

The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation: An Indian-Christian Perspective

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Abstract

A human being is informed, formed and transformed not in isolation but in a family or community. The spiritual formation and integration of a holistic vision of life is engrained and founded on a healthy community setting. This is fundamentally a reality in religious ethos and cultures of both Hinduism and Christianity. The Hindu concept of a community has been evolved from Vedas, Bhagavad Gita and linked to the varna system (Caste) in Manusmriti is a code of conduct for Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. *Gurukula* (house of a Master) style of training is envisaged in such a way that the knowledge and formative instructions are imparted to the seekers and candidates under the tutelage of a Guru (Teacher). Patanjali's *Astanga Yoga* (Eightfold steps of discipline) with a special emphasize to the principles of self-control (*Yama*) and the rules (*Niyama*) are to be seen as the best practices for spiritual formation and subsequent transformation of a student. Christian perspective of spiritual formation starts with human formation based on the teaching and life example of Jesus Christ. The Trinitarian understanding of a community presupposes unity and strong bonding. The Church as the community of faithful plays a pivotal role in the accompaniment of her members through different structures and communities. The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the apostolic exhortations of different popes highlight the need for cohesiveness and collective witnessing by every faithful in the Church for a challenging

testimony of the Kingdom values in the modern world. Thus, different religious communities are playing an important role in the spiritual formation of her members.

Keywords: Community, Spirituality, Formation, Indian-Christian.

Introduction

Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1: 26-27). The Lord said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen. 2:18). The narration of the Holy Bible in the creation of human beings made it mandatory that the humans need to exist together and not in isolation. The Psalmist says, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes” (Ps. 133:1-2). The Greek philosopher Aristotle considers human beings as rational animals. This rationality enables humankind to elicit physical, emotional and intellectual strength in partnership and communion. The concept of community varies from culture to culture and country to country. These differences could be seen even in religions and their practices also. This paper is a humble attempt to elucidate the role of community in Spiritual Formation from an Indian-Christian perspective. The common understanding is that family is the first visible community in any culture and nation. The basic lessons of being together are learned and practised at home or similar dwelling places. As a social unit, a community is a group of people living together with commonality such as place, norms, religion, values, customs, or identity, etc. Communion and communication are essential elements in a community. The family lays the basic foundation for any value system learned, acquired or possessed at the later stage of human development.

The Indian concept of community mainly derives from the Hindu understanding, which is, of course, from an age-old tradition of those who believe in the *Vedas* and follow the way (*dharma*) of the four classes (*varnas*) and stages of life (*ashrams*). The Buddhist concept of community as *sangha* originally is established as a community of celibate monks and nuns who follow strict discipline and learn *Dharma*: the teachings of Buddha. A Christian approach to the community mainly focuses on the Holy Trinity as the archetype of a community. “The mystery of the Holy Trinity reveals that Being is essentially a *koinonia* of love; it is communion, a reciprocal call to be; it is being-

together, being-with, *co-esse*; its essence is a coming-from and a going-to, a giving and receiving” (Abhiskiktananda, 1984). The image of a community then eventually centred around the Holy Family, Jesus and the disciples, and the formation of the early Christian Community. A shift is being noticed with the origin of monastic life in the church and the foundation of religious congregations. “The desert fathers and mothers established the first religious communities in the fourth century. These individuals withdrew from the world and lived in the desert to pursue a life of prayer and contemplation” (Communitarian Witnessing, 2023). They practised asceticism, simplicity, leading a life of poverty and celibacy. Emphasis has been given to the spiritual formation of the members in such communities following a set of rules and regulations and a disciplined way of life. The life and teaching of the elders in the community have been looked at with much respect and admiration. The rest of the members have accepted them as role models to imitate, who showed them the way to God and inspired the inmates through their exemplary life. The dawn of the 13th century witnessed the emergence of many religious orders, such as the Carmelites, Dominicans and Franciscans, etc. Each community has its unique charism and mission.

Concept of Community in the Indian Tradition

In the Indian Spiritual tradition, community plays a significant role in shaping and nurturing individuals’ spiritual practices and beliefs. India is a land of diverse cultures, religions, and spiritual traditions, and the concept of community has always been deeply ingrained in its spiritual fabric. “India is a mosaic of races, cultures, religions and languages... But the pluralism of cultures is no obstacle or danger to its unity. A basic unity and dynamic core is common to all forms and branches of Indian culture” (Amalorpavadass, 1982). Certain aspects highlight the nature of Indian Communities: (A) Support and Encouragement: Creating a conducive environment to explore and deepen their spiritual journeys. (B) Collective Practices: Many spiritual practices are performed collectively, fostering unity, connectivity and shared purpose among the community members. (C) Spiritual Knowledge Transmission: Indian spirituality has a rich oral tradition, where spiritual knowledge, scriptures, and teachings are passed down through generations. Communities serve as the carriers of this knowledge, ensuring its preservation and continuation. (D) Guru-Disciple Relationship: The Guru-disciple relationship is an essential aspect of Indian spirituality.

