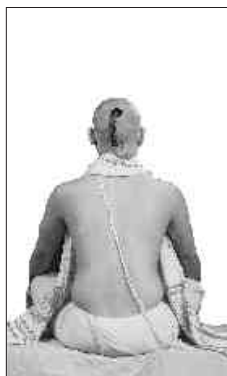


The Foundational Emblems of Indian Culture - Shikha and Sutra

The Vedic sages had emphasized the importance and necessity of the devotion and worship of God for the psychological and spiritual upliftment of mankind. Worshipping the idols of deities is an integral part of the Hindu religious practices. Multiple representations of divine manifestations in the idol forms were visualized by our *rishis* of the Vedic times. The specific forms symbolize specific divine qualities and powers of the manifestations of God and also incorporate ethical teachings for us. The Arya Samajis do not believe in idol-



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worship, but they also respectfully place the idols and photographs of Swami Dayanand Saraswati in their *yagyashalas*, community halls and offices and pay due regards before these symbols of his memories. The followers of Islam are against idol-worship. But, paying reverence to the sacred black stone (*sange avsad*) at Kaba by kissing it is essential for making their holy pilgrimage to Makka-Sharif complete. So, the rectangular sacred black stone is for them what a round, smooth black idol of Shiva is for a Hindu – a sacred symbol of God. Every religion has its holy symbols and rituals of worship.

The communists deny all religions and even deny the existence of God. Worshiping His idols is therefore a mark of blind faith and absurdity in their views. But, what if somebody burns their red flag, or tears off the manuscript of the manifesto of communism? They would certainly feel hurt and insulted and react furiously against any such attempt. But why should they? After all, as per the so-called 'rational thinking' the flag is 'only a piece of cloth' and there must be several copies of their manifesto available in print. Well, it is not the physical entity, but the sentiments, the faith in the implications associated with it that count. So many of our freedom fighters had dared to risk their lives for protecting our national flag; great revolutionaries had sacrificed their lives by placing this mark of our national prestige in place of the British flag those days!

The idols we enshrine in the temples, the Holy Scriptures like the Vedas, Bhagvad Gita, the Ramayana, and the Guru Granth Sahib are symbols of deities for us. We worship them. The symbols of our faith, our reverence for them are the source of light in our lives. Many times people also place the photographs of their ideal heroes, their guides, their gurus, in their houses and at their place of work. Many disciples also place the photographs of their Gurus to get instant inspiration and support while being away from the latter.

Indeed, emblems carry within them a message, an effect and have great importance in our lives as sources of inspiration and moral support and guidance. They have intimate linkage with sentiments and create immense impact on human psychology. It is in this regard that symbols of divine powers are enshrined in the form of idols, pictures and other models. Apart from the temples of Goddess Gayatri at Shantikunj and Brahmvarchas there is also a grand model of the Himalayas in a special temple like meditation hall. It reminds the devotees of the pristine, spiritually vibrant ambience of the Himalayas and helps good mental concentration.

However, the saints and sages have also warned us against remaining stuck only to the symbol and learn nothing from it. If one regards an idol as omnipotent and believe that just bending head and praying before it will solve all problems, then one is living in a fantasy, in blind faith. Then, for some people Lord Krishna sitting in the temple of Badrinath would

be superior to that in the temples of Mathura or Vrindawan; while the latter would be mightier for some others.... Does it have any sense?

Prophet Hazarat Mohammed had opposed idol worship because of the sinful customs that were propagated and practiced through it during his times. The place where he was born was dominated by the blind rule of “might is right” those days. Dacoits and hoodlums used to rob the villages and take away all the crops, cattle and young women for their pleasure; some of them used to possess ten to fifty women. Some of the children born by them were allowed to grow to serve as bonded labors or work in the dacoit gangs. As it was found a waste to raise the rest, those kids were killed in the name of sacrifices before the giant idols made in the lands occupied by the dacoits. The angelic soul of Hazarat Mohammed was born in human form to eliminate such heinous acts and insane customs. He destroyed the roots of such evils by opposing the mindless and cruel 'rituals of worship'. It was the necessity of that time and that place. But he did not advocate anything against the philosophy behind the role of idol-worship in inspiring human mind towards virtuous spirit.

