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UNDERSTANDING INDIA

G. L. MEHTA



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UNDERSTANDING INDIA

To
my daughters
NĀLANJANA
UMA
and
APARNA
with love

FOREWORD

DURING MY STAY in the United States as head of the mission for more than five and a half years, I had the opportunity of addressing several audiences all over the country. Many of the speeches were extempore but several were prepared. It was suggested to me by many American and Indian friends that these speeches should be published in a book so as to make available some material which interprets Indian thought, puts forward India's attitude in world affairs and explains India's economic problems and plans. Despite the topical nature of some of these speeches as also the fact that political and economic conditions have changed in many ways both in India and abroad since these speeches were made, I have thought it worth while publishing them as they might be of some value in making India a little more understood outside. The senior officials of the Ministry of External Affairs to whom I mentioned this idea whole-heartedly approved of it.

I am not a scholar or an economist and claim to be no more than a student of public affairs. These speeches although delivered in an official capacity were meant to tell the West what one Indian thinks and feels. They seek to provide some insight into India's mind, some knowledge of India's efforts, ambitions and achievements. It is for others to judge how far I have succeeded in this objective. All I can say is that I honestly tried to interpret India to American audiences because I felt and feel that cordial relationship between peoples demands understanding and understanding is promoted by light, not heat.

The reader, I trust, will overlook some repetitions in the speeches despite such weeding as was possible and will appreciate that they were made at different places and at different times to various kinds of audiences.

I should like to express my gratitude to Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd., Bombay, for permission to quote from Rabindra-

nath Tagore's *Gitanjali*; and to Messrs. Kitabistan, Ltd., Allahabad, for permission to quote from *The Sceptred Flute* by Sarojini Naidu.

GAGANVIHARI L. MEHTA

Bombay
30th April 1959

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THE SPIRIT OF INDIA

THE SPIRIT OF INDIA*

AFTER 5000 YEARS and more of recorded history, India survives, India endures. She has a civilization which goes back to centuries, contemporaneous with the earliest civilizations of China and Egypt, preceding the civilizations of Greece and Rome. This civilization still survives in India, as you can see any morning, even on a wintry day—thousands of men and women, poorly clad in tattered garments, going for a bath in a holy river. I remember one occasion on which I saw women, bare-footed, with not even a woollen shawl over them, going with a little brass utensil in hand for a bath in the holy Ganges. And I said to myself, this is real India; not the people whom you see in cocktail parties in Bombay and Calcutta and Delhi, not the people whom you see in fashionable clubs and hotels, but these people who are simple, humble people, and about whose spirit I hope to say something to you.

This India survives in its temples, in its architecture, and sculptures, in its epics and its lores. One of the great epics of India is Ramayana, the story of the king Rama, an incarnation of God Vishnu, who conquered evil and destroyed a demon. The original text of Ramayana is in Sanskrit, our ancient language, but it has been translated in Hindi, our national language, by poet Tulsi Das ; and although the story is known to every Hindu from his childhood, its recitation still fills one with some kind of deep ecstasy. Indeed, this is one of the stories, one of the epics, which mothers tell their children, and those children, even if they do not know how to read or write, know these epics, as the earlier generations knew them by heart.

This India, with its religious and cultural heritage, is still there, while other civilizations have perished, and modern civilizations have come into being. And one asks, are there some enduring values in this India ? And has this India got

* A talk given at the Vedanta Society of New York on January 12, 1954.

something to contribute to the world, in the realm of thought, in the realm of contemplation ?

Now, when one speaks about the spirit of a country, one is apt to be somewhat superficial in generalising ; one is apt even to take up an attitude akin to that of national arrogance or racial pride. It is often said that each nation has some peculiar characteristic ; some nation is proficient in music, some in poetry, some in philosophy, and so on. But I believe that one should be very careful in making such generalisations, or even in speaking about "the spirit" of a country : firstly, because no culture grows in isolation ; throughout the ages, countries have borrowed from other lands, and their cultures have assimilated and adapted from other countries. Again, the evolution of a nation itself is a long-term process ; it is a process in which so many strands are there, so many strands of race and culture, and also of environment, of geographical and material conditions. Therefore, I think we must be cautious in speaking about the spirit of a country.

