

The Discovery of India

The Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus Valley Civilization, of which impressive remains have been discovered at Mohenjo Daro in Sind and at Harappa in the Western Punjab, is the earliest picture that we have of India's past. These excavations have revolutionised the conception of ancient history. Unfortunately, a few years after this work of excavation began in these areas, it was stopped, and for the last thirteen years or so nothing significant has been done. The stoppage was initially due to the great depression of the early 'thirties. Lack of funds was pleaded, although there was never any lack for the display of imperial pomp and splendour. The coming of World War II effectively stopped all activity, and even the work of preservation of all that has been dug out has been rather neglected. Twice I have visited Mohenjo Daro, in 1931 and 1936. During my second visit I found that the rain and the dry sandy air had already injured many of the buildings that had been dug out. After being preserved for over five thousand years under a covering of sand and soil, they were rapidly disintegrating owing to exposure, and very little was being done to preserve these priceless relics of ancient times. The officer of the archaeological department in charge of the place complained that he was allowed practically no funds or other help or material to enable him to keep the excavated buildings as they were. What has happened during these last eight years I do not know, but I imagine that the wearing away has continued, and within another few years many of the characteristic features of Mohenjo Daro will have disappeared.

That is a tragedy for which there is no excuse, and something that can never be replaced will have gone, leaving only pictures and written descriptions to remind us of what it was.

Mohenjo Daro and Harappa are far apart. It was sheer chance that led to the discovery of these ruins in these two places. There can be little doubt that there lie many such buried cities and other remains of the handiwork of ancient man in between these two areas; that, in fact, this civilization was widespread over large parts of India, certainly of North India. A time may come when this work of uncovering the distant past of India is again taken in hand and far-reaching discoveries are made. Already remains of this civilization have been found as far apart as Kathiawar in the west and the Ambala district of the Punjab, and there is reason for believing that it spread to the Gangetic Valley. Thus it was something much more than an Indus Valley civilization. The inscriptions found at Mohenjo Daro have so far not been fully deciphered.

But what we know, even thus far, is of the utmost significance. The Indus Valley civilization, as we find it, was highly developed and must have taken thousands of years to reach that stage. It was surprisingly enough, a predominantly secular civilization, and the religious element, though present, did not dominate the scene. It was clearly also the precursor of later cultural periods in India.

Sir John Marshall tells us: ‘One thing that stands out clear and unmistakable both at Mohenjo Daro and Harappa is that the civilization hitherto revealed at these two places is not an incipient civilization, but one already age-old and stereotyped on Indian soil, with many millenniums of human endeavour behind it. Thus India must henceforth be recognised, along with Persia, Mesopotamia and Egypt, as one of the most important areas where the civilizing processes were initiated and developed.’ And, again, he says that ‘the Punjab and Sind, if not other parts of India as well, were enjoying an advanced and singularly uniform civilization of their own, closely akin, but in some respects even superior, to that of contemporary Mesopotamia and Egypt.’

These people of the Indus Valley had many contacts with the Sumerian civilization of that period, and there is even some evidence of an Indian colony, probably of merchants, at Akkad. ‘Manufactures from the Indus cities reached even the markets on the Tigris and Euphrates. Conversely, a few Sumerian devices in art, Mesopotamia toilet sets, and a cylinder seal were copied on the Indus. Trade was not confined to raw materials and luxury articles; fish,

regularly imported from the Arabian Sea coasts, augmented the food supplies of Mohenjo Daro.'¹

Cotton was used for textiles even at that remote period in India. Marshall compares and contrasts the Indus Valley civilization with those of contemporary Egypt and Mesopotamia: 'Thus, to mention only a few salient points, the use of cotton for textiles was exclusively restricted at this period to India and was not extended to the western world until 2,000 or 3,000 years later. Again, there is nothing that we know of in prehistoric Egypt or Mesopotamia or anywhere else in western Asia to compare with the well-built baths and commodious houses of the citizens of Mohenjo Daro. In these countries much money and thought were lavished on the building of magnificent temples for the Gods and on the palaces and tombs of kings, but the rest of the people seemingly had to content themselves with insignificant dwellings of mud. In the Indus Valley the picture is reversed and the finest structures are those erected for the convenience of the citizens.' These public and private baths, as well as the excellent drainage system we find at Mohenjo Daro, are the first of their kind yet discovered anywhere. There are also two-storeyed private houses, made of baked bricks, with bath-rooms and a porter's lodge, as well as tenements.

Yet another quotation from Marshall, the acknowledged authority on the Indus Valley civilization, who was himself responsible for the excavations. He says that 'equally peculiar to the Indus Valley and stamped with an individual character of their own are its art and its religion. Nothing that we know of in other countries at this period bears any resemblance, in point of style, to the faience models of rams, dogs, and other animals, or to the intaglio engravings on the seals, the best of which—notably the humped and shorthorn bulls—are distinguished by a breadth of treatment and a feeling for a line and plastic form that have rarely been surpassed in glyptic art; nor would it be possible, until the classic age of Greece, to match the exquisitely supple modelling of the two human statuettes from Harappa ... In the religion of the Indus people there is much, of course, that might be paralleled in other countries. This is true of every prehistoric and most historic religions as well. But, taken as a whole, their religion is so characteristically Indian as hardly to be distinguished from still living Hinduism.'