We must remember that all the idols of Divine manifestations are simply the source of reminding us of God. We may, for example, go to the temples of Lord Krishna and also bend our head and offer prayers. But we should know that this “*pranam*” and prayers are not for the stone that is enshrined in

the temple. Rather, these are for Lord Krishna, whose divine incarnation in human form had taken place about five thousands years ago to bestow the light of divinity, to establish the law of righteousness, to give new direction of enlightened progress to the world. The idols simply help awakening our devotional sentiments. These may activate the linkage of our inner mind with Him during meditation or emotionally engrossed prayers, if we have really purified our mind and have adopted the true meaning of devotional faith in our lives.

Our worshipping the idols is no better than kids' toy game if we do not have any living aspiration to imbibe divine attributes and values and make no efforts to materialize our worship by following the disciplines and teachings of the divine incarnations in real life. What is the point in saluting the book of Bhagavad Gita or lighting a lamp near it, if we don't read it and learn from what Lord Krishna had taught to Arjuna?

The blind attachment to the gross symbol with a desire of gaining favor from this inert 'God' in return for the offerings of worship make a mockery of the deep philosophy and psychological intensity underlying idol-worship. It is this superficial devotion and emotional excitement of 'affinity' with the symbols of deities that correspond to blind faith and superstition, which are criticized by the savants. These misconceptions and associated insane customs were at their peak in the medieval times. The real meaning and importance

of the emblems of Indian Culture, founded by the *rishis* (the seer-sages of the Vedic Age), were also lost in the mists of this dark phase of ignorance and religious anarchy.

Origin of Religion and Culture:

If we are to revive the glory of religion, we will have to look into its origin. The varieties of communes and sects mushroomed in the field of religion since the post Vedic Age need to be converged towards their fundamental unity. Recalling the emblems (and the associated knowledge) of this origin could be one effective way of achieving this goal. Our national flag is the symbol of our national unity, strength and prestige; we all, irrespective of whether we are Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians or someone else by faith, respect it. See how a symbol unites us!

What is the origin of the Vedic Religion and the Indian Culture? It is the ultimate knowledge, the preeminent force of spirituality, the divine light, and the eternal values, embedded in Gayatri Mantra. The Vedic *rishis* had therefore motivated the disciples towards the *sāadhanā* of Gayatri Mantra. This mantra is the root of the Vedas. One might be a follower of any incarnation of God. That is fine. For example, one may chant “*Śri Kriṣṇāya Namō Namaḥ*”; very good, continue with that. But that won't lead to universal unity. The incarnation of Lord Krishna is said to have occurred about five thousand years ago; was there no religion before that? Then, what was the mode of devotion at that time? In fact Lord Krishna himself

was a devotee of Gayatri Mantra. Look at the Valimiki Ramayana; it mentions of Lord Ram also having given the *dīkṣā* of Gayatri Mantra. Further back, this mantra has been described in the Vedic scriptures as also being the root of inspiration and activation of the powers of the eternal Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. It is said to be the source of all creation and existence in the gross and the subliminal realms of manifestation.

We all should also adopt the spiritual devotional practice of the Gayatri Mantra together with whatever other mode of worship we are used to. For this we may keep the written script of the mantra at our place of worship or enshrine an idol or picture of the deity Mother Gayatri as symbolized by the *rishis* to represent the divine power of this mantra. Collective efforts from all of us will lead to convergence and unity of all cults/faiths and revive the glory of the divine culture, which emanated from the universal (Vedic) religion in the Age of Truth.