And, again, when we speak of the spirit of a country, we must not forget the fact that frequently, the spirit of a country is very different from its actual practices. We are all prone to compare the best in our own religion or the best in our own nation—what is preached, the spiritual teachings may be, the inspiring messages of our prophets—with what is worst in the practices of other peoples, or in the practices of other religions. We think of a fine saying of our prophet, and we quote it and say, well, this is Hinduism, or this is Christianity, or this is Islam. But, on the other hand, we forget that these messages of the prophets are translated day by day in practice by ordinary men and women, and we must not forget that even in this translation they lose something of their pristine purity.

Material conditions, again, affect these spiritual yearnings and aspirations. And, therefore, what I am going to say about the spirit of India should not be construed as putting a glowing picture before you. And yet the spirit of a country, even if it frequently eludes us, is always superior to its institutions. Somehow or other it so happens that when men try to translate this spirit into institutions and customs and practices, some imponderable value is lost ; and, therefore, you will always find, whether in religion or in cultural

sphere, that the spirit is deeper than the institution. Consequently, some of the finest manifestations of a people are not in its military arts, not even in its social institutions, certainly not in its political conflicts but in its art and its philosophy, its religion, and its scientific pursuits.

At the outset, we may ask, then, is there something like a unity of India? It may sound an extraordinary question, but for years when we were under foreign rule, we were told that there is really nothing like "India", that India is simply "a geographical expression"; and that there is no inherent spiritual or cultural unity of India. But a British historian, Vincent Smith said, India beyond all doubt possesses a deep underlying fundamental unity, far more profound than that produced either by geographical isolation or by political superiority. That unity transcends the innumerable diversities of community, language, dress, manners, and sect.

But if there is this unity of India, what are its main attributes, attributes at their best, and what is the vital contribution that she has made through centuries? I suggest that India's contribution has been principally in the realm of spiritual thought, of religion and philosophy. Ignorant as an illiterate Indian may appear by modern standards, he has, deep down in his being something which we might call a religious consciousness.

In India, there are many sects even in Hinduism, and there have been reformist movements which have preached against idol worship. Indeed, one characteristic of Indian reformist movements has been that they themselves have been religious in outlook and approach. Some of them have harked back to the ancient Vedas and urged that all the gloss of subsequent rituals and doctrines should be removed, and that we should go back to our ancient lore. Other movements contended that idol worship is not something that is in consonance with the essence of Hindu religion. Some of these movements were, no doubt, influenced by other religions. But I am reminded of the story of a man who belonged to that movement, Brahmo Samaj as it is called, concentrated mainly in Bengal, though it spread to some other parts of the country. A Brahmo believes that God is formless, and that any kind of temple where an image or idol is worshipped does not express the essence of

Hinduism. A person who believed in this cult, who was a highly cultured man, deeply read in Western philosophy, went to the temple in Benares, our holy city, and saw a poor woman coming out of the temple, tears flowing from her eyes, tears of joy at having at last visited the temple and bowed before the shrine of God Siva. And this man said to my father, "I do not believe in idol worship, but at least this woman had seen *her* God in that temple ! "

And I remember another incident, in which one of the well-known amateur musicians of India, Dilip Kumar Roy, sang a beautiful song in Bengali and the words of that song were somewhat like this : "Those who do not know Him cannot understand, but I know You and, therefore, I believe in You, for I have seen You in the innermost recesses of my heart." It was a moving line though it loses its effect in translation. And I remember that when he sang it once in Calcutta, at least half-a-dozen women who were there burst into tears ; may be, someone had suffered, someone had lost her dear one, someone had a sense of deep devotion. I mention these stray incidents to show you that deep down in the consciousness of the ordinary, unsophisticated Indian—man or woman—is a feeling which one can only describe as a kind of yearning of the spirit.

