

## THE INDIAN WORLD VIEW

**Maya** To many Indians, the natural world has no ultimate reality. It is a world of subjective experiences—a transitory, ever-changing creation of our minds. In a chaotic, unpredictable world of experiences, order, meaning, and truth can be found only within oneself. The Ultimate Reality, or Brahman, cannot be perceived by the finite person, confined as he is to the prison of his mind. A person can gain a glimpse of it only through mediation, introspection, and the deep, innermost experiences of the self.

**1.1 Relativism** In the world of "maya," there are no absolutes—no sharp distinctions between "real" or objective experiences and illusions, between fact and fantasy, between absolute truth and error. Myths of the past merge imperceptibly into histories, which are subjective interpretations of events. Dreams and visions are as much a part of a man's experiential world as his "awake" life. Even right and wrong are personal interpretations of moralities that are relative to one's station in life.

**1.2 Supernaturalism** There is no sharp distinction between natural and supernatural. Gods and spirits are as real in everyday experiences as natural objects. Natural and supernatural explanations are freely interchanged in rationalizing daily occurrences. This blending of the supernatural and natural realms into a single framework lies at the heart of what is sometimes referred to as India's supernatural orientation.

**1.3 Cyclic Time** Time is a continual rerun of persons and events. The universe repeats itself in an almost unending series of epochs of prosperity and decay, of existence and non-existence. Individuals are reborn a hundred thousand times on a thousand different levels of life. This transmigration of all things from one life to the next blurs further any distinctions that may appear to be real in this life.

**1.4 Mutability and Unpredictability** Things are not always what they first appear to be. The passing beggar may be a king or a demon; the lion may be a god. In folk tales, animals live and talk in a world that mirrors that of humans. In scriptures, gods and demons frequently enter the world of men in various forms. Unexplainable changes are constantly taking place on earth. It is the world to which Americans are exposed on T.V., in which Clark Kents become Supermen and Sheshine Dogs become Underdogs.

**1.5 Wisdom** Humanity's goal is to gain wisdom ("jnana")—an intuitive understanding of the true nature of reality. Unlike knowledge, which comes by rational analysis and often has little effect on a person's behavior, wisdom comes as an inner light, as a flash of insight, which completely transforms a person's life and relationships to the world. No longer bound by ignorance nor attached to this world by desire, he or she is freed to live out this life in deep inner peace and, after death, to be released from the utility of future rebirths. Like a drop of water that falls back into the ocean, so the fragment of reality in humans, the spirit, is reabsorbed and lost in the cosmic Brahman. Release, not self-realization, is the supreme end. The wise realize that in a world of maya, a person's best course of action is nonattachment and noninvolvement.

**2. The Unity of All Things** Human experiences are endlessly varied and fragmented, but beneath the diversity of this phenomenal world lies a single essential unity. All things are manifestations of one spirit. The result is that Indians often organize their varied experiences along continuums. Like ladders, these have many rungs, but form a single whole. Life is segmented into an infinite variety of beings: gods, demigods, spirits, demons, people, animals, plants, and material objects. But life, itself, is one. It is easy, therefore, to understand why Hindus refuse to kill animals, such as cows. It also explains why they feel it proper to worship saints, since these, like the gods, are above them in the continuum of life. Characteristically, in music, the total spectrum of sounds is divided into notes, and these into quarter-notes and sixteenth notes, until the glide becomes the hallmark of Indian music.

**2.1 Hierarchy** Segments in any continuum are organized on the principle of hierarchy, and hierarchy is both necessary and good. The caste system is only part of a larger social order that extends up through the spirits and down through the worlds of animals and plants. Each person has a unique place in this order. All religions lead to the truth, but some are higher than others. The highest are the paths of wisdom in which the devotee gains insight into the true nature of the universe by means of meditation and asceticism. Below these are the many paths of mental devotion to the god of one's choice, and at the bottom are the paths of ritual duty—of bringing offerings to an image. Values, too, are ranked. The highest are spiritual values of release from transmigration, then the metaphysical ones of wisdom and insight, then the biological ones of health and offspring, and at the bottom, material possessions and power.

