

Spread of indian concepts into the western mainstream

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



----- Introduction It is sometimes a source of great wonder how certain elements of a culture have great similarities among different groups of another culture e. g., art forms from one culture being held in high regard in some other part of the world. Some instances would be French Perfumes, Italian Leather etc. Further examples could be of cuisine. It is a testament to globalization how one does not need to venture far in order to enjoy Chinese, Italian, French, Thai or any other cuisine. What may be clearly ascertained is that there is a constant exchange between cultures today and that societies no longer remain in isolation. It is a commonly heard phrase that ‘ India apes the west’. We talk about the ‘ dilution’ of Indian culture and its values due to Western influences and how Indians tend to blindly adopt Western concepts and ideals. American society plays a dominant role in today’s world scenario due to its political and economic position of importance. It is an accepted fact that when two cultures come into close proximity, the dominant cultural forms are often ‘ imposed, invented, reworked and transformed’ with far-reaching and even unintended consequences. While it is arguable that over exposure to Western culture, especially its media has had a detrimental effect on our society, one cannot deny that the end result of this intermingling of cultures is a more diverse and sensitive environment. In the course of this paper, various elements or traits that have arisen from Indian culture, juxtaposed with the forms they have taken in the West, will be examined. Finally, conclusions will be drawn for the possible reasons as to how and why such traits have achieved traction in the Western mainstream with respect to psychological mindset or sociological needs.

Chapter-1 | Diffusion, Acculturation and Assimilation Through the years, sociologists and anthropologists have studied this process of cultures coming into contact through various media, each having a profound effect on the other thereby altering their cultural fate in irreversible and unforeseeable ways. Thus many theories, albeit with overlapping terminology and ideology, have been propounded. Some of such theories are detailed in order to provide a historical backdrop to this paper. Diffusion may be simply defined as the spread of a cultural item from its place of origin to other places. A more expanded definition depicts diffusion as the process by which discrete culture traits are transferred from one society to another, through migration, trade, war, or other contact. Broadly, it comprises of acceptance, over time, of some specific item, idea or practice, by individuals, groups or other adopting units, linked to specific channels of communication, to a social structure, and a given system of values, or culture. Diffusionists are of the view that all cultures originated from a few, if not one main culture. Acculturation comprises of all the changes brought about in a culture due to its contact with another culture, which leads to increased similarities between the two. This theory presupposed constant contact between cultures however theorists differed on whether this process was unidirectional or not. The process may in fact be reciprocal but is often asymmetrical. Diffusion contributes to acculturation and acculturation necessarily involves diffusion. However, diffusion is a matter of what happens to the elements of a culture; whereas acculturation is a process of defining what happens to the culture as a whole. An individual is said to have

been 'assimilated' into a culture when he is able to enter social, political, economic and educational areas of that society. Assimilation is the final step an individual takes in a foreign society after acculturation. If the individual fails to find acceptance, he merely remains acculturated and not assimilated as he merely had knowledge of the values, habits and standards of the dominant culture. Growth of Human Civilization to a large extent can be attributed to this process of borrowing from other cultures and incorporating them into our own. It is a process through which mankind has been able to essentially pool its inventive and innovative ability.

----- Chapter-2 | Spread of Elements a) Tea

There was a great amount of excitement amongst the cosmopolitan populace when Starbucks, international coffeehouse chain, decided to enter into the Indian market. Yet it is amusing to note that Starbucks has been selling Chai-Tea based products internationally for the longest time. Tea or Chai is the most popular beverage in India. While Coffee might be more popular in some Southern states, India is one of the largest producers as well as consumers of tea in the world. In India, 'chai' ranges from a cup of hot water and a black teabag, loose leaves to 'tea dust' that has been carefully boiled with milk, spices and sweeteners. Each region of India has its own style of chai, and many 'chai wallahs' add their own flair when preparing and serving their chai. Masala Chai in India is usually sweetened using cane sugar, jaggery or other regional varieties depending on availability. It is generally made of black tea (Or green tea in Kashmir) along with whole milk. Easily available, freshly ground spices are used such as ginger and cardamom. While Tea has always been the hot beverage of choice in Europe