We find thus this Indus Valley civilization connected and trading with its sister civilizations of Persia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, and superior to them in some ways. It was an urban civilization, where the merchant class was wealthy and evidently played an important role. The streets, lined with stalls and what were probably small shops, give the impression of an Indian bazaar of today. Professor Childe says: ‘It would seem to follow that the craftsmen of the Indus cities were, to a large extent, producing “for the market”. What, if any, form of currency and standard of value had been accepted by society to facilitate the exchange of commodities is, however, uncertain. Magazines attached to many spacious and commodious private houses mark their owners as merchants. Their number and size indicate a strong and prosperous merchant community.’ ‘A surprising wealth of ornaments of gold, silver, precious stones and faience, of vessels of beaten copper and of metal implements and weapons, has been collected from the ruins.’ Childe adds that ‘well-planned streets and a magnificent system of drains, regularly cleared out, reflect the vigilance of some regular municipal government. Its authority was strong enough to secure the observance of town-planning by-laws and the maintenance of approved lines for streets and lanes over several reconstructions rendered necessary by floods.’²

Between this Indus Valley civilization and today in India there are many gaps and periods about which we know little. The links joining one period to another are not always evident, and a very great deal has of course happened and innumerable changes have taken place. But there is always an underlying sense of continuity, of an unbroken chain which joins modern India to the far distant period of six or seven thousand years ago when the Indus Valley civilization probably began. It is surprising how much there is in Mohenjo Daro and Harappa which reminds one of persisting traditions and habits—popular ritual, craftsmanship, even some fashions in dress. Much of this influenced Western Asia.

It is interesting to note that at this dawn of India’s story, she does not appear as a puny infant, but already grown up in many ways. She is not oblivious of life’s ways, lost in dreams of a vague and unrealizable supernatural world, but has made considerable technical progress in the arts and amenities of life, creating not only things of beauty, but also the utilitarian and more typical emblems of modern civilization—good baths and drainage systems.

The Coming of the Aryans

Who were these people of the Indus Valley civilization and whence had they come? We do not know yet. It is quite possible, and even probable, that their culture was an indigenous culture and its roots and offshoots may be found even in southern India. Some scholars find an essential similarity between these people and the Dravidian races and culture of south India. Even if there was some ancient migration to India, this could only have taken place some thousands of years before the date assigned to Mohenjo Daro. For all practical purposes we can treat them as the indigenous inhabitants of India.

What happened to the Indus Valley civilization and how did it end? Some people (among them, Gordon Childe) say that there was a sudden end to it due to an unexplained catastrophe. The river Indus is well-known for its mighty floods which overwhelm and wash away cities and villages. Or a changing climate might lead to a progressive desiccation of the land and the encroachment of the desert over cultivated areas. The ruins of Mohenjo Daro are themselves evidence of layer upon layer of sand being deposited, raising the ground level of the city and compelling the inhabitants to build higher on the old foundations. Some excavated houses have the appearance of two or three-storeyed structures, and yet they represent a periodic raising of the walls to keep pace with the rising level. The province of Sind we know was rich and fertile in ancient times, but from medieval times onwards it has been largely desert.

It is probable, therefore, that these climatic changes had a marked effect on the people of those areas and their ways of living. And in any event climatic changes must have only affected a relatively small part of the area of this widespread urban civilization, which, as we have now reason to believe, spread right up to the Gangetic Valley, and possibly even beyond. We have really not sufficient data to judge. Sand, which probably overwhelmed and covered some of these ancient cities, also preserved them; while other cities and evidences of the old civilization gradually decayed and went to pieces in the course of ages. Perhaps future archaeological discoveries might disclose more links with later ages.

While there is a definite sense of continuity between the Indus Valley civilization and later periods, there is also a kind of break or a gap, not only in

point of time but also in the kind of civilization that came next. This latter was probably more agricultural to begin with, though towns existed and there was some kind of city life also. This emphasis on the agricultural aspect may have been given to it by the newcomers, the Aryans who poured into India in successive waves from the north-west.

The Aryan migrations are supposed to have taken place about a thousand years after the Indus Valley period; and yet it is possible that there was no considerable gap and tribes and peoples came to India from the north-west from time to time, as they did in later ages, and became absorbed in India. We might say that the first great cultural synthesis and fusion took place between the incoming Aryans and the Dravidians, who were probably the representatives of the Indus Valley civilization. Out of this synthesis and fusion grew the Indian races and the basic Indian culture, which had distinctive elements of both. In the ages that followed there came many other races: Iranians, Greeks, Parthians, Bactrians, Scythians, Huns, Turks (before Islam), early Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians; they came, made a difference, and were absorbed. India was, according to Dodwell, ‘infinitely absorbent like the ocean.’ It is odd to think of India, with her caste system and exclusiveness, having this astonishing inclusive capacity to absorb foreign races and cultures. Perhaps it was due to this that she retained her vitality and rejuvenated herself from time to time. The Muslims, when they came, were also powerfully affected by her. ‘The foreigners (Muslim Turks),’ says Vincent Smith, ‘like their forerunners the Sakas and the Yueh-chi, universally yielded to the wonderful assimilative power of Hinduism, and rapidly became Hinduised.’

