Madhava seva”.

This ethos of people might have made the people receive many foreigners when they came
to India for trade and even for importing their religious thoughts to the land. Many foreigners had
invaded India but India never ever invaded any one.

The Indians are taught to respect their Fathers, Mothers and Gurus as the visible gods. The
children are expected to respect the older people as their father or mother figure. No one
addresses and older person by name but always addresses them with a respectful suffix added to
their names such as “Ji”. Gandhiji, Chachaji etc are examples. As part of etiquette, the Indian
youngsters do stand as a mark of respect whenever an elderly person enters to their vicinity.

The system of education in ancient India was quite different from that of the present form
of institutionalised one. The system was known by the term ‘Gurukulam’ where the student lived
in the house of the master and served him while being taught. ‘Guru Bhakti; or devotion to the
teacher was a supreme virtue. The students were given knowledge on various subjects as well as
training in various art forms like Music and martial arts. The advantage of the system was that it
gave more room for a wholesome development of all aspects of the student. It is worth noting
that it was in India that the First Universities in the world were established. The University of
Taxila and the University of Nalanda had stood par excellence as centres of learning in the time of
yore.

In Indian culture and belief, there are 4 stages in a person’s life namely; Brahmacharya,
Grehathasrama, Vanaprestha, and Sanyasam. (1) Brahamacharya is where one is supposed to be
exclusively devoted to the world of knowledge up to the age of 25. (2) Grehasthsrama is where
one is supposed to lead a family life procuring and taking care of children up to 50 years of age.
3) Vanaprestha is where husband and wife, after having completed their household responsibilities
go for pilgrimages one after the other to holy shrines by leading a simple life up to the age
75years. 4) Sanyasam is where one leads an austere life relinquishing all worldly pleasures and
spends time in meditation and contemplation until they die and merge with the Supreme Being –
God (Nirvana or Moksha)

There had been a caste structure prevalent in India which though developed for an efficient
government, or in other words as part of a division of labour, deteriorated into untouchability and
a sort of rigid society where inequality prevailed. Brahmens, Shethriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras were
the 4 group of people in the classification as per the caste system. . Brahmens were priests and
the custodians of Vidya, or knowledge. Kshathriya was the ruling clans who were warriors and the
Vyshyas were those engaged in commerce. Sudras did all the menial jobs.

We are living at a time when the global warming is all the more rampant. Every nook and
corner of India, we can come across Banyan trees and Basil plants especially in the premises of
temples. These two are sacred plants to the Hindus. Recent research says that these two plants
have a unique ability of producing large quantity of oxygen which is vital to the very existence of
the world especially in the present scenario. As part of Hindu religion, people are encouraged to
have small forest within each one’s homestead. No one is allowed to destroy such forests which are known in our own vernacular language as ‘Kavu’ where snakes are reared and venerated as divine. Ignoring the ecology behind such conservation of forest-life within the city limit, it is unfortunate that these traditions are now considered archaic. It is in fact an eco-friendly religion.

It is a practice among the Hindus to pray facing towards East, the direction of the rising Sun. This practice has got a tremendous health benefits. It is a kind of exposing oneself to the rays of Sun which happens to be a plethora of energies. The One, who does it, gets huge amount of vitamin D, which is essential for absorbing Calcium in their body.

There is a general notion that Hinduism is a primitive religion and all the Hindus are superstitious people who worship the nature and are idolaters. But, in fact, it is a highly developed religion which provides for the welfare of all. There is a variety of simple rites as part of popular piety as well as complex forms of rituals like Yaga and Yajna. There are elements of tribal rituals as well as philosophical religion developed there.

Hinduism is indeed the Sanathana Dharma or the Eternal Law. “Satyameva Jayathe”: meaning “Truth alone triumphs” has been the axiom of Sanathana Dharma. India, to her credit, has a great religious literature called Vedas, Puranas, Ithihasas, and Upanishads and so on and so forth. The great epics of India called ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata’ and the works of great poet Kalidas are indeed assets to the world of literature and religion. India had very famous scientists also in the past. The Number Zero was invented by Aryabhatta, an Indian in 400 BC. The contribution of Aryabhatta, the great mathematician and astronomer, to astrophysics was tremendous.