Shikha (Śikhā) and Sutra (Sūtra):

What are the emblems of this divine culture (the Rishi Culture or the original Indian Culture) that remind us of its principles and disciplines to be followed in human life? These are – *Śikhā* and *Sūtra*, the idols of Gayatri that are enshrined in the temple of the human body. *Śikhā* is a knot of hair, tied at the crown-point (right above the suture) on the central top of the

head; this point is given distinctive importance in the science of yoga and spirituality as the point of contact with the brain-centre of intellectual and emotional sensitivity. *Sūtra* is the sacred thread, also called *yagyopavit*, which is worn on the shoulders and the chest after the sacrament of *upnayana* or thread-ceremony.

Śikhā symbolizes the presence of discerning intellect, farsightedness and the deity of knowledge upon our head. It is a flag of human culture. It reminds us of the religious principles of morality, righteousness, responsibility and dutiful awareness. The moral and social duties of human life are worn on our shoulders and kept attached to our hearts in symbolic form as the sacred thread of *yagyopavita* (*Sūtra*). It also hangs on our back. It has tied us from all sides, as a reminder of the moral disciplines and ethical duties as human beings. With the advent of different religious doctrines and diversities in the religious practices *śikhā* and *sūtra* might have gotten confined only to the Hindus, but the principles and teachings associated with them are eternal and universal. Seer sages of the modern age have written several articles and booklets to elucidate these facts with historical evidences.

This body is the fort of the individual self upon which the flag of *śikhā* is hoisted as the mark of the dignified values and virtues of humanity. The foreign invaders, the crusaders against the Vedic (Indian) Culture had attempted to eliminate the roots of this divine culture by first cutting the *śikhā* and removing the *sūtra* from the bodies of the followers of Hindu

religion. Thousands of innocent heads were cut off just for protesting against this attack. It was for protecting the glory of these universal emblems of human religion that Maharana Pratap, Vir Shivaji, Guru Govind Sigh, and other great martyrs of India had dedicated their noble lives. Today, we have forgotten their sacrifices and done what even the foreign invaders of the medieval times could not do. We have let ourselves been swept away from our roots by the storm of cultural pollution coming from the West. We have lost faith in our own values. We feel ashamed in wearing the *sūtra* and keeping the *śikhā*.

If we go to some college and ask the students – whether they wear the *sūtra*, they would look at us blankly. They would not have even heard about it. It is not their fault. We have never bothered to tell them about these things. How will we explain the meaning and purpose behind these symbols when we ourselves don't know it? We have just shunned such things as signs of superstitions, blind faith and backwardness. The braided or tied hairs of women have at least preserved the custom of *śikhā*. But look at the boys; they may have long hair as per the fashion but maintaining the *śikhā*! Just don't talk about it!! On one hand we are running blindly after 'modernity' and on the other, we have let ourselves entrapped in blind customs in the name of religion – for example, in many parts of the Indian society, girls / women are deprived of chanting or even knowing the Gayatri Mantra; they can't wear or even touch the *yagyopavit* (*sūtra*).

stars/stripes/badges as signs of their rank; the police uniform also has different kinds of badges stitched on it, which reflect the identity of the rank/post/ state, etc of the wearer. If any police or army personal is found guilty of deviating from his duties, the first punishment is that his medals and badges are taken away. This is like wiping out his identity. No penalty would be more painful to him than losing his uniform. The Christians wear a cross; few people would know that even the custom of wearing necktie had begun as a mark of wearing the thread-symbol of the holy cross. The Sikhs keep *kirpan* (tiny sword), comb and maintain their hair uncut; they also wear a turban. Then what do the Hindus have as a sign of their identity of being the followers of the Vedic religion? If a Hindu has left *śikhā* and *sūtra*, should not he/she be regarded as someone who has disowned his religion?