What is Hinduism?

In this quotation Vincent Smith has used the words ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hinduised’. I do not think it is correct to use them in this way unless they are used in the widest sense of Indian culture. They are apt to mislead today when they are associated with a much narrower, and specifically religious, concept. The word ‘Hindu’ does not occur at all in our ancient literature. The first reference to it in an Indian book is, I am told, in a *Tantrik* work of the eighth century AC, where

'Hindu' means a people and not the followers of a particular religion. But it is clear that the word is a very old one, as it occurs in the Avesta and in old Persian. It was used then and for a thousand years or more later by the peoples of western and central Asia for India, or rather for the people living on the other side of the Indus river. The word is clearly derived from Sindhu, the old, as well as the present, Indian name for the Indus. From this Sindhu came the words Hindu and Hindustan, as well as Indus and India.

The famous Chinese pilgrim I-tsing, who came to India in the seventh century AC, writes in his record of travels that the 'northern tribes', that is the people of Central Asia, called India 'Hindu' (Hsin-tu) but, he adds, 'this is not at all a common name and the most suitable name for India is the Noble Land (Aryadesha).' The use of the word 'Hindu' in connection with a particular religion is of very late occurrence.

The old inclusive term for religion in India was *Arya Dharma*. Dharma really means something more than religion. It is from a root word which means to hold together; it is the inmost constitution of a thing, the law of its inner being. It is an ethical concept which includes the moral code, righteousness, and the whole range of man's duties and responsibilities. Arya dharma would include all the faiths (Vedic and non-Vedic) that originated in India; it was used by Buddhists and Jains as well as by those who accepted the Vedas. Buddha always called his way to salvation the 'Aryan Path'.

The expression *Vedic dharma* was also used in ancient times to signify more particularly and exclusively all those philosophies, moral teachings, ritual and practices, which were supposed to derive from the Vedas. Thus all those who acknowledged the general authority of the Vedas could be said to belong to the Vedic dharma.

Sanatana dharma, meaning the ancient religion, could be applied to any of the ancient Indian faiths (including Buddhism and Jainism), but the expression has been more or less monopolized today by some orthodox sections among the Hindus who claims to follow the ancient faith.

Buddhism and Jainism were certainly not Hinduism or even the Vedic dharma. Yet they arose in India and were integral parts of Indian life, culture and philosophy. A Buddhist or Jain in India is a hundred per cent product of Indian thought and culture, yet neither is a Hindu by faith. It is, therefore, entirely

misleading to refer to Indian culture as Hindu culture. In later ages this culture was greatly influenced by the impact of Islam, and yet it remained basically and distinctively Indian. Today it is experiencing in a hundred ways the powerful effect of the industrial civilization, which rose in the West, and it is difficult to say with any precision what the outcome will be.

Hinduism, as a faith, is vague, amorphous, many-sided, all things to all men. It is hardly possible to define it, or indeed to say definitely whether it is a religion or not, in the usual sense of the word. In its present form, and even in the past, it embraces many beliefs and practices, from the highest to the lowest, often opposed to or contradicting each other. Its essential spirit seems to be to live and let live. Mahatma Gandhi has attempted to define it: 'If I were asked to define the Hindu creed, I should simply say: Search after truth through nonviolent means. A man may not believe in God and still call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after truth ... Hinduism is the religion of truth. Truth is God. Denial of God we have known. Denial of truth we have not known.' Truth and non-violence, so says Gandhi: but many eminent and undoubted Hindus say that non-violence, as Gandhi understands it, is no essential part of the Hindu creed. We thus have truth left by itself as the distinguishing mark of Hinduism. That, of course, is no definition at all.

It is, therefore, incorrect and undesirable to use 'Hindu' or 'Hinduism' for Indian culture, even with reference to the distant past, although the various aspects of thought, as embodied in ancient writings, were the dominant expression of that culture. Much more is it incorrect to use those terms, in that sense, today. So long as the old faith and philosophy were chiefly a way of life and an outlook on the world, they were largely synonymous with Indian culture; but when a more rigid religion developed, with all manner of ritual and ceremonial, it became something more and at the same time something much less than that composite culture. A Christian or a Muslim could, and often did, adapt himself to the Indian way of life and culture, and yet remained in faith an orthodox Christian or Muslim. He had Indianized himself and become an Indian without changing his religion.

