

INDIAN CULTURE AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

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In considering Indian civilisation and its renaissance, I suggested that a powerful new creation in all fields was our great need, the meaning of the renaissance and the one way of preserving the civilisation. Confronted with the huge rush of modern life and thought, invaded by another dominant civilisation almost her opposite or inspired at least with a very different spirit to her own, India can only survive by confronting this raw, new, aggressive, powerful world with fresh diviner creations of her own spirit, cast in the mould of her own spiritual ideals. She must meet it by solving its greater problems,—which she cannot avoid, even if such avoidance could be thought desirable,—in her own way, through solutions arising out of her own being and from her own deepest and largest knowledge. In that connection I spoke of the acceptance and assimilation from the West of whatever in its knowledge, ideas, powers was assimilable, compatible with her spirit, reconcilable with her ideals, valuable for a new statement of life. This question of external influence and new creation from within is of very considerable importance; it calls for more than a passing mention. Especially it is necessary to form some more precise idea of what we mean by acceptance and of the actual effect of assimilation; for this is a problem of pressing incidence in which we have to get our ideas clear and fix firmly and seeingly on our line of solution.

But it is possible to hold that while new creation—and not a motionless sticking to old forms—is our one way of life and salvation, no acceptance of anything western is called for, we can find in ourselves all that we need; no considerable acceptance is possible without creating a breach which will bring pouring in the rest of the occidental deluge. That, if I have not misread it, is the sense of a comment on these articles in a Bengali literary periodical¹ which holds up the ideal of a new creation to arise from within entirely on national lines and in the national spirit. The writer takes his stand on a position which is common ground, that humanity is one, but different peoples are variant soul-forms of the common humanity. When we find the oneness, the principle of variation is not destroyed but finds rather its justification; it is not by abolishing ourselves, our own special temperament and power, that we can get at the living oneness, but by following it out and raising it to its highest possibilities of freedom and action. That is a truth which I have myself insisted on repeatedly, with regard to the modern idea and attempt at some kind of political unification of humanity, as a very important part of the psychological sense of social development, and again in this question of a particular people's life and culture in all its parts and manifestations. I have insisted that uniformity is not a real but a dead unity: uniformity

kills life while real unity, if well founded, becomes vigorous and fruitful by a rich energy of variation. But the writer adds that the idea of taking over what is best in occidental civilisation is a false notion without a living meaning; to leave the bad and take the good sounds very well, but this bad and this good are not separable in that way: they are the inextricably mingled growth of one being, not separate blocks of a child's toy house set side by side and easily detachable,—and what is meant then by cutting out and taking one element and leaving the rest? If we take over a western ideal, we take it over from a living form which strikes us; we imitate that form, are subjugated by its spirit and natural tendencies, and the good and bad intertwined in the living growth come in upon us together and take united possession. In fact, we have been for a long time so imitating the West, trying to become like it or partly like it and have fortunately failed, for that would have meant creating a bastard or twy-natured culture; but twy-natured, as Tennyson makes his Lucretius say, is no-natured and a bastard culture is no sound, truth-living culture. An entire return upon ourselves is our only way of salvation.