(especially Britain) it has now caught on in the United States. In recent years, aside from the ever-growing popularity of Darjeeling Tea, chai tea lattes and a masala-flavored drink called dirty chai have both also become popular in the west. In North America, a 'chai' usually means a latte-like drink prepared with black tea, spices, sugar (or another tea sweetener) and steamed or otherwise heated milk (or a milk alternative). American tearooms tend to use loose-leaf black tea. They also sell some caffeine-free versions of chai that contain rooibos instead of black tea. Honey and Cane sugar are the most popularly used sweeteners in the United States. Worldwide, various alternatives to whole milk such as skimmed, soy or almond milk are in common use. Often coffeehouses use Vanilla Ice-Cream to make “ frozen chai” Spices often used include cardamom, cinnamon, black pepper and star anise. Furthermore, products based on chai spices are becoming increasingly popular. This includes chai chocolates and other confections. The dirty chai is becoming a popular tea-espresso hybrid. Other products include unconventional flavor variations such as peppermint chai and chocolate chai. It is easy to comprehend the draw of this beverage in the West. While brews such as Darjeeling and Assam teas are considered geographical variations of the basic English Tea, the concept of Masala Chai has become unexpectedly popular. Further, with espressos having a very potent caffeine content, these brews provide a different, toned down experience due to the fact that caffeine is not the active ingredient in it. The eclectic blend of spices that infuse a spectrum of tastes to the tea and the resultant ‘ kick’ thus make it an attractive alternate to the generic coffees and espressos. b) Yoga

Although many Indians may have now begun flocking to gymnasiums to stay

in shape, many people in the West are going 'back to the basics' with the ancient science of Yoga. In the West, the term "yoga" is today typically regarded as a form of exercise. In the 1960s, western interest in Hindu spirituality reached its peak, giving rise to a great number of schools specifically advocated to a western public. The educated western public became aware of Yoga in the mid 19th Century. Swami Vivekananda, who toured Europe and the US in the 1890's, was reportedly the first Hindu teacher who disseminated the principles of Yoga in the west. Western Media also played a vital role in integrating the concept into mainstream culture. The Beatles, popular English band, met Swami Vishnu-Devananda in 1965. Impressed by his work and teachings, they eventually traveled to his ashram in Rishikesh, joined by other celebrities like Mia Farrow, Donovan and Mike Love of the Beach Boys. It is reported that much of the music on their 'White Album' was inspired by the yogi's words and their experience with 'Transcendental Meditation'. Another indicator of the mainstream relevance of Yoga is its portrayal in popular Television Show, The Addams Family as early as 1964. The patriarch, Gomez Addams is shown to be a regular practitioner. By 2007, Yoga was the 6th most commonly used alternative therapy in the US. Yoga's increase in popularity may be attributed to its modern perception as a legitimate physical system of health exercises unconnected to any religious denomination. The wide range of 'Asanas' with their level of difficulty ranging from 'laughably easy' to 'physically challenging' serve as a roadmap indicator for physical progress. The marriage of scientific as well as spiritual approach taken by Yoga add credibility to it as an alternative to the usual 'stretching' exercises most

people in the West are accustomed to. Its draw is the stark contrast to 'conventional' practices of fitness such as aerobic exercises that push one to their physical limits. This modern update to Yoga's image, due to increased relevance in mass media and more importantly its focus on spirituality disconnected from any particular religion ultimately served as a catalyst for its rise in popularity in Western culture. c) Ayurveda Ayurveda, India's 4, 000 year-old "science of life", the earliest known school of Medicine to Humans, is quietly but steadily moving out of the margins and toward the forefront of modern health care. Various studies and reports detail the benefits of Ayurveda as a viable alternate to conventional treatments and medications. "A coherent, comprehensive system emphasizing nutrition, botanical medicine, physical activity, meditation, and synchrony with subtle but powerful daily, monthly and yearly biological cycles, Ayurveda offers a strong framework for multi-modal preventive medicine. It is also a patient-friendly, non-pharma complement for managing chronic diseases refractory to allopathic therapies." Though it had remained in the periphery of US medicine since the 1960s, Ayurveda is now poised for prime time, as a growing number of American physicians embrace its tenets and practices. In recent years, it has emerged in clinics, spas, academic centers, and even oncology wards nationwide. So much so that according to the National Ayurvedic Medical Association there are now over 30 Ayurvedic training programs in the US in addition to the thousands of practitioners and lay consultants. In fact, NAMA just marked its 12th year, and cites over 450 members, with further growth expected in the coming years. Various institutes now offer courses aimed at providing in depth knowledge into the