Please note this in no way should make of any one of us a fundamentalists. The point being made is that we should be aware of the importance of the symbols of cultural dignity, which our forefathers – the great seers and sages, the scientists of yoga and spirituality – had invented. These are not only the symbols of the eternal values and disciplines suitable for men and women of all ages, in all eras, but also have scientific and spiritual relevance. These teachings should be propagated in scientific light with logical justifications during the *yagyas* and other religious ceremonies. If one explains the meaning, purpose and importance of these sacred symbols of one's faith, there is no reason why others,

including the younger generations would not respect and adopt these basic symbols of the Vedic culture.

Many people have great faith in doing *havan* (*yajña* or *yagya*). This faith is inculcated in their minds since the childhood. *Havan* is generally performed on every religious ceremony in the Hindu families; but nobody knows about the intimate relation between *yagya* and *yagyopavit*. *Yagya* symbolizes noble deeds and *yagyopavita* (*sūtra*) indicates noble qualities that should be integral parts of a Brahmin's life. Who is a Brahmin? The one who strives for his inner enlightenment; who expects minimum from the society; and gives his best to the society. The commencement of wearing of the *sūtra* and tightening of the *śikhā* at the time of initiation (*dīkṣā*) into Gayatri *sādhana* is referred in the *shastras* as *dwijatva* – the second birth, and the one who wears the sacred thread (*sūtra*) and keeps the *śikhā* is called a *dwija* (born anew - as Brahmin). That means: whatever family one may be born into, wearing the *sūtra* is his second birth, which is that of a Brahmin. What does that imply? It conveys that the beginning of wearing the *sūtra* symbolizes the initiation into the life of a true Brahmin.

The *japa* of Gayatri Mantra with devotional meditation is carried out twice a day; preferably around the times of sunrise and sunset (this is also called *sandhyā vandan*) but the *sūtra* (*yagyopavit*, the symbol of Goddess Gayatri) is enshrined on the body all the twenty-four hours. (This being a thread of cotton needs to be changed as a practical necessity; women

change it once a month on any auspicious day after their menses and men usually change it once with the change of season on auspicious days like Vasant Panchami, Shivratri, Shravani Parva, etc).

Doing *japa* or *yagya* etc, has become a superficial ritual for most of us today – partly because we are not aware of their underlying philosophy and science and partly because of our extrovert, selfish attitude which always looks for materially gainful results. We feel that doing this or that will bring worldly benefits, eliminate our sins, and what not! Is this rational thinking? Nothing will be bestowed upon you by doing all this. Remember, Vedic scriptures do mention of miraculous effects and supernatural potentials associated with these sacraments but this materializes only when we adopt the essential disciplines of *sāadhanā* connected with them.

What we now see everywhere and also follow in practice is mostly a mockery of our religion. Look at the *Kumbha Melas* for instance! Lots of crowds and commercial fan-fares! Hordes of people bathing in the rivers without even taking minimum care of hygiene; and instead, dirtying the holy rivers in an effort of purifying themselves! Or the hordes of the so-called *sadhus* and *sanyasis* fighting with each other to have the 'honored' privilege of taking the first dip into the sacred waters... and so on! In their original form, the *Kumbha Melas* used to be the truly rare and auspicious occasions of the majestic gatherings and conferences of the great saints, sages

and sincere devotees from all parts of India. Disciples and other people used to reach there despite all difficulties in traveling far distances, to be blessed by the nectar of knowledge, spiritual light and affectionate guidance from the discourses and meetings of these noble masters – the saintly scholars and accomplished *sādhakas*. Personal and social problems of the pilgrim-devotees used to be resolved by their eminent guidance; these altruist seers also used to focus on global problems and find amicable solutions for the welfare of the whole world, of all beings – men, women, birds, animals, plants, trees, rivers, mountains...., every thing in Nature.