A Guru, a spiritual teacher, imparts knowledge, guidance, and wisdom to the disciple. Often, this relationship is nurtured within a community setting, where the Guru leads a group of disciples. (E) *Satsang*: *Satsang*, meaning association with truth, refers to gatherings where individuals come together to discuss spiritual topics, listen to spiritual discourses, and engage in devotional practices. *Satsang* provides an opportunity for spiritual growth and self-realization in the company of fellow seekers.

The concept of community in the Indian tradition differs greatly from that of Christianity. Of course, as a basic unit of society, the family plays an important role. However, the nature of family differs as a joint family, tribal family, Village family, etc. The traditional understanding of religious community is linked to the *varna* (caste) system in Manusmriti. Manusmriti is a code of conduct put together by Brahmins, mainly for Brahmins and other upper castes. It aligns with the Vedic view that society comprises four kinds of communities: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The status and privileges were assigned based on birth, duties and obligations. In ancient India, the sages often wrote their ideas about how society should run in the manuscripts. Referring to the Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita, a similar idea runs through priests or teachers (Brahmins), rulers or warriors (Kshatriyas), landowners or merchants (Vaishyas) and servants (Sudras). And the Gita mentions a fifth group as untouchables (Dalits). It is said that the teachings of the Gita are meant for people and, therefore, universal and sublime and not belonging to any cult, sect, creed or country and age.

The Bhagavad Gita emphasizes the importance of performing one's duty (Dharma) and responsibilities within the context of one's community. Lord Krishna advises Arjuna, a warrior, to fulfil his duty as a Kshatriya (warrior class) and fight for righteousness. This highlights the significance of adhering to social roles and responsibilities to maintain harmony and order within the community. The other values the Gita emphasizes are Selflessness and Service towards others; Unity in Diversity regardless of social status or occupation; Compassion and Understanding towards others; Spiritual Brotherhood, where individuals recognize the divine essence within every being. The role of a community in the spiritual formation of an individual is always identified with the concept of one's social responsibility. Now, let us see more about how the Guru-disciple relationship is established, lived in the communities, and practised in *Satsang*.

Satsang (Communion of Beings)

Satsang refers to a gathering of like-minded individuals who engage in spiritual practices such as meditation, chanting, and discussing spiritual topics. A religious community in which its members live united with the Word, sharing what they are and have with God, with each other and the People of God, in prayer, suffering and service is understood as a *sat-sang*. The members in such a community try their best to live in union with God through a life of commitment regarding and loving each other, witnessing to the fact that they are a true family gathered together. In his Bhakti Sutra, Narda presents the following observation: People who live in *Satngas* show no distinction based on social status, educational standard, physical beauty, family position, financial condition, or any other kind of greatness or office.

The idea of *Satsang* is expressed in the Rigveda (X. 191. 2-4) as follows:

Meet together, speak together
Let your minds be of one accord.
As the devas of old, being of one mind,
Accepted their share of sacrifice.
May your hymn be common, your dwelling common,
Common the mind, and the thoughts of these united.
A common hymn do I chant with you,
And worship with your common oblation.
Your call is the same,
Let your hearts be of one accord,
And all of you be of one mind,
As you dwell well together.

This hymn of Rigveda very clearly presents the unity among the members in performing sacrifices, meeting together, chatting together and dwelling together with one mind and heart. Of course, unity is strength. United we stand, divided we falter. A community is different from that of a crowd. Community life entails, on the part of the members, *co-existence* (existing-with) and *pro-existence* (existing-for). What distinguishes a mere crowd from a genuine community is its power to *co-existence* and grow constantly and continuously into *pro-existence*. In other words, the ability of the members to exist with each other, so that they may exist for each other. The *co-existence* envisages only a sharing of things (*having*); whereas, in genuine idea

of pro-existence the members share with each other all they possess with a view to share with each other all they are (their *being*), in terms of life and love. What ultimately unites the members in the community are the Word of God from a believer's point of view. "We, human beings, communicate with each other through words and gestures (verbal and non-verbal). Yes, words are powerful and effective means of communication. In the ancient Vedic religion as well as in the Bible, we see God communicating with His people through different means and ways. We call this the revelation of God. Hence, the two major religions of the world: Hinduism and Christianity use enormously the term "Word" or "Vac" to describe man's encounter and experience of the divine" (Vattakuzhy, 2020). It is in the community the members realize their call to be united fulfilling the commandment to love God and one's neighbour "with all our heart, soul, strength and mind" (Lk. 10: 25-37) as we read in the Bible.