Ayurveda, the Indian branch of medicine and the Yoga have a vital role to play in the welfare and the general health of the present world. It is a baffling fact that the great physician of India-Shushrutha- had done ophthalmic surgeries for his patients who had cataract in their eyes even in 800 BC. It is equally astonishing that there has been a reference of an aeroplane called ‘Pushpakavimananam’ in the great epic Ramayana written many centuries ago before the invention of the aeroplane by the Wright Brothers in 1903. Ravana, the king of Lanka (The present Sri Lanka) abducted Sita, the wife of King Rama of India, in his Pushpakavimana (a plane made of flowers).

In addition to the folk music, India has two major branches of music namely Carnatic and Hindustani. The former has evolved from the Dravidian culture in Southern part of India, and the latter has been a blend of carnatic and Persian music. (The Dravidians in South India were the people of Indus Valley civilisation pushed down to the south by the Aryan Invasion.) Like the Irish, Indian people too are very much fond of music. There is always an element of devotion to a particular deity rather than mere performance for the applause of audience while rendering a concert by a group of musicians. Most of the concerts are conducted in the premises of temples as part of religious activity. The caves in Ajanta and Ellora stand as symbols of mural art paintings. The temples and many historical monuments in India speak volumes about the glory of Indian architecture and sculpture. Taj Mahal, the beautiful structure made in white marble, still survives the vagaries of the time and holds its head high in the rank of the seven wonders of world.

Kerala, widely eulogised as “the God’s own country” and fortunately my native place, is one of the 22 states of Indian Republic. It lies at the tip of the Indian peninsula and protected by the Sea of Arabia in the West and the Sahyadri hills in the East is indeed a beautiful piece of land for living. The serene streams of water run through the thick forests, the quiet back waters, the nicely cut and manicured hilly tea estates, the plantation of the coconut trees, the paddy fields, and the wealth of wild life, all are a feast to the eyes. The panoramic scenery of the landscape heralds the fact that God appears to have carved every nook and corner of this land with care as if with His own hand. Certainly this land is worthy to be called ‘God’s own Country’. Nature has been so kind to Kerala with its wide variety of natural resources. It is fortunate that this land was blessed by
the footprints of St Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ who braved to come all the way from Jerusalem down to Kerala. It is in this land where according to legend, Mahabali, an ideal King of humility and magnanimity, ruled. Onam- the national festival of Kerala- is celebrated every year to commemorate and to re-live those good old days. It helps the people of Kerala to foster a sense of oneness, and to inculcate a sense of humility in them and to urge them for a mutual sharing. It is surprising fact that there was order without law in this land once upon a time. Justice, Peace, Equality, Fraternity, and Liberty prevailed in Kerala in those days of the past.

As mentioned supra, Indian culture is a composite culture, its essential hallmark being ‘Unity in diversity’. Indian culture is an amalgam of diverse cultures that has entered the country through the long and chequered courses of its history. With a long history of twenty centuries, Indian Christianity is an integral part of the society and culture of India. Some people still entertain the misconception that Christianity in India is an extension of the European civilisation to India since the arrival of foreigners in the sixteenth century. The origin of Christianity in India can be traced back to the very first century. Christianity, according to a dearly loved tradition of a considerable section of Christians in India, was founded by St.Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ, in the year 52AD. Thus, Christianity in India had its origin during the lifetime of the Apostles just like the Church of Rome or Church of Antioch. That means Christianity was there already in India even before Christianity made its way into the Europe and even before the present form of organised Hindu religion came into existence in India. Since its introduction in India, the Christian faith had made steady progress, and members of the Christian Church evolved an ecclesiastical lifestyle in tune with the culture of the country. This Church developed individuality and a history of its own. Christianity developed as an indigenous religion in India.

I have heard many a people nicknaming St. Thomas as ‘doubting Thomas.’ In fact, he was not so. He was indeed, I must say, a man of courage. He can be best qualified for the title a ‘daring Thomas’ rather than a doubting Thomas. We read from the holy Bible that St. Thomas dared to be outside when all other disciples hid themselves inside a closed room for fear of the Jews. He wanted to have a deep and direct knowledge of his master by touching the nail prints on the palms of Jesus Christ for the reason that he might be more kinaesthetic than auditory and visual. He ventured to make a voyage to the Far East. He came all the way from Jerusalem down to India for disseminating the gospel of Christ, and that too at a time when transportation facilities was not so advanced as that of today. He made a missionary journey more than what St.Paul had done and finally became a martyr in South India for the sake of his Lord and God Jesus Christ. It is a pity that there is no one in the Christendom to acknowledge his great service rendered for the extension of the Kingdom of God. History says that he was first brought to North India, precisely to the place called Taxila in 45 AD, where he converted many including the King Gondaphorus by his sincere and dedicated mission work. After that, he is believed to be taken back to Jerusalem in a whirlwind to have a last glimpse of the mother of God, St.Mary, following her demise. Tradition holds that before his arrival in Jerusalem, the holy body of St. Mary was transported to heaven by the angels. Seeing that glorious event, he prayed to St.Mary to bless him. And it is said that the girdle tied around her loin fell into his hands. That girdle is still kept as a holy relic of St.Mary with all reverence in a Syrian Church in Holms.

