



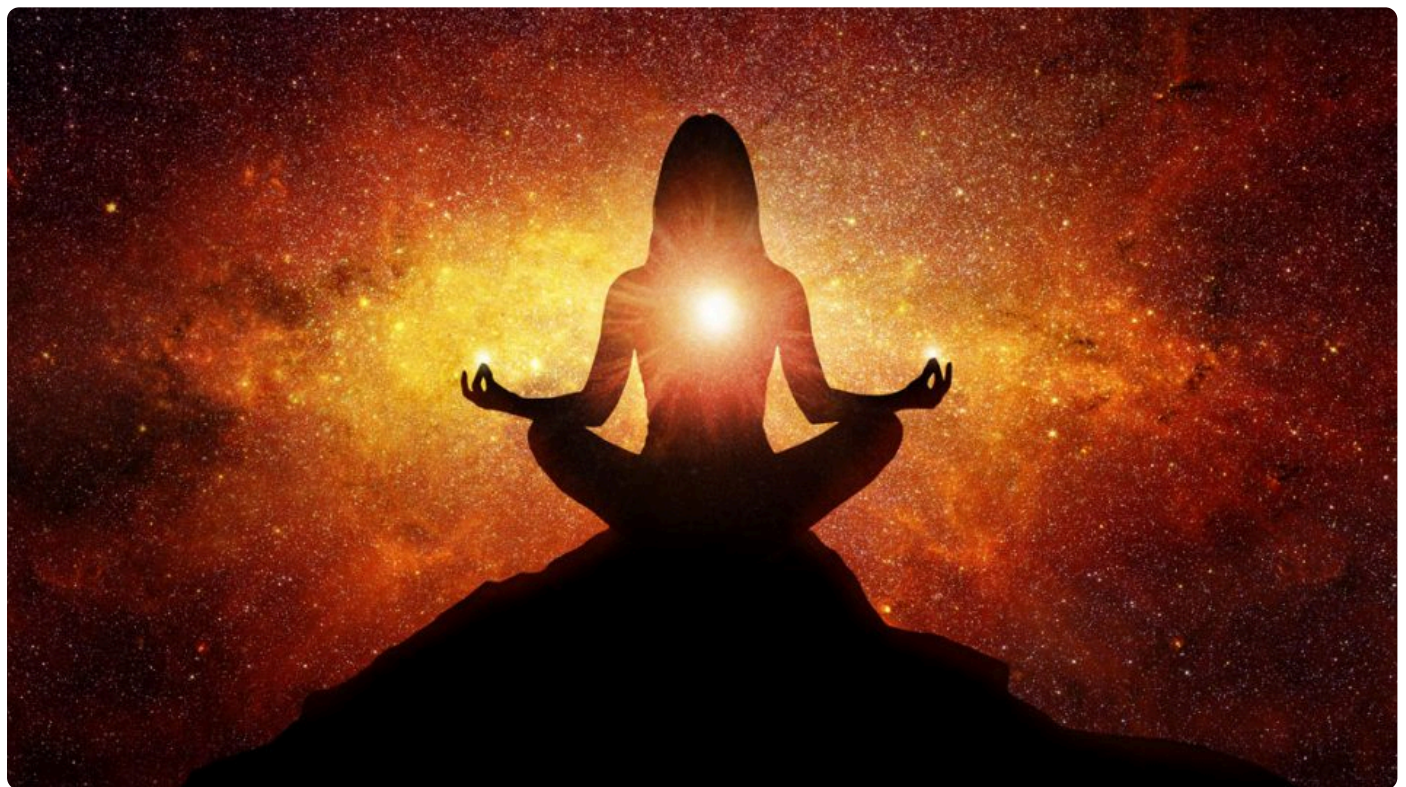
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When culture masquerades as wisdom

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By Acharya Prashant



Cultural assertion is the mood of the day. From rituals to symbols, all is in. Even the Gita is trending in a way not seen before. Politicians, motivational speakers, and corporate gurus are all uttering its name, quoting it, and more frequently, misquoting it. A tech entrepreneur quotes the Gita in interviews but has never sat with its uncomfortable demands. A university student declares on social media that she is “reclaiming her roots,” though she cannot name a single Upanishad. A family performs e’ for generations, yet no one in the room can explain what the \ professional wears religious

symbols as fashion, posting aesthetic shots with captions about “ancient wisdom” he has never read.

