

Self, society, and the state: Vedanta's voice in Indian democracy

By **Acharya Prashant** - April 6, 2025



In India, age-old traditions weave through the fabric of daily life. And on the other hand, the ideals of democracy are deeply cherished. We often find ourselves caught in a paradox: Can a secular Constitution truly reflect the spiritual essence of a nation so steeped in religion? This question pops up time and again in discussions on balancing our rich cultural heritage with the modern framework of laws that govern us. Some argue that these two worlds—our spiritual traditions and the secular principles of democracy—must be by definition at odds. But is that really the case, or is there something deeper at play here?

To answer that, we first need to step back and ask: What do we actually mean by “religion” and “culture”? These terms are often used casually, but perhaps understanding them more clearly can reveal a more harmonious connection between the Constitution and India’s spiritual heart—a connection that might just be hiding in plain sight.

Religion vs Culture

To grasp this complicated relationship, we should first try to determine what religion is in itself. Unless we look deeper into its core nature, we tend to reduce religion to mere rituals and customs. Culture, on the other hand, is everything about behavior—how we live from day to day. It is concerned with habits, values, and social interactions; it is essentially a system of decisions that we make on a daily basis.

However, culture fails to capture the true spiritual depth that religion holds. When discussing religion in the Indian context, most specifically Hinduism – it is necessary to distinguish between the two categories of religious texts: Shruti and Smriti. Shruti, comprising texts like the Vedas and Upanishads, is the revealed, timeless, unchanging

spiritual content. Smriti, on the other hand, includes texts like the Dharmashastras and Puranas, which are interpretative, extrapolative and instructive works shaped by temporal and social conditions. Smriti originated to simplify Shruti's advanced teachings for broader accessibility. In the course of time, some parts of Smriti seem to have become more influenced by the prevailing social beliefs of the time, rather than pure spiritual insight. What we see as the practiced culture today in India has much more to do with Smriti than Shruti. The beliefs, practices and rituals of the common man come from Smriti and local traditions.

Conflation of Shruti with Smriti leads to misunderstanding. The timeless principles of Sanatana Dharma come from Shruti, but popular culture is derived more from Smriti.

Constitution and Culture: A Tension Misunderstood

The conflict we observe between the Constitution and culture arises because much of our culture has strayed away from the spiritual essence of religion. In fact, the Constitution—when read in the light of Shruti—is not against religion but actually aligns with the eternal principles of Dharma.

While the Constitution states that all men and women are created equal, our lived experience remains plagued by differences—of caste, class, gender, and so forth. To reconcile this contradiction, we must acknowledge an innate human tendency: discrimination. Underlying this is a spiritual lack—Vedanta calls it *ahankara* (ego). Ego rooted in a sense of incompleteness, seeks wholeness through external identifiers. As a result, we begin to value some things over others, often irrationally and unjustly.

Discrimination is not only a social occurrence—it is existential. Our judgments, likes, and dislikes are shaped by inner confusion, not wisdom. That is why the Upanishads emphasize on *Viveka*—discretion; the capacity to distinguish the eternal from the temporal, the essential from the superficial. Such discrimination is essential for spiritual growth. Without it, we are bound to make choices misaligned with our higher good. Our higher levels of awareness become affected by unconscious instead of conscious states. Culture, particularly popular culture (*lok-sanskriti*), evolves over centuries through mass conditioning and may carry inherent limitations. Constitutions, therefore, become inevitable.

The Necessity of a Constitution

If our culture had been impeccable or absolutely equitable, a Constitution would never have been required. But history attests that cultures—not only fallen or secular ones—tend to indulge in inequality and injustice. This is why India requires a strong constitutional system comprising a visionary Preamble, basic rights (Articles 15-31), directive principles (Part IV of the Constitution, Articles 36-51), and duties (Article 51A). These provisions do not oppose culture; they correct its imbalances.

A law-based society founded solely on cultural beliefs—especially in a multicultural nation like India—would inevitably face internal collisions. Beliefs of one group would conflict with

those of another. Thus, the Constitution is needed not just as a legal document but as a spiritual guardian that upholds the dignity of all citizens regardless of background.

The Spiritual Heart of the Constitution

The Constitution, in this regard, is a deeply spiritual document. At its heart lies a return to the Self—the quest for self-realization. It seeks not superficial compliance but deep, personal commitment. Such spiritual foundations reinforce, rather than undermine, the secular character of our democracy.

Even though much is said about the Indian Constitution being borrowed from Western models, it would not be an exaggeration to say that its spirit resonates with the insights of Vedanta.

The relationship between India's spiritual heritage and its constitutional ethos is not adversarial, but one of profound resonance. If we distinguish the nature of religion—as revealed in Shruti—from the socio-cultural accretions shaped by Smriti, we find that the Indian Constitution does not reject tradition; it transcends its limitations. It offers a framework for justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity—values that mirror the Vedantic pursuit of inner freedom and self-knowledge.

"Sovereign" aligns with the Vedantic idea of freedom from being controlled by outside forces. "Socialism," when understood on a deeper level, is not just about economic equality, but about creating an environment where individuals can realize their fullest potential—where they can truly know themselves. The Constitution seeks to create this environment, ensuring that every person has the freedom to awaken to who they truly are.

Real freedom isn't about being able to do whatever we want. It's about freeing ourselves from the limitations of the mind and the ego. The Constitution offers us a deeper kind of freedom: the realization of our limitless, eternal nature.

At the core of every person is a spark of the same divine essence. The differences we see—whether in caste, religion, or status—are just illusions created by the ego. The equality the Constitution speaks of isn't just a legal idea; it reflects the deeper truth that, at our core, we are all the same in our spiritual essence.

When we truly understand that we are all part of the same universal consciousness, fraternity becomes something natural. The Constitution's vision of fraternity is about recognizing this connection and building a society that reflects our shared humanity.

Bridging the Spiritual and the Constitutional

Embracing the Constitution isn't just about fulfilling a civic duty; it's about acknowledging a spiritual responsibility. It calls on us to recognize that India's true freedom lies in harmonizing our laws with our inner truths. As we continue to grow as a democracy, we should remember that the Constitution isn't something foreign to our heritage but an expression of the deepest aspirations of the Indian spirit.

In this journey toward justice, freedom, and equality, the Constitution stands as a protector—ensuring our rights while guiding us toward the realization of the Self, where the state, society, and individual unite in the pursuit of truth, peace, and ultimate freedom.

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