There is much to be said here, it seems to me, both in the way of confirmation and of modification. But let us be clear about the meaning of our terms. That the attempt in the last century which still in some directions continues,—to imitate European civilisation and to make ourselves a sort of brown Englishmen, to throw our ancient culture into the dust-bin and put on the livery or uniform of the West was a mistaken and illegitimate endeavour, I heartily agree. At the same time a certain amount of imitation, a great amount even, was, one might almost say, a biological necessity, at any rate a psychological necessity of the situation. Not only when a lesser meets a greater culture, but when a culture which has fallen into a state of comparative inactivity, sleep, contraction, is faced with, still more when it receives the direct shock of a waking, active, tremendously creative civilisation, finds thrown upon it novel and successful powers and functionings, sees an immense succession and development of new ideas and formations, it is impelled by the very instinct of life to take over these ideas and forms, to annex, to enrich itself, even to imitate and reproduce, and in one way or in another take large account and advantage of these new forces and opportunities. That is a phenomenon which has happened repeatedly in history, in a greater or a lesser degree, in part or in totality. But if there is only a mechanical imitation, if there is a subordination and servitude, the inactive or weaker culture perishes, it is swallowed up by the invading leviathan. And even short of that, in proportion as there is a leaning towards these undesirable things, it languishes, is unsuccessful in its attempt at annexation, loses besides the power of its own spirit. To recover its own centre, find its own base and do whatever it has to do in its own strength and genius is certainly the one way of salvation. But even then a certain amount of acceptance, of forms too,—some imitation, if all taking over of forms must be called imitation,—is inevitable. We have, for instance, taken over in literature the form of the novel, the short story, the critical essay among a number of other adoptions, in science not only the discoveries and inventions, but the method and instrumentation of inductive research, in politics the press, the platform, the forms and habits of agitation, the public association. I do not suppose that anyone seriously thinks of renouncing or exiling these modern additions to our

life,—though they are not all of them by any means unmixed blessings,—on the ground that they are foreign importations. But the question is what we do with them and whether we can bring them to be instruments and by some characteristic modification moulds of our own spirit. If so, there has been an acceptance and an assimilation; if not, there has been merely a helpless imitation.

But the taking over of forms is not the heart of the question. When I speak of acceptance and assimilation, I am thinking of certain influences, ideas, energies brought forward with a great living force by Europe, which can awaken and enrich our own cultural activities and cultural being if we succeed in dealing with them with a victorious power and originality, if we can bring them into our characteristic way of being and transform them by its shaping action. That was in fact what our own ancestors did, never losing their originality, never effacing their uniqueness, because always vigorously creating from within, with whatever knowledge or artistic suggestion from outside they thought worthy of acceptance or capable of an Indian treatment. But I would certainly repel the formula of taking the good and leaving the bad as a crudity, one of those facile formulas which catch the superficial mind but are unsound in conception. Obviously, if we "take over" anything, the good and the bad in it will come in together pell-mell. If we take over for instance that terrible, monstrous and compelling thing, that giant Asuric creation, European industrialism,—unfortunately we are being forced by circumstances to do it,—whether we take it in its form or its principle, we may under more favourable conditions develop by it our wealth and economic resources, but assuredly we shall get too its social discords and moral plagues and cruel problems, and I do not see how we shall avoid becoming the slaves of the economic aim in life and losing the spiritual principle of our culture.

But, besides, these terms good and bad in this connection mean nothing definite, give us no help. If I must use them, where they can have only a relative significance, in a matter not of ethics, but of an interchange between life and life, I must first give them this general significance that whatever helps me to find myself more intimately, nobly, with a greater and sounder possibility of self-expressive creation, is good; whatever carries me out of my orientation, whatever weakens and belittles my power, richness, breadth and height of self-being, is bad for me. If the distinction is so understood, it will be evident, I think, to any serious and critical mind which tries to fathom things, that the real point is not the taking over of this or that formal detail, which has only a sign value, for example, widow remarriage, but a dealing with great effective ideas, such as are the ideas, in the external field of life, of social and political liberty, equality, democracy. If I accept any of these ideas it is not because they are modern or European, which is in itself no recommendation, but because they are human, because they present fruitful viewpoints to the spirit, because they are things of the greatest importance in the future development of the life of man. What I mean by acceptance of the effective idea of democracy,—the thing itself, never fully worked out, was present as an element in ancient Indian as in ancient European polity and society,—is that I find its inclusion in our future way of living, in some shape, to be a necessity of our growth. What I mean by assimilation, is that we must not take it crudely in the European

forms, but must go back to whatever corresponds to it, illumines its sense, justifies its highest purport in our own spiritual conception of life and existence, and in that light work out its extent, degree, form, relation to other ideas, application. To everything I would apply the same principle, to each in its own kind, after its proper Dharma, in its right measure of importance, its spiritual, intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, dynamic utility.