The correct word for 'Indian', as applied to country or culture or the historical continuity of our varying traditions, is 'Hindi', from 'Hind', a shortened form of Hindustan. Hind is still commonly used for India. In the countries of Western

Asia, in Iran and Turkey, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and elsewhere, India has always been referred to, and is still called, Hind; and everything Indian is called ‘Hindi’. ‘Hindi’ has nothing to do with religion, and a Muslim or Christian Indian is as much a Hindi as a person who follows Hinduism as a religion. Americans who call all Indians Hindus are not far wrong; they would be perfectly correct if they used the word ‘Hindi’. Unfortunately, the word ‘Hindi’ has become associated in India with a particular script—the *devanagri* script of Sanskrit—and so it has become difficult to use it in its larger and more natural significance. Perhaps when present-day controversies subside we may revert to its original and more satisfying use. Today, the word ‘Hindustani’ is used for Indian; it is, of course, derived from Hindustan. But this is too much of a mouthful and it has no such historical and cultural associations as ‘Hindi’ has. It would certainly appear odd to refer to ancient periods of Indian culture as ‘Hindustani’.

Whatever the word we may use, Indian or Hindi or Hindustani, for our cultural tradition, we see in the past that some inner urge towards synthesis, derived essentially from the Indian philosophic outlook, was the dominant feature of Indian cultural, and even racial, development. Each incursion of foreign elements was a challenge to this culture, but it was met successfully by a new synthesis and a process of absorption. This was also a process of rejuvenation and new blooms of culture arose out of it, the background and essential basis, however, remaining much the same.

The Earliest Records, Scripture and Mythology

Before the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization, the Vedas were supposed to be the earliest records we possess of Indian culture. There was much dispute about the chronology of the Vedic period, European scholars usually giving later dates and Indian scholars much earlier ones. It was curious, this desire on the part of Indians to go as far back as possible and thus enhance the importance of our ancient culture. Professor Winternitz thinks that the beginnings of Vedic literature go back to 2000 BC, or even 2500 BC. This brings us very near the Mohenjo Daro period.

The usual date accepted by most scholars today for the hymns of the Rig Veda is 1500 BC, but there is a tendency, ever since the Mohenjo Daro excavations, to date further back these early Indian scriptures. Whatever the exact date may be, it is probable that this literature is earlier than that of either Greece or Israel, that, in fact, it represents some of the earliest documents of the human mind that we possess. Max Müller has called it: ‘The first word spoken by the Aryan man.’

The Vedas were the outpourings of the Aryans as they streamed into the rich land of India. They brought their ideas with them from that common stock out of which grew the Avesta in Iran, and elaborated them in the soil of India. Even the language of the Vedas bears a striking resemblance to that of the Avesta, and it has been remarked that the Avesta is nearer the Veda than the Veda is to its own epic Sanskrit.

How are we to consider the scripture of various religions, much of it believed by its votaries to be revealed scripture? To analyse it and criticize it and look upon it as a human document is often to offend the true believers. Yet there is no other way to consider it.

I have always hesitated to read books of religion. The totalitarian claims made on their behalf did not appeal to me. The outward evidences of the practice of religion that I saw did not encourage me to go to original sources. Yet I had to drift to these books, for ignorance of them was not a virtue and was often a severe drawback. I knew that some of them had powerfully influenced humanity and anything that could have done so must have some inherent power and virtue in it, some vital source of energy. I found great difficulty in reading through many parts of them, for try as I would, I could not arouse sufficient interest; but the sheer beauty of some passages would hold me. And then a phrase or a sentence would suddenly leap up and electrify me and make me feel the presence of the really great. Some words of the Buddha or of Christ would shine out with deep meaning and seem to me applicable as much today as when they were uttered 2,000 or more years ago. There was a compelling reality about them, a permanence which time and space could not touch. So I felt sometimes when I read about Socrates or the Chinese philosophers, and also when I read the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. I was not interested in the metaphysics, or the description of ritual, or the many other things which apparently had no relation to the problems that faced me. Perhaps I did not understand the inner

significance of much that I read, and sometimes, indeed, a second reading threw more light. I made no real effort to understand mysterious passages and I passed by those which had no particular significance for me. Nor was I interested in long commentaries and glossaries. I could not approach these books, or any book, as Holy Writ which must be accepted in their totality without challenge or demur. Indeed, this approach of Holy Writ usually resulted in my mind being closed to what they contained. I was much more friendly and open to them when I could consider them as having been written by human beings, very wise and far-seeing, but nevertheless ordinary mortals, and not incarnations or mouthpieces of a divinity, about whom I had no knowledge or surety whatever.

It has always seemed to me a much more magnificent and impressive thing that a human being should rise to great heights, mentally and spiritually, and should then seek to raise others up, rather than that he should be the mouthpiece of a divine or superior power. Some of the founders of religions were astonishing individuals, but all their glory vanishes in my eyes when I cease to think of them as human beings. What impresses me and gives me hope is the growth of the mind and spirit of man, and not his being used as an agent to convey a message.