Principles of *Yama* and *Niyama* for a Community Living

The eight-fold steps of spiritual discipline mentioned in the *Ashtanga Yoga* of Padanjali can be taken as the Indian principles of discipleship. *Yama* (the principles of Self-control) and *Niyama* (the rules to be observed) are clearly depicting what a student of yoga is supposed to live in a community. This is well accepted as the universal and comprehensive *sadhana* (Exercise). The eight limbs of yoga are: *Yama* (Restraints), *Niyama* (Observances), *Asana* (Postures), *Pranayama* (Regulation of breath), *Pratyahara* (Withdrawal of senses), *Dharana* (Concentration), *Dhyana* (Meditation) and *Samadhi* (Complete Quiet). These steps of yoga are actively playing an important role in the formation of a candidate that too in the spiritual realms. Integrating *Yama* and *Niyama* into spiritual formation is a powerful way to cultivate a deeper and more meaningful spiritual practice. They provide a strong ethical and moral foundation for the journey of self-discovery and spiritual growth. It is the duty of every individual whether these principles resonate with their values and beliefs enhancing their spiritual journey.

***Yama*:** *Ahimsa* (Non-violence), *Satya* (Truthfulness), *Asteya* (Non-stealing), *Brahmacharya* (Practice moderation), *Aparigraha* (Non-possessiveness). Practice of non-violence and compassion (*Ahimsa*) towards all living beings, including ourselves, is the need of every time. Incorporating this principle into our spiritual formation by cultivating kindness and empathy in our interactions with others would definitely help us creating a peaceful world. Same is the case with the practice of

truthfulness (*Satya*). Honesty is the best policy. Integrating truthfulness and honesty in spiritual formation avoid deception and falsehood in thoughts, speech and conducts. *Asteya* enables a person to have his mind focused on God instead of worldly possessions. “Those who are determined to reach the depth should not allow themselves to be carried away by the glamour of things they find around them” (Vineeth, 1995). *Brahmacharya* is a principle which encourages one to make a fundamental option for Brahman (God) as the absolute and ultimate goal of his life. *Aparigraha* is the principle of non-possessiveness and letting go of attachments from the worldliness. Here, one does not hold on to anything that is not God.

Niyama: Any community should have certain rules to be observed so that a decorum of discipline and smooth running of it would be maintained. *Saucha* is the principle of cleanliness and purification, both externally and internally. In spiritual formation, this involves keeping one’s physical space clean and uncluttered and purifying the mind through meditation and positive thoughts. *Samtoshā* is a principle of inner contentment and being satisfied with what life offers. This attitude helps a person to avoid constant desires for more. “As a soul reaches the inner chamber of *Atman* it finds itself in a state of joy (*Ananda*)” (Vineeth, 1995). *Tapas* is ardour, a self-disciplined and austere effort in life. Integrating *tapas* into spiritual formation by committing to regular spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, etc. enable a person to dedicate himself to spiritual path alive avoiding obstacles. *Svadhyaya* is self-study and continuous learning. Engage in self-reflection seeking knowledge nurturing one’s spiritual growth. The responsibility of learning especially sacred scripture is left to each one for the realization of God. *Isvara Pranidhana* is the principle of surrendering to a higher power of divine. Let go of the need for control and ego-driven desires, and trust in the higher plan for one’s life attaining God realization. These were the principles of good religious formation given by *gurus* in the ancient Indian spiritual traditions.

Astanga Yoga incorporates various community concepts that emphasize the importance of interconnectedness, compassion, and spiritual growth within the community. By practicing self-discipline, non-violence, self-study, and selfless service, individuals foster an environment of support, acceptance, and mutual respect. The community’s shared journey creates a space for collective growth, enabling practitioners to strengthen their understanding of themselves and others.

