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Culture through the lens of DV Gundappa

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Abstract

D.V. Gundappa, popularly known as DVG, remains an enduring figure in India's cultural and intellectual history. His reflections on culture, ethics, and art provide a profound exploration of human values. This paper examines DVG's philosophy, emphasizing his vision of culture as a synthesis of tradition and modernity, rooted in ethical living, spirituality, and artistic expression. His magnum opus, Mankutimmana Kagga, serves as a timeless guide to understanding the deeper dimensions of life and culture.

Keyword: D.V. Gundappa, culture, ethics, spirituality, Mankutimmana Kagga, tradition, modernity, Indian philosophy, art, samskruti

Introduction

D.V. Gundappa, affectionately known as DVG, stands as an immortal figure in the cultural and intellectual history of India. His life and legacy epitomize the essence of true living and culture at its best. As a philosopher-poet, social thinker, and advocate of Indian ethical traditions, DVG articulated a vision of culture that transcends superficial interpretations. His commendable work, Mankutimmana Kagga, often referred to as the Bhagavad Gita of Kannada literature, along with his essays on culture, provides profound insights into the ethical, spiritual, and social dimensions of culture.

Culture as the Soul of Society

DVG viewed culture (samskruti) as the soul of human society—the essence that gives life to communities. He believed that culture is a state of living attained by synthesizing discrimination of the world and its experiences with the analysis and assimilation of scriptures. In his essays, particularly those compiled in Jeevana Saundarya Mattu Sahitya, he emphasized that culture is not limited to artistic or ritualistic practices but involves the cultivation of inner refinement and ethical living. He succinctly summarized this ethos in Mankutimmana Kagga:

“Samskrutiya sanjeevana shuddhiyolide,
Hrudaya vishalata satya tande.”

(Culture lives in purity, vastness of heart, and truthfulness.)

For DVG, culture served as a bridge between human aspirations and eternal values—truth, goodness, and beauty (satyam, shivam, sundaram). He regarded culture as a vehicle of self-expression, enabling harmony between the individual and the collective. DVG's essays frequently underscore the idea that "Culture is Concern for Others," reflecting his deeply humanistic worldview.

Ethics: The Core of Culture

DVG's reflections on culture are deeply rooted in ethical considerations. Inspired by the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, he believed that moral conduct forms the foundation of a meaningful life. In Mankutimmana Kagga, he poignantly conveys:

“Nele illada meenu, galle illada jeeva,
Naale illada jeeva, geleyanarthavalla.”

(Like a fish without water, a life without support is meaningless. A friendless person lacks life's essence.)

This verse illustrates that relationships, mutual respect, and ethical behavior are the backbone of a thriving culture. DVG's philosophy emphasizes humility, compassion, and self-discipline as essential traits of a cultured individual. His ethical framework aligns with the concept of *Dharma*, emphasizing harmony between individual responsibility and collective well-being.

Tradition and Modernity

DVG's enduring legacy lies in his ability to harmonize tradition with modernity. In his essay *Samskruti Mattu Kranti* (Culture and Revolution), he cautioned against blind adherence to tradition and uncritical acceptance of modernity. He proposed a middle path, advocating for a cultural evolution guided by the wisdom of the past to navigate contemporary challenges. He argued that culture must adapt without compromising its foundational values, as this balance is crucial for sustainable progress. DVG's perspective resonates with the Upanishadic dictum of "Yatha purvam akalpayat" (creating anew while respecting the past).

Art as Spiritual Expression

For DVG, art was a sacred medium, transcending entertainment to serve as an expression of the divine. He admired the spiritual depth of Indian classical music, temple architecture, and Sanskrit literature. In his essay *Kalopasana* (The Worship of Art), he described art as a means of self-realization and a reflection of universal truths. He saw beauty (*saundarya*) as inseparable from ethics and spirituality, symbolizing the interconnectedness of life.

In *Mankutimmana Kagga*, DVG eloquently articulated this ideal:

“Cheluvantha jeevana kaleyu atishaya,
Manava sanskrutiya moulya.”

(A beautiful life is the pinnacle of human culture's worth.)

Practical Wisdom for a Cultured Life

DVG's *Mankutimmana Kagga* is replete with practical wisdom for leading a cultured life. His aphorisms highlight virtues like contentment (*santosha*), equanimity (*samachittatva*), and duty (*kartavya*). He firmly believed that culture begins at the level of the individual, who must undergo inner transformation to positively influence society. One of his oft-quoted verses encapsulates this philosophy:

“Ellarantavanagu manuja, yenokti,
Sollaradu chelularike!”

(To see oneself in others and act accordingly is true beauty.)

Relevance Today

In an age of rapid globalization and cultural homogenization, DVG's insights remain profoundly relevant. His vision urges the preservation of cultural diversity while fostering a universal ethos of empathy and cooperation. DVG's idea of culture—rooted in ethical living and spiritual values—transcends geographical and temporal boundaries, making it a guiding light for modern society.

The harmony he advocated between tradition and modernity offers valuable lessons for addressing contemporary challenges in education, governance, and interfaith dialogue.

His emphasis on ethical and spiritual refinement serves as a counterbalance to the materialism and fragmentation of modern life.

Conclusion

D.V. Gundappa's writings present culture as a multidimensional journey encompassing ethics, spirituality, and art. His philosophy reminds us that true culture lies not in material achievements but in the refinement of the human spirit and the creation of a harmonious society. As the world grapples with the complexities of modernity, DVG's wisdom inspires us to build a balanced world rooted in introspection, empathy, and universal love.

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