

THE
INDIAN HERITAGE

by
HUMAYUN KABIR

ASIA PUBLISHING HOUSE
BOMBAY — CALCUTTA

Preface

AN INVITATION to deliver the Maharaja Sayaji Rao Golden Jubilee Lectures for 1943 served as an incentive to organise and record some thoughts on the unity and continuity of Indian culture. The first two chapters of this book are substantially the same as the lectures delivered and soon after published under that Foundation. I wish to place on record my gratefulness for the honour conferred by Baroda's invitation and the opportunity it offered to stress some aspects of Indian civilisation which are often neglected in our traditional histories.

India is too big a country to be summed up in any simple formula. Her long and chequered history lends itself to diverse and at times contrary interpretations. Complexity and variety are inevitable in so vast and ancient a land and those who seek to stress and perpetuate differences may find sufficient material to justify their stand-point. And yet there is a unity of spirit underlying the multiform manifestations of Indian life.

To the world outside, India is often represented as a stage for the conflict between Hindus and Muslims, and the pomp and pageantry of prince and princeling. They form but a small part of the story recorded here. The omission is not accidental but deliberate. Considering the expanse of the country and the duration of her history, the vastness of the population and the

stringency of their struggle for existence, communal frictions are few and far between while prince and princeling seem but mere bubbles on the surface of Indian life. The record of communal jealousy and conflict pales into insignificance when one thinks of the friendship and kindness that generally mark the relations of the communities. The pomp and pageantry of the princes fade into nothingness against the background of the silent and massive flow of the dumb and inert masses. In the long run, they and their life alone matter.

The contemporary world is torn with the clash of rival ideas and ideologies. Immediate differences often conceal fundamental needs and ideals. India sought to reconcile differences without suppressing individual points of views. She built up a unity of spirit which has survived without the aid of physical compulsion. We can serve India and humanity best if we seek to discover that unity and base on it our attempts to create a new India out of old values and traditions.

H U M A Y U N K A B I R

22 December, 1946

Preface to the Third Edition

THE RECEPTION given to this brief study in Indian history and culture, originally published under the title *Our Heritage*, has exceeded my fondest expectation. I am keenly aware of its shortcomings and know that many of my suggestions and hypotheses are not included in the accepted historical tradition. Far more detailed study and research than I could undertake will be needed before a final decision on them can be taken. In order to provoke thought and challenge what appear to be mere myths, I have at times expressed my views more categorically than may be warranted by our current information. It is however my conviction that the picture of Indian culture I have attempted to draw is by and large truer to the facts than the story of the conflicts of a few political personalities which so often passes as Indian history. It is my earnest hope that more careful and competent historians will take up the study in greater detail and help in providing a true and comprehensive history of the Indian people.

Many of those who have favoured me with their views have suggested the addition of a new chapter. While they welcomed the emphasis on the process of cultural unification, they felt that a brief account of the political events would be useful to those who are unfamiliar with Indian history. It would have been

impossible within the available time and space to give a full account of the political history of India, but I have tried to supply a bare skeleton of events in an introductory survey. I have also added a brief postscript on some tendencies which have become clear only since independence.

I must however repeat what I said in the preface to the first edition of the book. What matters in Indian history is not the story of the clash and conflict of prince and princeling but the silent and massive flow of the life of the people which has built and is building up in India a common humanity out of a diversity of races, clans, religions, languages, customs and creeds.

I wish to thank Dr. P. C. Chakravarty for some valuable suggestions with regard to the Introduction. My daughter helped me by checking the dates and reading the proofs. Last but not least, I am grateful to Dr. John Guy Fowlkes for the great interest he has taken in the preparation and production of this edition.

HUMAYUN KABIR

New Delhi

15 September, 1955

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Introduction

A BRIEF summary of the political history of India may be helpful in understanding the process of cultural unification which is recorded in this study. Indian history can be traced back to over 5000 years and it is obvious that no adequate account can be given within the compass of a few pages. Even apart from the limitation of space, the time has perhaps not yet come to write a full history of the political and social life of the Indian people. Twenty-five years ago, books on Indian history began their story with the advent of the Aryans. To this day, our knowledge of the period before 600 B.C. is incomplete and sketchy. Nor are the difficulties of the historian confined to the ancient period. We have fairly adequate records of what happened after the Muslims appeared on the scene. Of what has often been described as the British period, the accounts are even more numerous. The events are, however, still too near us to permit an objective and dispassionate study. For the purpose of this book, all that we need is a skeleton of events. It is hoped that this bare record of facts may serve as a frame of reference for those who are not familiar with the story of India.