This is the age of intellect, scientific thinking. We should learn to adopt religious teachings not just by convention, but by prudent thinking through an open mind. Many a times it is seen that neither the elders in the family nor the priests are able to explain the meaning or purpose of the rituals during any religious ceremony. Instead of satisfying the queries of the youngsters, they would often either scold them or simply 'declare' that it was our tradition. There is an interesting incident worth citing in this regard. The daughter of a rich advocate in Mathura was getting married to a foreign-born, well-educated young man. The girl had also completed her M. A. The wedding ceremony was organized gorgeously. In the *lagna-maṇḍap*, the priest (Pandit) kept on asking the bride and the bridegroom to do several things one after the other as part of the ceremonial rituals. He was

chanting some mantras in incomprehensive Sanskrit. He never bothered to see whether anybody was listening to him or not.

All this had really bored the couple. Unaware of this, the Pandit continued with – “Keep these many *paise* here with flowers, these many rupees there with rice grains”, and what not! Finally, the bridegroom interrupted him and humbly said that he was unable to understand what the Pandit was saying or doing and why? The 'smart' Pandit tried to pose as a guru and warned that interrupting him would be inauspicious, etc. The young man then said; “Anyway if you could pray to the God on our behalf, why don't you also complete the rituals on our behalf. In the mean time we both will go out and take care of the guests who are waiting for us since long?” Everybody around just laughed... This incident makes us think seriously about the pitiable state of our rituals and customs. What kind of social reformation and progress we would make if we can't even maintain the grace of important sacraments and convey the underlying teachings to our younger generation? Why boast of our cultural heritage when we don't have the dignity to follow its values?

The awakened souls should take up this task of social reformation and cultural awakening through the religious platform. It is good to see that the Gayatri Pariwar has given boost to pioneering efforts of saint-seer Pt. Shriram Sharma Acharya in this regard and has been able to eliminate, to a great extent, the misconceptions about Yagya and Gayatri. It

has been able to remove the barriers of so-called caste, creed and discrimination on the basis of gender and social status. Anybody interested in religious philosophy, humane culture and desirous of self-refinement and enlightenment can participate in social and religious programmes of the Gayatri Pariwar.

Now we should also understand and propagate the importance of wearing the *sūtra* and keeping *śikhā*. Initially when Acharyaji used to explain some points on its underlying philosophy and science while conducting a *yagya*, people used to find it very unusual. They would request him – “Why don't you just complete the rituals; we have come to offer the *ahutis* in the sacred fire of *yagya*; what have we to do with all the teachings and scientific effects...?”. There was strong opposition from several swamis and pandits to my allowing women and people from all castes and cults to chant the Gayatri Mantra and participate in *yagya*. But one can see the impact of his teachings now!! Truth and righteous attempts cannot be checkmated by anyone for long.... Now we see thousands of women priests ably conducting and guiding Gayatri *Yagyas* and the Vedic sacraments under the banner of this mission. People from all walks of society, all creeds live together, work together like members of a large family in this organization. We have just lit the torch of truth and knowledge; humbly attempted the renaissance of the divine *rishi* culture. You all have to spread its light across the globe. Do this with the spread of the disciplines of *śikhā* and *sūtra*.

The *śikhā* represents the *śrīṣa* (top) of the Gayatri Mantra. It reminds the devotee of the subtle presence of the pure divine intelligence in the human mind. Tightening the hair knot right above the suture induces marvellous psychological benefits. It helps in harmonious blood circulation in the brain in normal conditions and augments alertness. As described in the yoga-scriptures, it also lends support in increasing mental concentration and meditation. In terms of its sublime spiritual effects, the *śikhā* works like an antenna in the outer domain of the *sahasrāra cakra* (topmost extrasensory centre) to link the individual consciousness with the cosmic consciousness in the elevated state of Gayatri *sādhana*.