Mythology affected me in much the same way. If people believed in the factual content of these stories, the whole thing was absurd and ridiculous. But as soon as one ceased believing in them, they appeared in a new light, a new beauty, a wonderful flowering of a richly endowed imagination, full of human lessons. No one believes now in the stories of Greek gods and goddesses and so, without any difficulty, we can admire them and they become part of our mental heritage. But if we had to believe in them, what a burden it would be, and how, oppressed by this weight of belief, we would often miss their beauty. Indian mythology is richer, vaster, very beautiful, and full of meaning. I have often wondered what manner of men and women they were who gave shape to these bright dreams and lovely fancies, and out of what gold mine of thought and imagination they dug them.

Looking at scripture then as a product of the human mind, we have to remember the age in which it was written, the environment and mental climate in which it grew, the vast distance in time and thought and experience that separates it from us. We have to forget the trappings of ritual and religious usage

in which it is wrapped, and remember the social background in which it expanded. Many of the problems of human life have a permanence and a touch of eternity about them, and hence the abiding interest in these ancient books. But they dealt with other problems also, limited to their particular age, which have no living interest for us now.

The Vedas

Many Hindus look upon the Vedas as revealed scripture. This seems to me to be peculiarly unfortunate, for thus we miss their real significance—the unfolding of the human mind in the earliest stages of thought. And what a wonderful mind it was! The Vedas (from the root *vid*, to know) were simply meant to be a collection of the existing knowledge of the day; they are a jumble of many things: hymns, prayers, ritual for sacrifice, magic, magnificent nature poetry. There is no idolatry in them; no temples for the gods. The vitality and affirmation of life pervading them are extraordinary. The early Vedic Aryans were so full of the zest for life that they paid little attention to the soul. In a vague way they believed in some kind of existence after death.

Gradually the conception of God grows: there are the Olympian type of gods, and then monotheism, and later, rather mixed with it, the conception of monism. Thought carries them to strange realms, and brooding on nature's mystery comes, and the spirit of inquiry. These developments take place in the course of hundreds of years, and by the time we reach the end of the Veda, the *Vedanta* (*anta*, meaning end), we have the philosophy of the Upanishads.

The Rig Veda, the first of the Vedas, is probably the earliest book that humanity possesses. In it we can find the first outpourings of the human mind, the glow of poetry, the rapture at nature's loveliness and mystery. And in these early hymns there are, as Dr. Macnicol says, the beginnings of 'the brave adventures made so long ago and recorded here, of those who seek to discover the significance of our world and of man's life within it ... India here set out on a quest which she has never ceased to follow.'

Yet behind the Rig Veda itself lay ages of civilized existence and thought, during which the Indus Valley and the Mesopotamian and other civilizations had

grown. It is appropriate, therefore, that there should be this dedication in the Rig Veda: ‘To the Seers, our ancestors, the first path-finders!’

These vedic hymns have been described by Rabindranath Tagore as ‘a poetic testament of a people’s collective reaction to the wonder and awe of existence. A people of vigorous and unsophisticated imagination awakened at the very dawn of civilization to a sense of the inexhaustible mystery that is implicit in life. It was a simple faith of theirs that attributed divinity to every element and force of nature, but it was a brave and joyous one, in which the sense of mystery only gave enchantment to life, without weighing it down with bafflement—the faith of a race unburdened with intellectual brooding on the conflicting diversity of the objective universe, though now and again illumined by intuitive experience as: “Truth is one: (though) the wise call it by various names.”’

But that brooding spirit crept in gradually till the author of the Veda cried out:

‘O Faith, endow us with belief,’ and raised deeper questions in a hymn called the ‘The Song of Creation’, to which Max Müller gave the title: ‘To the Unknown God’:

1. Then there was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.
What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? was water there, unfathomed depth of water?
2. Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day’s and night’s divider.
That one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.
3. Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness, this all was indiscriminated chaos.
All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of warmth was born that unit.
4. Thereafter rose desire in the beginning, desire the primal seed and germ of spirit.
Sages who searched with their heart’s thought discovered the existent’s kinship in the non-existent.
5. Transversely was their severing line extended: what was above it then, and what below it?
There were begetters, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy of yonder.

6. Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation?
The gods are later than this world's production. Who knows, then, whence it first came into being.
7. He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it.
Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows it not.³

The Acceptance and the Negation of Life

From these dim beginnings of long ago flow out the rivers of Indian thought and philosophy, of Indian life and culture and literature, ever widening and increasing in volume, and sometimes flooding the land with their rich deposits. During this enormous span of years they changed their courses sometimes, and even appeared to shrivel up, yet they preserved their essential identity. They could not have done so if they had not possessed a sound instinct for life. That staying power need not necessarily be a virtue; it may well mean, as I think it has meant in India for a long time past, stagnation and decay. But it is a major fact to be reckoned with, especially in these days when we seem to be witnessing an undermining, in repeated wars and crises, of a proud and advanced civilization. Out of this crucible of war, wherein so much is melting, we hope that something finer will emerge for the west as well as the east, something that will retain all the great achievements of humanity and add to them what they lacked. But this repeated and widespread destruction not only of material resources and human lives, but of essential values that have given meaning to life, is significant. Was it that in spite of astonishing progress in numerous directions and the higher standards, undreamed of in previous ages, that came in its train, our modern highly industrialized civilization did not possess some essential ingredient, and that the seeds of self-destruction lay within it?