An important characteristic of the heritage of India is its synthetic outlook. India, in many respects, is like a vast ocean in which many streams of race and religion have flowed since times immemorial, and India has had the capacity of absorbing these varied strands, of assimilating them, instead of rejecting them. This has been so throughout the ages. Even centuries ago, people who were persecuted in other lands because of their religion, came over to India, and India gave them refuge. But it is not only a question of refuge. Systems of eclectic thought developed in India ; systems of religion developed which tried to harmonise various creeds, which tried to distill the essence of religion from the mass of doctrines and from the gamut of rituals and ceremonies. And many of those people who came from abroad lost some of their fanatical zest, their zeal for conversion. They also settled down in India and imbibed something of that spirit of tolerance which is the essence of Hinduism at its best. Indeed,

so eclectic has Hinduism become that it is often difficult to define it or even to understand its essence. It has had so many sects, it has had so many deities that some people think it is a kind of polytheism full of superstitions and crude rituals. And yet it encompasses some of the most abstruse thought that the human mind has ever been capable of. All religions have their ceremonies and rituals which may appear irrational to others but a spiritual religion has a deeper meaning and significance. And in Hinduism, religion and philosophy co-exist.

Many illustrations can be given of this synthetic spirit. Sufism was influenced by this philosophy. One of the great sages of the Middle Ages, Kabir, preached and practised a religion which tried to combine the spirit of both Hinduism and Islam, and the great Muslim Emperor Akbar tried to evolve a religion in which he wanted to combine the best of several religions—he had even a Christian priest near him. And this Din-i-Ilahi, as it was called, was again a characteristic example of the climate of India influencing even kings.

At the root of this outlook is a belief in the supremacy of the spirit over matter. Such a thesis, no doubt, is liable to be misconstrued. But I shall cite here not the teachings of the sages or what is stated in the scriptures, but the attitude of the common man in the country. Even an ordinary illiterate peasant has almost a philosophical attitude about the transitoriness of life, about the reality of another world hereafter, about good deeds bearing their fruits in an after life, and even a certain spirit of resignation and renunciation. If an ordinary Indian—uneducated may be, but in many respects he probably represents the spirit of India better than we educated people—if he loses some dear one, say his only child, no doubt he will mourn, but still he will say “it is God’s will.” This spirit of resignation may appear at times something that leads to paralysis; if you have flood, or famine, and you say “well, that is God’s will” and will not take steps to see that you have better irrigation or do not take steps for conservation of soil, then that is not really “spiritual”; it is pathetic contentment born of indolence and stagnation. But granted that this sort of complete resignation is not desirable, I suggest that the idea of the omnipotence of man,

the idea that man can do anything in this world, is also something that leaves some truth unsaid, something that needs to be qualified. Because, after all, there are things in life which not even the most powerful can control. One of the most materialistic philosophers I know, Bertrand Russell, says in one of his profound essays, *A Free Man's Worship*, that sooner or later in life, there comes the great renunciation, the knowledge that the world is not made for us, and that however desirable the things may be that we crave for, ultimately we cannot have them. Difficult as it is to realise in our egoism that the world is not made for us, still, I think, sooner or later we have to recognize that the world existed long before we were born and will continue long after we pass away. And, therefore, I feel that a certain spirit of renunciation is not only wise but is conducive to happiness, happiness born of inner harmony, not happiness which is simply based on material comforts.

And, because of this renunciation, there is an emphasis in Hindu thought, as in other religions, on sacrifice, on what we call *tyag*. Our *Geeta* says, "Renounce the world in order to enjoy it." And, again and again, we find this is a wise precept, that he who renounces all eventually wins all. I do not wish to tell you—it would be hypocrisy for me to say so—that this means that we must all embrace poverty or that we must give up all worldly possessions. But surely, even after having some worldly possessions, this constant yearning, this feverish activity, for something more, something newer, something bigger, has its limitations so far as the human mind is concerned. For, we find in life, each one of us, that, in the ultimate analysis, real happiness comes from within, not from without. And that, I think, is the innermost thought in Hinduism. There is a verse which says, "Not by wealth, not by progeny, but by renunciation alone is immortality attained."

And there is a beautiful story of this *tyag*, this sacrifice, in one of the legends of Buddha. One of the well-known disciples of Buddha, Anathpindad, went to the town of Shravastipur from one end of the city to the other saying: "Give me some gift today for Lord Buddha; I want to carry it to him." Rich people came down from their palatial buildings and gave him jewels, women gave him ornaments, others gave money but he was not satisfied; he would not take anything.