I

Recent discoveries indicate that round about 3000 B.C.

there was a developed civilisation in the north-western and northern regions of India. Popularly described as the Indus Valley civilisation, we had till recent times evidence of its existence only in Mohenjodaro and Harappa. In the last decade, traces of this civilisation have however been found in the Sutlej Valley, in Jaisalmer in Rajasthan and as far south as Lothal near Ahmedabad. It now seems clear that this ancient civilisation was not confined to the valley of the Indus but had spread east and south across half the Indian sub-continent.

Who the people of Mohenjodaro and Harappa were and where they came from cannot be said with any certainty today. The available remains indicate striking similarities with the people of Sumer, but historians offer different explanations of the similarity. Some are of the view that the civilisation spread westwards from the Indus basin till it reached the banks of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Others hold that it came to India from Sumer. Be that as it may, it had round about 3000 B.C. attained a high degree of maturity. One is thus justified in holding that its beginnings must go back perhaps another 500 years.

The Indus Valley civilisation is the first recognisable ingredient in the development of Indian culture. Its influence has persisted to this day and led some historians to declare that it is the true progenitor of modern India. This claim may be exaggerated, but it is the exaggeration of a truth. The historic culture of India has in some important respects deviated from this ancient pattern. The Mohenjodaro civilisation appears to have been primarily urban while Indian life through

the centuries has flowed mainly in rural channels. Traces of its influence however persist in the way of life of the people. Forms of dress, utensils and pottery which are still in use go back to the Mohenjodaro days. It has been suggested that some of the religious beliefs current today—the cult of the mother goddess, the reverence for the cow, and the worship of Siva—date back to this ancient culture.

According to one hypothesis, the most important influence of this civilisation is to be found in the pacifist temper of the Indian people. Aryans in other parts of the world have not been specially remarkable for pacifism. In fact, they have generally been noted for their warlike quality and temper. It may therefore be doubted if the prevalent Indian attitude to war and violence is derived from the Aryans. The people of Harappa and Mohenjodaro seem to have developed a pacifist attitude which according to some historians was one main reason for their defeat at the hands of the Aryans. In the scale of civilisation, the Aryans were perhaps inferior to the people of Mohenjodaro, but their more aggressive character and their superiority in the art of warfare gave them the victory.

As far as is known, the Aryans started coming into India round about 2000 B.C. This was not immigration on a mass scale and there was probably no great movement of peoples. They came in dribblets and trickled over many decades, if not centuries, through the mountains that guard the north-western frontiers of India. They were a pastoral people and cattle seem to have been their chief wealth even though their earliest verses contain many references to agriculture. Unlike the

people of Mohenjodaro, they had probably learnt the use of iron and tamed the horse. These gave them superiority in warfare over the people of Mohenjodaro and made Aryan conquest of India possible.

The Aryans settled down in villages and began to develop the pattern of rural life which has remained basically unchanged to this day. Their social institutions, religious beliefs and forms of worship were influenced by what they found prevalent in India but they in turn influenced the life of the indigenous people. It is not certain if the Aryans brought the Vedas with them or composed the Vedic hymns after their arrival in India. In any case, for the vast majority of the Indian people, the Vedas became the repository of religious faith. In fact, belief in God and the Vedas and in the transmigration of the soul are almost the only articles of faith for a Hindu. The Aryan influence is also seen in the occupational division of society into four major castes and in the fourfold division of the life of the individual. The new Aryan society which developed in India between 1500 B.C. and 1000 B.C. is to this day the basis of the life of the Hindus who constitute the vast majority of the Indian people.

There are no regular histories of this early phase of Aryan settlement in India. A picture of the life of the people can, however, be obtained from the epics and other literature. Of the epics, the most important are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The story of the Ramayana refers to an earlier period when the Aryans had not yet achieved their dominion over the whole of India. In fact, some regard it as a record of the Aryan incursion into south India. There is

mention of cities built by Aryans, but it is clear that the most magnificent cities were built and inhabited by non-Aryan people. The majority of the Aryans had settled down to an agricultural life but there was still room for pioneering activity along the fringes of the Aryan settlement.