practices. Pulse diagnosis, identification of constitution and imbalances; intensive study of diet, nutrition and lifestyle, and basic Ayurvedic herbal medicine, aims at giving physicians a working knowledge of Ayurveda as well as a core skill set to take back to their clinics. " As yoga continues to make a huge impact in the West, so will its root science, Ayurveda," says Bhaswati Bhattacharya, MD, MPH, a NYC-based physician and pioneer in Ayurvedic education in the US and India. Ayurveda's popularity may be largely attributed to its prevention-based remedies, which complement the concept of Yoga that resonate with a large number of patients. Advocates say it has the potential to greatly supplement the American medical system. While Ayurveda has deep roots in Indian culture, it is no longer being viewed as ' folk medicine' as it has been recognized that the system offers many feasible remedies to address pathophysiology without pharmaceuticals. Thus, the major reason behind the success of Ayurveda in the West is the reemergence of herbal remedies as a viable option in itself as well as a supplement to the conventional allopathic system of medicine and healthcare. e) Sari Western culture has also had a visible impact on Indian dressing styles, especially in the Metropolitan Cities. Indian women now also lust after Parisian fashions just like their counterparts in the United States; Men attempt to emulate James Bond in Tuxedos and Business suits. But the Indian Sari has found an unlikely market in the United States. The Sari is a quintessentially Indian garment with various interpretations across different states or communities. Aside from its cultural significance today with celebrities donning the garment on the Red Carpet and other globally publicized occasions; it has made inroads into Western fashions as well. One

can find hints of the garment incorporated into designs by many designers especially 'wrap dresses'. Indications of the early influence of the Sari can be found as early as in 1965 with articles in the United States referring to its merits. As early as 1965, the Daily Item reported that celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor, Dina Merrill, Monique Van Vooren, and Eva Gabor had started wearing saris at various occasions. It reported that 'Newcomers to the sari report that it is comfortable to wear, requiring no girdles or stockings and that the flowing garb feels so feminine with unusual grace' further noting that unlike evening gowns, saris 'never go out of style.' Further, an article in 1977 stated that 'Men appeared intrigued by the fragility and the femininity it confers on the wearer'. It notes how Jackie Kennedy, the then First Lady, wore a sari-like gown when she attended a gala at the Metropolitan Opera. It is evident that even though the Sari may arguably have a niche market abroad, it has had a fair influence in Western popular culture for a considerable amount of time. The obvious draw is the exotic nature of the garment. It offers a highly flexible choice of wear as the Sari can be worn in various traditional forms as well as incorporated into a Western style evening gown. Along with that is the option of a wide variety of colours, patterns and designs that can further add somber or even decorative and festive tones to the garment, making it an ideal fit for a wide range of occasions. d) Religion India is home to a multitude of religious faiths. However the scope of this paper is limited to the examination of two primary faiths that originated from the subcontinent: Hinduism and Buddhism. Both will be jointly examined to ascertain possible reasons as to why one seems to have gained more followers in the West. Today, Buddhism

is practiced by increasing numbers of people in the Americas, Europe and Oceania. In fact, Buddhism has become the fastest growing philosophical religion in Australia and some other Western nations. In sharp contrast to Hinduism, Buddhism in the U. S. is primarily made up of native-born adherents, whites and converts. Only one-in-three American Buddhists describe their race as Asian, while nearly three-in-four Buddhists say they are converts to Buddhism. Only about a third (32%) of Buddhists in the U. S. are Asian; a majority of them (53%) are white and most are converts. On the other hand, Hindus are predominantly Asian (88%). They are comprised overwhelmingly of immigrants, almost exclusively from South-Central Asia. Hindus are comprised overwhelmingly of immigrants; fully 86% were born outside the U. S., almost exclusively in South-Central Asia. Knowledge of Buddhism has come through three main channels: Western scholars; the work of philosophers, writers and artists; and the arrival of Asian immigrants who have brought various forms of Buddhism with them to Europe, North America and Australia. Part of the appeal is the 'come and see for yourself' attitude of Buddhism. One is not asked to believe in anything, but to follow the Buddha's advice of testing ideas first. It does not preach alien or strange cult concepts of dogma nor does it fervently seek converts. A number of Europeans now feel that merely reading about Buddhism is not enough, so they often travel to the east in order to gain first hand knowledge of Buddhism practices and monastic life. Some of the major reasons for this are as follows: * Spread of basic knowledge in the West due to Oriental Studies. * Increased importance of Science and Humanism causing a decline in influence of Christianity * European colonialism in Asia, which put Europeans