I take it as a self-evident law of individual being applicable to group-individuality, that it is neither desirable nor possible to exclude everything that comes in to us from outside. I take it as an equally self-evident law that a living organism, which grows not by accretion but by self-development and assimilation, must recast the things it takes in to suit the law and form and characteristic action of its biological or psychological body, reject what would be deleterious or poisonous to it,—and what is that but the non-assimilable?—take only what can be turned into useful stuff of self-expression. It is, to use an apt Sanskrit phrase employed in the Bengali tongue, *ātmāsātkarāṇa*, an assimilative appropriation, a making the thing settle into oneself and turn into characteristic form of our self-being. The impossibility of entire rejection arises from the very fact of our being a term of diversity in a unity, not really separate from all other existence, but in relation with all that surrounds us, because in life this relation expresses itself very largely by a process of interchange. The undesirability of total rejection, even if it were entirely possible, arises from the fact that interchange with the environment is necessary to a healthy persistence and growth; the living organism which rejects all such interchange, would speedily languish and die of lethargy and inanition.

Mentally, vitally and physically I do not grow by a pure self-development from within in a virgin isolation; I am not a separate self-existent being proceeding from a past to a new becoming in a world of its own where no one is but itself, nothing works but its own inner powers and musings. There is in every individualised existence a double action, a self-development from within which is its greatest intimate power of being and by which it is itself, and a reception of impacts from outside which it has to accommodate to its own individuality and make into material of self-growth and self-power. The two operations are not mutually exclusive, nor is the second harmful to the first except when the inner genius is too weak to deal victoriously with its environmental world; on the contrary the reception of impacts stimulates in a vigorous and healthy being its force for self-development and is an aid to a greater and more pronouncedly characteristic self-determination. As we rise in the scale we find that the power of original development from within, of conscious self-determination increases more and more, while in those who live most powerfully in themselves it reaches striking, sometimes almost divine proportions. But at the same time we see that the allied power of seizing upon the impacts and suggestions of the outside world grows in proportion; those who live most powerfully in themselves, can also most largely use the world and all its material for the Self,—and, it must be added, most successfully help the world and enrich it out of their own being. The man who most finds and lives from the inner self, can most embrace the universal and become one with it; the *svarāt*, independent, self-possessed and self-ruler, can most be the *samrāt*, possessor and shaper of the world in which he lives, can

most too grow one with all in the Atman. That is the truth this developing existence teaches us, and it is one of the greatest secrets of the old Indian spiritual knowledge.

Therefore to live in one's self, determining one's self-expression from one's own centre of being in accordance with one's own law of being, svadharma, is the first necessity. Not to be able to do that means disintegration of the life; not to do it sufficiently means languor, weakness, inefficiency, the danger of being oppressed by the environing forces and overborne; not to be able to do it wisely, intuitively, with a strong use of one's inner material and inner powers, means confusion, disorder and finally decline and loss of vitality. But also not to be able to use the material that the life around offers us, not to lay hold on it with an intuitive selection and a strong mastering assimilation is a serious deficiency and a danger to the existence. To a healthy individuality the external impact or entering energy, idea, influence may act as an irritant awakening the inner being to a sense of discord, incompatibility or peril, and then there is a struggle, an impulse and process of rejection; but even in this struggle, in this process of rejection there is some resultant of change and growth, some increment of the power and material of life; the energies of the being are stimulated and helped by the attack. It may act as a stimulus, awakening a new action of the self-consciousness and a sense of fresh possibility,—by comparison, by suggestion, by knocking at locked doors and arousing slumbering energies. It may come in as a possible material which has then to be reshaped to a form of the inner energy, harmonised with the inner being, reinterpreted in the light of its own characteristic self-consciousness. In a great change of environment or a close meeting with a mass of invading influences all these processes work together and there is possibly much temporary perplexity and difficulty, many doubtful and perilous movements, but also the opportunity of a great self-developing transformation or an immense and vigorous renaissance.