By the time of the Mahabharata, practically the whole of India had come under Aryan sway. There were magnificent cities built by the Aryans but the majority of the people still lived in the villages. The pattern of life was not very different from what obtains to this day. Trade and commerce had increased but it is interesting to note that even at this stage, the Aryans depended on non-Aryan architects and engineers for some of their most ambitious projects.

Rama and Krishna dominate these two epics but their historical period has not yet been definitely fixed. In fact, it is not even certain whether Rama was an individual or the apotheosis of kingship. With regard to Krishna there are similar doubts. It is, however, interesting to note that both Rama and Krishna were conceived as dark in complexion. The Aryans were fair and in the earlier phases of their settlement in India, extremely proud of the fact. The contempt with which they referred to their dark-skinned enemies would bring joy to the most fanatic votary of white supremacy. How and why they accepted the dark-skinned Rama and Krishna as heroes and gods is not known. It may however be regarded as an act of supreme statesmanship which went a long way in winning over the native inhabitants of the land.

As life became more settled, social forms became

more rigid. The occupational division of earlier times slowly ossified into caste. There was for long a struggle for primacy between the Brahman or the priestly class and the Kshattriya or the warrior class. In course of time, the Brahman won and established his domination over the whole of society. The simpler naturalistic religion of the Vedas gradually gave place to Brahmanism with its emphasis on a priestly class and elaborate rituals of worship. Earlier Aryan polity was largely elective and the society democratic. In course of time, they gave place to states that were monarchic and societies that were hierarchical both in spirit and form.

With the age of the Buddha and Mahavira we come into historical times. Round about the sixth century B.C., there appears to have been a great intellectual and spiritual ferment throughout the whole of the then known world. Confucius in China and Zoroaster in Iran were near contemporaries of the Buddha. This was also the period which saw an outburst of spiritual fervour among the Jews of Palestine. Whatever be the reasons for this spiritual efflorescence it led to religious movements which have had far-reaching influence on the history of man. We are not concerned in this brief study with the influence of Confucius or Zoroaster. It is enough to point out that the impact of the Buddha has been one of the most significant in the history of man. His was perhaps the first attempt to solve the mystery of existence in rational terms and without recourse to mysticism. He emphasised good conduct and taught the eightfold way by which man can live at peace with his fellows. He broke away from ritualism and the rigours of caste which had become

characteristic of Indian society. His influence did not remain confined to India but in course of time spread throughout the world.

The first definite date which helps to fix Indian chronology was the invasion of Alexander in 326 B.C. Alexander did not penetrate far into India but as a result of his invasion, a great deal of information about India became available to the western world. He had brought with him a number of Greek philosophers, scientists and historians. Aristotle, it is said, wished to discuss with an Indian philosopher the Indian solution to problems of metaphysics. There is a legend that Alexander took away with him a number of Indian scholars to satisfy the wish of his teacher. It is certain that the earlier contacts between western Asia and India were further developed as a result of Alexander's invasion.

The first empire in Indian history was established almost immediately after Alexander's withdrawal. There are earlier references to empires which unified India but these are based on myth and legend and we have no historical record about them. Chandragupta Maurya was on the other hand a historical figure and organised a vast empire which stretched from Afghanistan to the borders of Bengal. He maintained a large and well-equipped army and introduced the system of government by commissions. Separate commissions and committees were in charge of clearly demarcated functions of administration. Special measures were taken for the development of agriculture, crafts and commerce. He received envoys from foreign kings and we have in the report of Megasthenes, the Greek, the first foreign account of Indian life and institutions.

It is held that many of the innovations in government were introduced by the Prime Minister, Chanakya, who has been identified with Kautilya, the author of the first Indian treatise on economics and politics.

Under Chandragupta's grandson, Asoka, almost the whole of India was brought under the sway of the Mauryan empire. Asoka has left edicts in different parts of India containing exhortations to his people. He is reported to have undertaken only one war, namely the conquest of Kalinga or modern Orissa. His empire is however believed to have been larger in size than that of his father or grandfather. There is no record of how this expansion of the empire took place. One explanation offered is that his empire was federal and many of the smaller border states acceded voluntarily to the federation.