**2.2 Specialization and Interdependence** Segments of a whole are also integrated on the principle of interdependence. Each caste has certain unique skills and specialized functions that are essential for the operation of the society as a whole. Each individual has certain tasks to fulfill within the family. Diversity and cooperation, not uniformity and competition, are the ideals.

**2.3 Patron-Client Relationships** Some people are clearly born to greater rights and responsibilities, others to service. The ideal social relationships are those that combine both the principles of hierarchy and interdependence into hereditary patron-client bonds.

**3. Karma or Cosmic Law** In an organic universe, in which each part contributes to the harmonious operation of the whole, all processes are governed by the law of "karma." Just as there is no distinction between natural and supernatural worlds, so there is no sharp difference between natural and moral laws. All actions are governed by karma and have both natural and moral consequences.

**3.1 Samsara or pilgrimage** The condition of each life in a person's spiritual pilgrimage is determined by the actions, good or bad, of his previous lives. The fruits of one's actions are not always seen in this life. Transmigration is not fatalistic. A person's present position and the things that happen to him are determined by past deeds, but by his response to life now, he is shaping his future destiny.

**3.2 Relative morality** Right and wrong depend for a person on his place in the universal and social orders. Consequently, there is no absolute morality. More is expected of those higher in the spiritual and caste hierarchy in terms of orthodoxy and ritual practice. "Right" lies in conformity to the cosmic order. A man who lives according to his social position and in harmony with the universe acquires the spiritual force of truth, which is moral and nonviolent. This force ("satyagraha") is ultimately superior to physical force in the establishment of a harmonious society. In a system of relative ethics, the aim of law is not justice defined in some absolute terms, but the restoration of harmony in society. Actions cannot be divided into the good and the evil, and there is no sharp difference between offender and offended. Nor is it the task of man to punish actions whose causes he can never fully understand. Final justice is meted out by the cosmic law of karma.

**3.3 Inclusivism and tolerance** Cultural pluralism and ethnic relativism are inclusive—they accept a diversity of thought and action in the same world without demanding conformity to a single standard. People pride themselves in their own unique cultures. Individuals can simultaneously follow several apparently contradictory courses of action without inconsistency. Closely tied to inclusivism is a spirit of tolerance, in which each must respect the cultural differences of others and not seek to convert them to his or her own way of life.

**4. Dharma or Functional Responsibility** The universe and human society are organic wholes, in which each part has a unique function to fill. Only as each caste and each individual fulfills its responsibility or duty ("dharma") can the whole operate smoothly. It is wrong to abandon one's prescribed role and seek another. A person should live on the level at which he was born, and by fitting himself dispassionately into the cosmic order, fulfill the task to which he was destined.

**4.1 Limited good** There exists only a limited amount of all the desired things of life, such as wealth, land, power, status, friendship, and love, and there is no direct way to increase the quantities available for all to use (Foster, 1965). Therefore, one individual's gain or advancement can only come at the expense of others. Since it is not always clear who is losing, any significant attempt by some to improve their social or economic situation is seen as a threat to all individuals, to the community as a whole.

**4.2 Ascription orientation** Security and meaning are found in the groups to which one belongs and in the relationships one has with others, rather than in the material possessions one acquires. The building of relationships, particularly those to which one is born, is of greatest importance, for they are a measure of an individual's status and power.

**4.3 Jatis and castes** A person's primary ties are to his "jati," or caste, to those who are the same kind of people. Because membership is by birth, a great deal of individual variation can be permitted by the members. However, if one defies the dictates of the caste, the ultimate sanction is ostracism—to be cut off from the group.

**4.4 Moksha** The goal of life is not self-realization but release from the hardships of life ("moksha"). The cultural hero is the man of wisdom and insight who can rise above the troubles of this passing life and understand the significance of all things.