The *yagyopavit (sūtra)* has nine threads and three knots. The knots are symbols of the three *granthis* (extrasensory roots of ultimate realizations) – the *Brahma-granthi*, the *Vishnu-granthi* and the *Shiva-granthi*; these also represent the three segments of the Gayatri Mantra that encode the sublime streams of manifestation of the omnipresent eternal sound of “*Oam*”. The nine threads symbolize the nine planets and the nine divine-powers (manifestations of *śakti*, called the *nav-durgās*)–implied in the nine words (after the *śrīṣa*) of the Gayatri Mantra. The *yagyopavit* is like an idol of the deity Gayatri. You enshrine the idol in the temple of your body by wearing it. Wearing this sacred *sūtra* on the shoulders, keeping it near the chest, should remind you of the nine duties, nine virtues,

nine principles that are taught and inspired through the nine words of the Gayatri Mantra, which are industriousness, humility, austerity, orderliness, cooperation, wisdom, integrity of character, sense of responsibility and courage.

These nine qualities open the door to a bright, happy and successful life. Inculcation of these qualities induces eminent transformation of personality. These are also the most desired virtues for social and global welfare and progress. The first five of these deal with behavior and deeds. Industriousness means constructive utilization of time and potentials with diligence and enthusiasm for the work in hand. Humility implies modesty, etiquette, and balanced and humble behavior with due respect for the self as well as for others. Austerity includes piety of mind and body. It also means adopting the principle of “simple living & high thinking” in daily life. You must note that foresighted, constructive and altruist use of the resources becomes possible by observing austerity in personal life.

Orderliness corresponds to ideal management and disciplined organization of time, talents and other mental, physical and materialistic resources; punctuality and neatness and tidiness of the body, house and workplace, are primary necessities of orderliness. Cooperation means wholehearted sharing of joys and pains with family, friends and colleagues. As some of you might have experienced in family-life or on social fronts, it requires a good amount of patience and tolerance to work

harmoniously in any collective setting. Benevolence and zeal to work for collective welfare of the society are its obvious reflections.

The remaining four qualities pertain to the mental and emotional spheres of life. Wisdom incorporates thoroughness and maturity of attitude, and thinking. Refinement of thoughts and aspirations are essential steps towards sagacious development of mind. As you all know, integrity of character is a must if you are to gain the respect and cooperation of others and achieve something worthwhile in life. Sincerity, honesty and moral purity of the character, authenticity and trustworthiness in every aspect of personal, professional and social life are the yardsticks of the integrity of a person. Gratitude for all the (direct or indirect) help received from Nature and society at every step of your life is what motivates you towards bearing your share of responsibilities. Happily transact your duties towards the physical, mental and moral progress of your dependents and associates. Do take care of contributing to and participating in the earnest activities of social welfare as well.

Many a times people think of courage and valor as some qualities required only in the battlefield. Listen my children! We all need to have these qualities to struggle and overcome our own vices first. We should also have courage to oppose immoral practices around us; raise our voice against corruption, injustice and exploitation of the weaker sections

of society in our areas of interactions. If we can't do that individually, at least we must have the courage to join collective and organized efforts against the wrongs in the system.

I advise the parijans in Gayatri Pariwar to talk about these positive effects and teachings associated with *śikhā* and *sūtra* whenever they perform a *yagya*. You should yourself adopt them in life and then tell others that one cannot perform *yagya* or practice the *sāadhanā* of Gayatri unless one wears the *sūtra* and ties the *śikhā*. These are the prime emblems of the great Vedic culture. Having them with us is a sign of our being the inheritors of the great *rishis*, the followers of the divine culture. These remind us of the values and disciplines of human dignity.

Let people come and ask us about the necessity of these symbols of Hindu Religion. People's discerning quest should be always encouraged. Unless religious philosophy justifies its relevance in logical ways in the light of prudence, it cannot serve the real purpose. It has to shed off the superstitions and unwise customs that have clouded and veiled its true light. It has to spread the sagacious light of its eternal power, the divine values hidden in its core. We all, the believers, the theists need to resolutely work for this reformation and reconstruction on the religious and social fronts. Let us begin this march with a revolutionary propagation of the culture of *śikhā* and *sūtra*.