These are not isolated cases. In India especially, and increasingly elsewhere as well, a wave of cultural self-assertion is sweeping through public life, sometimes as confidence, often as a reaction. “Heritage” is being reclaimed, traditions revived, ancient symbols worn with new pride. The young declare they are done apologising for their roots. Social media amplifies the chorus. What was once taken for granted, and sometimes even shyly hidden, is now displayed with confidence.

On the surface, this can look like a civilisational reawakening. But on a closer look, it becomes clear that what is being reclaimed is rarely examined, and what is being celebrated is rarely understood. The confidence is loud, but it rests on very little inner contact.

As generally practised, culture is not wisdom; it is repetition. It is behaviour carried forward because it was once useful, once meaningful, once powerful, or simply because it has not yet been questioned. It belongs to the past by definition. It has momentum because it becomes society’s collective habit. Truth is alive, but culture is memory. When a society begins to bow before its memory, it has already stopped learning.

What we are witnessing is not a cultural renaissance. It is mostly the past asserting itself through the present, helped by technology, volume, and collective emotion. This is not depth returning. This is conditioning congratulating itself.

The Shelter of Inherited Answers

People claim to be returning to their “roots”. But what are roots, really? The word sounds noble, earthy, and authentic. But what we generally call roots are inherited habits, languages, rituals, symbols, reflexes, along with the fears and prides attached to them. They are not chosen or examined; they are simply absorbed. To derive pride from them is to derive identity from accident, to say, “I am this because I was born here.” That is not liberation; that is bondage made respectable.

Culture gives the ego a ready-made shelter, telling the individual who to be, what to value, what to fear, and whom to oppose. This is convenient, because thinking is demanding and inquiry is lonely. Conditioning offers belonging without inner work, certainty without investigation, and meaning without responsibility.

Identity is nothing but conditioning made respectable. Whether one calls it national pride, civilisational confidence, or cultural assertion makes little difference. The psychological movement remains the same: the past dictates the present, and the present obeys while calling obedience strength.

The Mundaka Upanishad distinguishes between *apara vidya*, the lower knowledge of rituals and worldly learning, and *para vidya*, the higher knowledge that liberates. Much of what we call culture operates in the first domain. It teaches how to behave, whom to worship, what to eat, and whom to marry. It does not teach you who you are.

Devotion Without Inquiry

Devotion, in the true sense, means the devotion of the false ego to truth itself. Devotion implies the love of the encaged self for freedom. However, something has happened to devotion itself. Bhajans are remixed for dance floors, pilgrimage becomes content for social media, ritual becomes lifestyle aesthetic. None of this is necessarily wrong, but something essential is lost when the sacred is used primarily to entertain or to display. Repetition with better lighting is still repetition, and conditioning with music is still conditioning.

A bhajan is not meant to affirm identity; it is meant to dissolve it. The Ashtavakra Gita declares that the false self must be dropped at all costs, and that all spirituality is about negating and sublimating the false self. Devotion too is meant to see the falseness of what one has erroneously become. Instead, when devotion becomes a way to feel good about who one already thinks one is, it has betrayed its purpose. Now the ego not just survives, it flourishes, singing and celebrating its latest method of glorified self-preservation. And therefore, the opposite of the spiritual process has happened.

When behaviour flows from habit rather than awareness, life becomes mechanical, and mechanical living is the very definition of unconsciousness. One may chant, celebrate, and travel, but if one's existing ways, identities, preferences, and prides are not questioned, then nothing essential has moved.