Asoka's rule may be described as benevolent paternalism. He looked upon himself as the guardian not only of the wealth and material prosperity of his subjects but also of their moral and spiritual welfare. Asoka was a great champion of the Buddhist faith and did everything he could to expand the influence of Buddhism in India and outside. There was however no discrimination against men who followed other religions and in one of his famous edicts, Asoka declared that a truly religious man has regard for all faiths. It was due mainly to his patronage that Buddhism spread beyond the shores of India. There are records of missions sent by him to Ceylon, western Asia and Egypt and it has been suggested that his missions also visited Burma, China and Japan.

After Asoka's death, the Mauryan empire gradually

broke up. The reasons for the decay of the Mauryan power are not fully known. One explanation offered is that fresh invasions from the north-west took place at a time when India was militarily weak. This weakness, it is said, was due partly to the long period of peace enjoyed under the Mauryas and partly to the influence of Buddhism which discouraged martial activities. Whatever be the reason, it is believed that the first incursion of the Bactrians into the Punjab took place round about 200 B.C. It was not that there was no resistance from India. There is evidence that Pushyamitra pushed back one of the Bactro-Greek kings, but the repulse was temporary. This is proved by the existence of a number of Greek principalities in north-west India about this time. One of the most well-known of these Indo-Greek kings is Menander, popularly known in Buddhist mythology as Milinda.

The inter-regnum between the fall of the Mauryan empire in the second century B.C. and the rise of the Gupta empire in the fourth century A. D. was one of turmoil and unrest, at least so far as north India was concerned. With the weakening of the imperial power, new tribes were continually pouring in. After the Graeco-Bactrians followed in quick succession the Indo-Parthians, the Sakas and the Kushanas. There was a brief interlude of comparative peace and consolidation with the establishment of the empire of Kanishka in A.D. 78. He was a Buddhist, had his capital in Purushapura or modern Peshawar and ruled a vast empire from central Asia to the heart of India. It is interesting to note that a statue of Kanishka clad in what corresponds to the modern achkan and pyjama

is the first evidence we have of the introduction of this dress in India.

After the break-up of Kanishka's empire, there was again a period when small principalities were continually fighting one another. Some of these rulers were foreign in origin but were quickly absorbed in the Indian social hierarchy. The period of internecine war and disorder came to an end only with the establishment of the Gupta empire. Like earlier periods of imperial consolidation, this also was marked by a great cultural efflorescence which has led some people to describe the Gupta period as the golden age of Indian history. After the preceding unrest and uncertainty, the establishment of law and order under the Gupta's must have come as a great boon. Agriculture and commerce flourished and there was an era of peace and prosperity throughout the land. There were also great developments in almost all forms of art. Some of the finest Indian sculptures date back to this period. This was also one of the greatest periods of Sanskrit poetry. Samudra Gupta was not only a great conqueror but a great patron of music and scholarship. Chandra Gupta II, popularly known as Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya is held to be the most distinguished king of ancient times. Kalidasa, perhaps the greatest name in Sanskrit literature, is believed to have been his court-poet.

Buddhism had suffered a setback after the fall of the Mauryan empire. By the time of the Guptas, it was no longer the predominant religion of the land. The Guptas were patrons of Hinduism but they did not persecute the Buddhists. In fact, both kings and the common people did equal honour to the Buddhist

saints and monks and to the priests and gods of Hinduism. Life was simple but spacious. The state maintained law and order but the laws were mild and bore lightly on the people. We have an interesting account of the life of the times in the writings of Fahien, the first of a famous series of Chinese pilgrims who came to India as the homeland of Buddhism.

Like the earlier empires, the Gupta empire also broke down partly on account of internal weakness and partly because of attacks by trans-Indian tribes. India was again divided into a number of small principalities. It has been suggested that the break-up of the Gupta empire was due to the Huna invasion of India. Because there was no unified central power to oppose the invaders, they came in increasingly larger numbers. Because they appeared in larger numbers, the central authority was further weakened. There were temporary checks to these invasions but the invaders continued to pour in, in spite of the opposition of local rulers. Internecine struggles not only weakened them but also prevented a sustained and united stand against the foreign foes.

In early seventh century, King Harsha again succeeded in establishing a unified empire in north India. His efforts to extend his sway to the south were however checked by Pulakeshin. There were thus two powerful empires in the north and the south which offered peace and security to the people. With the establishment of law and order, the arts of peace again flourished. Agriculture and crafts and trades prospered. The restoration of peace was accompanied by general prosperity throughout India. Buddhism had lost its pre-eminence but it was still widely prevalent. Harsha