By 45AD, a new sea route to south India was discovered by the Egyptian navigator-Hippalus. This facilitated the arrival of St. Thomas to the shore of south India by sea route. He landed in an ancient port called Muziris (Kodungalloor) near Cochin in Kerala in the year 52 AD. He first preached Christianity to the Jewish Diaspora there. According to History, there was a Jewish settlement in the northern part of this ancient port from 63 BC. Even today, there is a synagogue and small Jewish community living in Cochin, a nearby place to the ancient port Muziris. It is quite remarkable that the Muslim Community and Jewish community here co-exist and live in amity and friendship when the State Palatine is over cast with dark clouds of religious hatred and rivalry.

History says that St.Thomas spent 20 long years travelling across the south India making
many people Christians. He established 7 churches in Kerala; one of them still exists even today in its archaic form withstanding the vicissitudes of time. He even went to the land of China to preach Christianity there. He was stabbed to death in 72 AD in Mylapore near Madras and entombed there. Later on, His holy relics were translated to Edessa in Persia which was his primary place of mission.

Right from the very beginning of Christian Church in India, it maintained spiritual relationship with the Church of Persia. Until the arrival of Portuguese missionaries sent by the Church of Rome in the 16th Century, the Christianity in India stood united in conforming strictly to the orthodox faith and practices of the early Apostolic Church. The Portuguese missionaries forcefully tried to bring the indigenous church under the yoke of Roman papacy. They checked the relation of the Indian church with that of the Persian church. They imposed Latin rites upon the Indian Church. The Portuguese people who came to Kerala for trade became so much powerful as to steer the power centre, and they misused their influence to bring the indigenous church under their control. The national church of India was constrained to yield to the catholic teachings and administration for a period of 52 years. But the surge for autonomy and autocephaly made a section of the indigenous church to revolt against the Papal suzerainty in 1653. A public oath was taken place to disband the relationship with the Church of Rome. When they took the oath catch holding to a rope tied to a Cross erected in a place called Mattanchery in Kerala, it is said that the Cross slanted slightly towards their side. This event, in a sense, was the first revolt against the foreign rule, in the history of Indian Independence. Later, the indigenous church approached the Syrian Church of Antioch for spiritual assistance but eventually they too tried to bring the Indian Church under their control. When the British missionaries came to India, their attempt was to bring the protestant teachings into the ancient church in India.

By resisting to the foreign abuses, the Church in India stood as a national church keeping its identity and integrity and it became Independent in the year 1912 by the establishment of Catholicate of East in India. And this National Church of India known as the Indian Orthodox Church or Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church with its headquarters in Devalokam, Kottayam in India claims the holy apostolic throne of St.Thomas and strives to uphold Orthodox faith with an ecumenical outlook in the soil of India and strives to reach out to the World at large. Indian Orthodox Church now plays a leading role in the World Council of Churches (WCC). In brief, The Indian Orthodox Church is based purely on the Universal Christian ethics and Indian cultural ethos. She could produce a host of saints and scholars thanks to God.

Let me conclude this lecture by borrowing the words of Paul Tillich: “Orthodoxy is Catholic in substance and Protestant in principle”. It means Orthodoxy stand in between the Catholicism and Protestantism as a via media. Every local Church all over the world forms part of the Universal Church –One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church –as stated in the Nicene Creed where Christ is the Supreme Head of the Universal Church and each individual Christian is its organ which is also termed as the mystical body of Christ(Ephesians 4:16). It is worth mentioning that there has evolved a new discipline called Indian Christian theology and is, of course, a vast subject of study. The riches of India and her culture can only be garnered by the discerning. Her religion, culture, art, science, medicine, literature etc are treasure troves awaiting you. A serious study and research on Indology has to be made at large. I invite you to explore and discover and relish and gain in the process”.