This is how culture survives when it turns into identity: by discouraging inquiry. It labels questioning as disrespect, calls dissent arrogance, and frames obedience as loyalty. Intelligence does not ask whether something is ancient or indigenous; it asks whether it is true. Common culture is about carrying forward the past. True culture is a spontaneous product of one's devotion to Truth as it stands in present facts. Common culture is pre-planned, frozen conditioning; true culture is a living expression of one's liberation. Does that mean that true culture necessarily rejects everything coming from the

past? No. It passes the past through the uncompromising lens of illuminated enquiry. That which deserves to survive is celebrated.

True inquiry has no loyalty to tradition; it has loyalty only to clarity. A culture that demands preservation before understanding has already placed itself above truth, and anything placed above truth becomes false.

The Katha Upanishad records Nachiketa's refusal to accept easy answers even from Yama, the lord of death. When offered wealth, long life, and pleasures, the boy insists on knowing the truth of the Self. He did not ask what his ancestors believed; he asked what survives death. That question has no cultural address.

The Sages Were Culture-Breakers

The great sages and saints of this land were not culture-builders; they were culture-breakers. They did not polish inherited identities; they shattered them.

The Upanishadic seers did not ask how to belong better; they asked who it is that wants to belong at all. They spoke in the language of negation: Neti neti, not this, not this, dismantling body, mind, belief, tradition, and self-image with ruthless honesty. And today, their words are used as cultural ornaments, stripped of their fire, repackaged to reassure the very ego they were meant to burn.

Saint Kabir mocked the priest and the mullah alike. Saint Ravidas declared that the divine cares nothing for caste. Saint Meerabai defied palace and temple, singing her way out of every cage society constructed. They did not celebrate their roots; they pulled them up and examined them with honesty. Their devotion was not a costume; it was a fire that burned down pretence.

These figures were not culture-proud; they were truth-hungry. And truth-hunger does not permit comfortable sleep in ancestral beds.

The Only Valid Criterion

What is presented as cultural confidence is often fear in disguise: fear of standing alone, fear of not knowing, fear of losing the comfort of inherited answers. So the crowd is embraced, the slogan is repeated, and doubt is silenced. This is not always conscious, but it is terribly effective.

This fear does not remain hidden. It turns defensive, then aggressive, policing thought and equating criticism with betrayal. At that point, culture stops being mere memory and becomes a weapon. Loud self-assertion without depth does not inspire respect; it signals anxiety. A civilisation that constantly announces its greatness appears unsure of it, for a mind at peace does not need to shout.

India does not need more pride, for pride has never liberated anyone. Pride is the ego's way of feeling good about itself without changing. India needs intelligence, intelligence willing to look at everything inherited and ask one ruthless question: Is this true? Not whether it is ancient, not whether it is ours, but simply whether it is true. Does this liberate, or does this bind?

This does not mean rejecting everything inherited. It means refusing to accept anything merely because it is inherited. Some inherited things may prove true upon examination; keep them. Some may prove false; let them go. But the criterion must always be truth, never heritage.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad records Yajnavalkya telling Maitreyi: it is not for the sake of the husband that the husband is dear, nor for the sake of wealth or children, but for the sake of the Self alone. This is the Upanishadic demand: see through every identification until only the Self remains. Culture cannot survive this gaze. Only truth can. Freedom lies not in asserting identity, but in seeing through it; not in preserving culture, but in transcending it; not in belonging more loudly, but in understanding more deeply.

Culture belongs to the past, but truth is always present. Those who cannot let go of the past will never touch the present. The question before every thinking person is not which culture to preserve, but which conditioning to dissolve.

That inquiry begins when the noise stops, and the slogans fade, when one is left alone with the only question that matters: Who am I, beneath all this accumulated memory?

Whatever remains is not Indian or Western, ancient or modern. Whatever remains is simply true. And truth alone liberates.

Acharya Prashant is a teacher, founder of the PrashantAdvait Foundation, and an author on wisdom literature.

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