Ecclesial Dimension of Community

The Church (*ecclesia*) is the mystical body of Jesus Christ. Standing as the community of the faithful, the Church represents heaven on earth bearing witness to Jesus Christ. “The Church is essentially *agape* (love) and *koinonia* (being-with, being-together). She is the sign and the sacrament of the divine *koinonia* of Being. By her nature she is communion in love, and her function in mankind is to produce a ferment of love” (Abhishiktananda, 1984). The Catholic Church has a long history of emphasizing the importance of community in spiritual formation. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “Unity of the Mystical Body triumphs over all the human divisions” (CCC 791). The Church is “One Body,” the community of those who have been called by God to share in his life and mission. This means our spiritual growth is not something that we can do in isolation, it is something that we do in relationship with others. “She is united in him, in his body. Three aspects of the Church as the Body of Christ are to be more specifically noted: the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ; Christ as head of the Body; and the Church as bride of Christ” (CCC 789). Beyond the Church’s theological doctrines and rich history, she holds a unique position as a community that transcends borders, languages, and cultures. At the heart of the Church’s community lies her communal worship and celebration of the sacraments. She is bound together by a common set of doctrinal beliefs that are rooted in scripture and tradition and the teaching of the Magisterium. These beliefs form the foundation of Catholic faith.

There are many ways that community can help us in our spiritual formation. First, community provides with a sense of belonging. Feeling of belonging to a community nurtures the inner cohesiveness and empowering the members to undertake the spiritual journey with more vigor and enthusiasm. This is because we know that we are not alone on our journey, and that there are others also who are walking with us. Secondly, when we are part of a community we are exposed to different perspectives and experiences. This can help us to grow in our understanding of our faith, and to become more open to the Spirit’s leading. Third, community provides us with opportunities for service. When we serve other, we are not only helping them, but we are helping ourselves to grow in our spiritual maturity. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom

for many” (Mk. 10:45). This is because service helps us to put our faith into action, and to experience the joy of giving to others.

The role of community in spiritual formation holds significant importance within the Catholic Church. “The spiritual leadership of attracting people to God can be accomplished only by Spirit-filled people” (Mathew, 2020). This comprehensive study examines the multifaceted aspects of community’s influence on spiritual growth and development from a Catholic perspective. Drawing from biblical teachings, Church documents, encyclicals, and apostolic letters of Popes, this paper explores the theological foundation and practical implications of community in fostering spiritual formation. The study highlights the communal nature of Catholic faith, the role of worship and sacraments, the significance of fellowship and support, the impact of formation and education, the discernment process, etc. By delving into scriptural references and official Church documents, this study provides a thorough understanding of the role of community in spiritual formation.

The Church as a community can become a powerful tool for spiritual formation, holding us accountable. “Formation at all levels, whether in the family, society, Church or in the specific formation for religious and priestly life, is the process in which humans are to be assisted to realize their capacity to become fully human in communion with God and other human beings” (Jacob Parappally, 2017). When we are part of community, we are more likely to be held accountable for our spiritual practices. This can be helpful in staying on track with our spiritual goals. It is in community that we experience a lot of opportunities to grow being supported and encouraged by others. A good community will encourage us to grow in faith. They will challenge us to go deeper in our relationship with God, and to live our faith more fully in the world. “A human person is invited to grow unto the perfection of Jesus of Nazareth, a fully divine-human person with a vision and mission for other human beings” (Manickam, 2019).

Community in the Encyclicals and Apostolic Letters

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of community and communion in the process of evangelization. He states that “an evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (1 John 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out

to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast” (Pope Francis, 2013). The encyclical stresses the need for a community that supports and encourages one another in sharing the Gospel message. The Pope also stresses in the letter to the consecrated men and women in *Rejoice*, “Community is the first and most believable gospel we can preach. We are asked to humanize our community. Build friendship between yourselves...There are and there will be problems, but...search for solution with love. Build community life with a big heart. Let things go, do not brag, be patient with everything, smile from the heart” (Pope Francis, 2018).

Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love) highlights the connection between love and community. He emphasizes that, “Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love God who has loved us first” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006). The document emphasizes that love is not only a personal experience but finds its fulfillment in the community. It states that “love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God and that closing our eyes to our neighbour also binds us to God” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006).

Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* (The Mission of the Redeemer) expresses the importance of Christian communities in the mission of the Church. He states that “The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity towards the poor, the weak and those who suffer” (Pope John Paul II, 1991). The encyclical highlights that the community plays a vital role in forming and supporting missionaries who are sent out to proclaim the Gospel to the world. The Pope also affirms that the Christian communities are very much part of their respective nations loyal to the culture and their heritage. “Christian and Christian communities are very much a part of the life of their respective nations and can be a sign of the Gospel in their fidelity to their native land people and national culture, while preserving the freedom brought by Christ” (Pope John Paul, 1991).