The group-soul differs from the individual only in being more self-sufficient by reason of its being an assemblage of many individual selves and capable within of many group variations. There is a constant inner interchange which may for a long time suffice to maintain the vitality, growth, power of developing activity, even when there is a restricted interchange with the rest of humanity. Greek civilisation,—after growing under the influence of Egyptian, Phoenician and other Oriental influences,—separated itself sharply from the non-Hellenic "barbarian" cultures and was able for some centuries to live within itself by a rich variation and internal interchange. There was the same phenomenon in ancient India of a culture living intensely from within in a profound differentiation from all surrounding cultures, its vitality rendered possible by an even greater richness of internal interchange and variation. Chinese civilisation offers a third instance. But at no time did Indian culture exclude altogether external influences; on the contrary a very great power of selective assimilation, subordination and transformation of external elements was a characteristic of its processes; it protected itself from any considerable or overwhelming invasion, but laid hands on and included whatever struck or impressed it and in the act of inclusion subjected it to a characteristic change which harmonised the new element with the spirit of its own culture. But nowadays any such strong separative aloofness as distinguished the ancient

civilisations, is no longer possible; the races of mankind have come too close to each other, are being thrown together in a certain unavoidable life unity. We are confronted with the more difficult problem of living in the full stress of this greater interaction and imposing on its impacts the law of our being.

Any attempt to remain exactly what we were before the European invasion or to ignore in future the claims of a modern environment and necessity is foredoomed to an obvious failure. However much we may deplore some of the characteristics of that intervening period in which we were dominated by the western standpoint or move away from the standpoint back to our own characteristic way of seeing existence, we cannot get rid of a certain element of inevitable change it has produced upon us, any more than a man can go back in life to what he was some years ago and recover entire and unaffected a past mentality. Time and its influences have not only passed over him, but carried him forward in their stream. We cannot go backward to a past form of our being, but we can go forward to a large repossession of ourselves in which we shall make a better, more living, more real, more self-possessed use of the intervening experience. We can still think in the essential sense of the great spirit and ideals of our past, but the form of our thinking, our speaking, our development of them has changed by the very fact of new thought and experience; we see them not only in the old, but in new lights, we support them by the added strength of new viewpoints, even the old words we use acquire for us a modified, more extended and richer significance. Again, we cannot be "ourselves alone" in any narrow formal sense, because we must necessarily take account of the modern world around us and get full knowledge of it, otherwise we cannot live. But all such taking account of things, all added knowledge modifies our subjective being. My mind, with all that depends on it, is modified by what it observes and works upon, modified when it takes in from it fresh materials of thought, modified when it is wakened by its stimulus to new activities, modified even when it denies and rejects; for even an old thought or truth which I affirm against an opposing idea, becomes a new thought to me in the effort of affirmation and rejection, clothes itself with new aspects and issues. My life is modified in the same way by the life influences it has to encounter and confront. Finally, we cannot avoid dealing with the great governing ideas and problems of the modern world. The modern world is still mainly European, a world dominated by the European mind and western civilisation. We claim to set right this undue preponderance, to reassert the Asiatic and, for ourselves, the Indian mind and to preserve and develop the great values of Asiatic and of Indian civilisation. But the Asiatic or the Indian mind can only assert itself successfully by meeting these problems and by giving them a solution which will justify its own ideals and spirit.

The principle I have affirmed results both from the necessity of our nature and the necessity of things, of life,—fidelity to our own spirit, nature, ideals, the creation of our own characteristic forms in the new age and the new environment, but also a strong and masterful dealing with external influences which need not be and in the nature of the situation cannot be a total rejection; therefore there must be an element of successful assimilation. There remains the very difficult question of the application of the principle,—the degree, the way, the guiding perceptions. To

think that out we must look at each province of culture and, keeping always firm hold on a perception of what the Indian spirit is and the Indian ideal is, see how they can work upon the present situation and possibilities in each of these provinces and lead to a new victorious creation. In such thinking it will not do to be too dogmatic. Each capable Indian mind must think it out or, better, work it out in its own light and power,—as the Bengal artists are working it out in their own sphere,—and contribute some illumination or effectuation. The spirit of the Indian renascence will take care of the rest, that power of the universal Time-Spirit which has begun to move in our midst for the creation of a new and greater India.