in contact with Asian culture (especially the British with India) * Recognition of the usefulness of techniques like meditation and the martial arts. * The efforts of certain key teachers in " translating" Buddhism into a form that can be readily understood and used by Westerners. Thus the basic draw of Buddhism may be summed up in the following remark by popular Therava Buddhist monk, Bhikku Bodhi,: " Theistic religions have lost their hold on the minds of many educated Americans and this has opened up a deep spiritual vacuum that needs to be filled. For many, materialistic values are profoundly unsatisfying, and Buddhism offers a spiritual teaching that fits the bill. It is rational, experiential, practical, and personally verifiable. It brings concrete benefits that can be realized in one's own life; it propounds lofty ethics and an intellectually cogent philosophy. Also less auspiciously, it has an exotic air that attracts those fascinated" -----

Conclusion Psychological mindset serves as the boundary that governs the extent to which such concepts are absorbed. Concepts that fit well in the system are generally accepted easily and readily: as for instance Tea and Masala Chai cater to the basic demand for an alternate beverage. This holds true for other customs, ideas and institutions though the process differs in each case. An important observation is that, more often than not, any trait that Indians imbibe from Western culture is quickly assimilated into their daily lives, becoming a part of the mainstream conscience. On the other hand any such Indian trait in the West tends to hold an ' exotic' or ' niche' corner for a long period of time. This may in fact be a reflection of our collective psychological attempt to gain global recognition as a culturally integrated modern society. However the fact stands that this exchange is a

two way process. That it is so asymmetrical is contingent on the mindset of both the cultures. Another key point of difference is that by and large, Western traits are by a large accepted by all Indians universally, even subconsciously so by staunch opponents of this intermingling of cultures. Case in point, the obsession with fair skin tones. It's interesting to note that natural Indian tones range from ' dusky' to ' wheat-ish' and yet having fair skin considered a highly desirable physical quality. This shows the deep-rooted impact of our Colonial heritage as well as our obsession with all things West. India's Colonial heritage makes it predisposed to Western influences however societies like the United States do not share such a history. In fact, the main draw for them is the contrast that India presents to their own culture. The intrigue that Indian culture represents is thus the main reason as to why it finds ready acceptance abroad. However, certain Indian traits that travel to the West tend to get a more mixed reception. This is based on their utility. Variations in demand for Masala Chai may be attributed to differences in personal tastes; Yoga and Buddhism filled a void in the spirituality system; But in some states of the United States, concepts like Ayurveda fail to gain any traction due to the comparatively more conservative mindsets. The fact is that Indians have internalized this claim of them ' aping the West' into a sort of inferiority complex. We are increasingly ready to adopt anything Western due to the accompanying connotation of it being a superior culture. Even though remnants of our Colonial past can be seen in present day Indian society, the effects of India's domination as a hub of culture and innovation since ancient times are clearly seen today. As Will Durant said in *The Case for India* (1931), " India was the Motherland of our

race and Sanskrit the mother of Europe's languages; she was the mother of our philosophy; mother, through the Arabs, of our mathematics; mother, through the Buddha of the ideals embodied in Christianity; mother, through the village community of self governance and democracy. Mother India is in many ways the mother of us all." From the observations made through the course of this paper, it is amply clear that while we failed to recognize the importance of our indigenous cultural elements, they have resonated with a large number of people abroad. Ultimately, what we Indians need is a collective ' attitude makeover.' -----

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