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World) Pope Paul VI stresses the role of Christian community in evangelization. He states that “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself” (Pope Paul VI, 1988). The document emphasizes that the community itself should be a witness to the Gospel through unity, love, and service to others. “She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of

brotherly love; and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love” (Pope Paul VI, 1988).

These encyclicals and apostolic letters highlight that the Popes’ teachings on the role of community in spiritual formation. They emphasize the importance of community as assurance of support, communion, and evangelization. The community seen as a place where individuals are formed in faith, growing in love, and are sent forth to share the Good News with others. The Popes and other documents of the Church give much importance to the communitarian dimension of the Church and the apostolate since it was the very spirit of the Lord, Jesus Christ. “And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mk. 3: 14-15). The call narratives in the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John also emphasize the attitude of Jesus that the disciples should learn from the life, mission and the values of him by being with him. The tone in the biblical language about the community especially in the New Testament is sharing and having a life being with the Lord before the proclamation. “They said to him, ‘Rabbi’, where are you staying? He said to them. Come and see’. They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day” (Jn. 1: 38-39). The dogmatic constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) states that “the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men” (LG,1) (Flannery, 1983).

The religious communities in the Catholic tradition emphasize the communitarian living. This has been highlighted in the constitutions of every religious order. As a CMI religious priest, our constitution in its very first sentence states that, “God, in His loving providence has called us, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, to a community of love in the Church” (CMI Constitution, 2016) 1). St. Chavara advises his confreres on community bonding and charity, the strength of a religious community is not in the thickness of the walls of the monastery, but in the fraternal bonding among them. Though individual charisms are promoted and appreciated in the religious communities, there is no existence for the members without having an identity of an order to which the person belongs. The members bear witness to the Lord in the community. This is applicable to every member of the Church either as a diocesan priest or laity belonging to a diocese or a parish

or even as a prayer group. This is because the Church is a community and communion of the faithful, the visible sign of God in the world. “Giving ourselves to one another, we show forth the unity of the Body of Christ, the people of God called to participate in the fellowship of the Most Holy Trinity” (CMI Constitution, 2016). Spiritual formation of a person takes place to a great extent in communities being part of it undertaking varied responsibilities. This had been the spirit of the early Church having one heart and one soul in serving God’s people. It is in communities the members are being formed by the Word of God and observing religious obligations such as vowed life, celebration of the Holy Eucharist and other apostolates.

Conclusion

We have been trying to analyze the role of community in the spiritual formation of a person from Christian and Indian perspectives. Despite the differences, both perspectives acknowledge the transformative power of communal spiritual endeavors in sporting individuals on their spiritual path. Spiritual formation in Indian tradition is a holistic and all-encompassing process that aims to help individuals transcend their limited identities and merge with the universal consciousness. It fosters a sense of unity, compassion, and harmony with oneself, others, and the world at large. In the Christian tradition, spiritual formation in community is deeply rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Church as the body of Christ, plays a crucial role in supporting and nurturing the spiritual growth of the members. Holy Trinity, the mysterious community of three persons, shows us the ideal unity of unities. Trinitarian unity is the ultimate unity that any human being can comprehend and conceive.

In Indian spirituality, community plays a significant role in shaping and nurturing individuals’ spiritual practices and beliefs. India is a land of diverse cultures, religions and spiritual traditions, and the concept of community has always been deeply ingrained in its spiritual fabric. It helps individuals on their spiritual journey, allowing them to connect with others who share similar beliefs and values, and to draw inspiration and guidance from experienced practitioners and spiritual leaders. Some key concepts include Guru-disciple relationship; *Satsang*, company of the wise and spiritually inclined, Meditation and yoga especially the eight-fold steps of Yoga with an emphasize to *Yama* and *Niyama*. The concepts of community in the sacred scripture of Bhagavad Gita, the Vedic understanding and code of Manusmriti also

looked into exploring the pivotal role played by the communities in spiritual formation. The Catholic Church encourages believers to come together in fellowship, supporting and encouraging one another in their spiritual journeys. The community provides a sense of belonging, a space for mutual support, and the opportunity for spiritual growth. Within the community, individuals can share their experiences, seek guidance, and receive pastoral care from priests, religious leaders, and fellow believers. Pope John Paul II says, “The Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit” (Pope John Paul, 1996). The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith. This mystery of the triune God is model for all the religious communities in the Church. The teachings of the Church, Apostolic Letters and Encyclicals also highlight in great extent the importance of communities in spiritual formation of the members. Communities become a deciding factor in moulding the candidates in their pursuit of spiritual journey aiming at deeper intimacy and union with God.

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