A country under foreign domination seeks escape from the present in dreams of a vanished age, and finds consolation in visions of past greatness. That is a foolish and dangerous pastime in which many of us indulge. An equally

questionable practice for us in India is to imagine that we are still spiritually great though we have come down in the world in other respects. Spiritual or any other greatness cannot be founded on lack of freedom and opportunity, or on starvation and misery. Many western writers have encouraged the notion that Indians are otherworldly. I suppose the poor and unfortunate in every country become to some extent other-worldly, unless they become revolutionaries, for this world is evidently not meant for them. So also subject peoples.

As a man grows to maturity he is not entirely engrossed in, or satisfied with, the external objective world. He seeks also some inner meaning, some psychological and physical satisfactions. So also with peoples and civilizations as they mature and grow adult. Every civilization and every people exhibit these parallel streams of an external life and an internal life. Where they meet or keep close to each other, there is an equilibrium and stability. When they diverge conflict arises and the crises that torture the mind and spirit.

We see from the period of the Rig Veda hymns onwards the development of both these streams of life and thought. The early ones are full of the external world, of the beauty and mystery of nature, of joy in life and an overflowing vitality. The gods and goddesses, like those of Olympus, are very human; they are supposed to come down and mix with men and women; there is no hard and fast line dividing the two. Then thought comes and the spirit of inquiry and the mystery of a transcendental world deepens. Life still continues in abundant measure, but there is also a turning away from its outward manifestations and a spirit of detachment grows as the eyes are turned to things invisible, which cannot be seen or heard or felt in the ordinary way. What is the object of it all? Is there a purpose in the universe? And, if so, how can man's life be put in harmony with it? Can we bring about a harmonious relation between the visible and invisible worlds, and thus find out the right conduct of life?

So we find in India, as elsewhere, these two streams of thought and action—the acceptance of life and the abstention from it—developing side by side, with the emphasis on the one or the other varying in different periods. Yet the basic background of that culture was not one of other-worldliness or world-worthlessness. Even when, in philosophical language, it discussed the world as *maya*, or what is popularly believed to be illusion, that very conception was not an absolute one but relative to what was thought of as ultimate reality

(something like Plato's shadow of reality), and it took the world as it is and tried to live its life and enjoy its manifold beauty. Probably semitic culture, as exemplified in many religions that emerged from it, and certainly early Christianity, was far more other-worldly. T.E. Lawrence says that 'the common base of all semitic creeds, winners or losers, was the ever present idea of world-worthlessness.' And this often led to an alternation of self-indulgence and self-denial.

In India we find during every period when her civilization bloomed an intense joy in life and nature, a pleasure in the act of living, the development of art and music and literature and song and dancing and painting and the theatre, and even a highly sophisticated inquiry into sex relations. It is inconceivable that a culture or view of life based on other-worldliness or world-worthlessness could have produced all these manifestations of vigorous and varied life. Indeed it should be obvious that any culture that was basically other-worldly would not have carried on for thousands of years.

Yet some people have thought that Indian thought and culture represent essentially the principle of life negation and not of life affirmation. Both principles are, I suppose, present in varying degrees in all the old religions and cultures. But I should have thought that Indian culture, taken as a whole, never emphasized the negation of life, though some of its philosophies did so; it seems to have done so much less than Christianity. Buddhism and Jainism rather emphasized the abstention from life, and in certain periods of Indian history there was a running away from life on a big scale, as, for instance, when large numbers of people joined the Buddhist *Viharas* or monasteries. What the reason for this was I do not know. Equally, or more, significant instances can be found during the Middle Ages in Europe when a widespread belief existed that the world was coming to an end. Perhaps the ideas of renunciation and life-negation are caused or emphasized by a feeling of frustration due to political and economic factors.

Buddhism, in spite of its theoretical approach, or rather approaches, for there are several, as a matter of fact avoids extremes; its is the doctrine of the golden mean, the middle path. Even the idea of *Nirvana* was very far from being a kind of nothingness, as it is sometimes supposed to be; it was a positive condition, but because it was beyond the range of human thought negative terms were used to

describe it. If Buddhism, a typical product of Indian thought and culture, had merely been a doctrine of life negation or denial, it would surely have had some such effect on the hundreds of millions who profess it. Yet, as a matter of fact, the Buddhist countries are full of evidence to the contrary, and the Chinese people are an outstanding example of what affirmation of life can be.

The confusion seems to have arisen from the fact that Indian thought was always laying stress on the ultimate purpose of life. It could never forget the transcendent element in its makeup; and so, while affirming life to the full, it refused to become a victim and a slave of life. Indulge in right action with all your strength and energy, it said, but keep above it, and do not worry much about the results of such action. Thus it taught detachment in life and action, not abstention from them. This idea of detachment runs through Indian thought and philosophy, as it does through most other philosophies. It is another way of saying that a right balance and equilibrium should be kept between the visible and invisible worlds, for if there is too much attachment to action in the visible world, the other world is forgotten and fades away, and action itself becomes without ultimate purpose.

There is an emphasis on truth, a dependence on it, a passion for it, in these early adventures of the Indian mind. Dogma or revelation are passed by as something for lesser minds which cannot rise above them. The approach was one of experiment based on personal experience. That experience, when it dealt with the invisible world, was, like all emotional and psychic experiences, different from the experience of the visible, external world. It seemed to go out of the three-dimensional world we know into some different and vast realm, and was thus difficult to describe in terms of three dimensions. What that experience was, and whether it was a vision or realization of some aspects of truth and reality, or was merely a phantasm of the imagination, I do not know. Probably it was often self-delusion. What interests me more is the approach, which was not authoritarian or dogmatic but was an attempt to discover for oneself what lay behind the external aspect of life.

It must be remembered that the business of philosophy in India was not confined to a few philosophers or highbrows. Philosophy was an essential part of the religion of the masses; it percolated to them in some attenuated form and created that philosophic outlook which became nearly as common in India as it

is in China. That philosophy was for some a deep and intricate attempt to know the causes and laws of all phenomena, the search for the ultimate purpose of life, and the attempt to find an organic unity in life's many contradictions. But for the many it was a much simpler affair, which yet gave them some sense of purpose, of cause and effect, and endowed them with courage to face trial and misfortune and not lose their gaiety and composure. The ancient wisdom of China and India, the Tao or the True Path, wrote Tagore to Dr Tai Chit-tao, was the pursuit of completeness, the blending of life's diverse work with the joy of living. Something of that wisdom impressed itself even upon the illiterate and ignorant masses, and we have seen how the Chinese people, after seven years of horrible war, have not lost the anchor of their faith or the gaiety of their minds. In India our trial has been more drawn out, and poverty and uttermost misery have long been the inseparable companions of our people. And yet they still laugh and sing and dance and do not lose hope.

Synthesis and Adjustment. The Beginnings of the Caste System

The coming of the Aryans into India raised new problems—racial and political. The conquered race, the Dravidians, had a long background of civilization behind them, but there is little doubt that the Aryans considered themselves vastly superior and a wide gulf separated the two races. Then there were also the backward aboriginal tribes, nomads or forest-dwellers. Out of this conflict and interaction of races gradually arose the caste system, which, in the course of succeeding centuries, was to affect Indian life so profoundly. Probably caste was neither Aryan nor Dravidian. It was an attempt at the social organization of different races, a rationalization of the facts as they existed at the time. It brought degradation in its train afterwards, and it is still a burden and a curse; but we can hardly judge it from subsequent standards or later developments. It was in keeping with the spirit of the times and some such grading took place in most of the ancient civilizations, though apparently China was free from it. There was a four-fold division in that other branch of the Aryans, the Iranians, during the

Sassanian period, but it did not petrify into caste. Many of these old civilizations, including that of Greece, were entirely dependent on mass slavery. There was no such mass or large-scale labour slavery in India, although there were relatively small numbers of domestic slaves. Plato in his *Republic* refers to a division similar to that of the four principal castes. Medieval catholicism knew this division also.

Caste began with a hard and fast division between Aryans and non-Aryans, the latter again being divided into the Dravidian races and the aboriginal tribes. The Aryans, to begin with, formed one class and there was hardly any specialization. The word *Arya* comes from a root word meaning to till, and the Aryans as a whole were agriculturists and agriculture was considered a noble occupation. The tiller of the soil functioned also as priest, soldier, or trader, and there was no privileged order of priests. The caste divisions, originally intended to separate the Aryans from the non-Aryans, reacted on the Aryans themselves, and as division of functions and specialization increased, the new classes took the form of castes.

Thus at a time when it was customary for the conquerors to exterminate or enslave the conquered races, caste enabled a more peaceful solution which fitted in with the growing specialization of functions. Life was graded and out of the mass of agriculturists evolved the *Vaishyas*, the agriculturists, artisans, and merchants; the *Kshatriyas*, or rulers and warriors; and the *Brahmins*, priests and thinkers who were supposed to guide policy and preserve and maintain the ideals of the nation. Below these three were the *Shudras* or labourers and unskilled workers, other than the agriculturists. Among the indigenous tribes many were gradually assimilated and given a place at the bottom of the social scale, that is among the Shudras. This process of assimilation was a continuous one. These castes must have been in a fluid condition; rigidity came in much later. Probably the ruling class had always great latitude, and any person who by conquest or otherwise assumed power, could, if he so willed, join the hierarchy as a *Kshatriya*, and get the priests to manufacture an appropriate genealogy connecting him with some ancient Aryan hero.

The word *Arya* ceased to have any racial significance and came to mean ‘noble’, just as *Anarya* meant ignoble and was usually applied to nomadic tribes, forest-dwellers, etc.

The Indian mind was extraordinarily analytical and had a passion for putting ideas and concepts, and even life's activities, into compartments. The Aryans not only divided society into four main groups but also divided the individual's life into four parts: the first part consisted of growth and adolescence, the student period of life, acquiring knowledge, developing self-discipline and self-control, continence; the second was that of the householder and man of the world; the third was that of the elder statesman, who had attained a certain poise and objectivity, and could devote himself to public work without the selfish desire to profit by it; and the last stage was that of the recluse, who lived a life largely cut off from the world's activities. In this way also they adjusted the two opposing tendencies which often exist side by side in man—the acceptance of life in its fullness and the rejection of it.

In India, as in China, learning and erudition have always stood high in public esteem, for learning was supposed to imply both superior knowledge and virtue. Before the learned man the ruler and the warrior have always bowed. The old Indian theory was that those who were concerned with the exercise of power could not be completely objective. Their personal interests and inclinations would come into conflict with their public duties. Hence the task of determining values and the preservation of ethical standards was allotted to a class or group of thinkers who were freed from material cares and were, as far as possible, without obligations, so that they could consider life's problems in a spirit of detachment. This class of thinkers or philosophers was thus supposed to be at the top of the social structure, honoured and respected by all. The men of action, the rulers and warriors came after them and, however powerful they might be, did not command the same respect. The possession of wealth was still less entitled to honour and respect. The warrior class, though not at the top, held a high position, and not as in China, where it was looked upon with contempt.

This was the theory, and to some extent it may be found elsewhere, as in Christendom in mediaeval Europe, when the Roman Church assumed the functions of leadership in all spiritual, ethical, and moral matters, and even in the general principles underlying the conduct of the State. In practice Rome became intensely interested in temporal power, and the princes of the Church were rulers in their own right. In India the Brahmin class, in addition to supplying the thinkers and the philosophers, became a powerful and entrenched priesthood,

intent on preserving its vested interests. Yet this theory in varying degrees has influenced Indian life profoundly, and the ideal has continued to be of a man full of learning and charity, essentially good, self-disciplined, and capable of sacrificing himself for the sake of others.

The Brahmin class has shown all the vices of a privileged and entrenched class in the past, and large numbers of them have possessed neither learning nor virtue. Yet they have largely retained the esteem of the public, not because of temporal power or possession of money, but because they have produced a remarkable succession of men of intelligence, and their record of public service and personal sacrifice for the public good has been a notable one. The whole class profited by the example of its leading personalities in every age, and yet the public esteem went to the qualities rather than to any official status. The tradition was one of respecting learning and goodness in any individual who possessed them. There are innumerable examples of non-Brahmins, and even persons belonging to the depressed classes, being so respected and sometimes considered as saints. Official status and military power never commanded the same measure of respect, though it may have been feared.

Even today, in this money age, the influence of this tradition is marked, and because of it Gandhiji (who is not a Brahmin) can become the supreme leader of India and move the hearts of millions without force or compulsion or official position or possession of money. Perhaps this is as good a test as any of a nation's cultural background and its conscious or subconscious objective: to what kind of a leader does it give its allegiance?

The central idea of old Indian civilization, or Indo-Aryan culture, was that of *dharma*, which was something much more than religion or creed; it was a conception of obligations, of the discharge of one's duties to oneself and to others. This dharma itself was part of *Rita*, the fundamental moral law governing the functioning of the universe and all it contained. If there was such an order then man was supposed to fit into it, and he should function in such a way as to remain in harmony with it. If man did his duty and was ethically right in his action, the right consequences would inevitably follow. Rights as such were not emphasized. That, to some extent, was the old outlook everywhere. It stands out in marked contrast, with the modern assertion of rights, rights of individuals, of groups, of nations.

The Continuity of Indian Culture

Thus in these very early days we find the beginnings of the civilization and culture which were to flower so abundantly and richly in subsequent ages, and which have continued, in spite of many changes, to our own day. The basic ideals, the governing concepts are taking shape, and literature and philosophy, art and drama, and all other activities of life were conditioned by these ideals and world-view. Also we see that exclusiveness and touch-me-notism which were to grow and grow till they became unalterable, octopus-like, with their grip on everything—the caste system of modern times. Fashioned for a particular day, intended to stabilize the then organization of society and give it strength and equilibrium, it developed into a prison for that social order and for the mind of man. Security was purchased in the long run at the cost of ultimate progress.

Yet it was a very long run and, even within that framework, the vital original impetus for advancement in all directions was so great that it spread out all over India and over the eastern seas, and its stability was such that it survived repeated shock and invasion.

Professor Macdonell, in his *History of Sanskrit Literature*, tells us that

the importance of Indian literature as a whole consists in its originality. When the Greeks towards the end of the fourth century BC invaded the north-west, the Indians had already worked out a national culture of their own, unaffected by foreign influences. And in spite of successive waves of invasion and conquest by Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Mohammedans, the national development of the life and literature of the Indo-Aryan race remained practically unchecked and unmodified from without down to the era of British occupation. No other branch of the Indo-European stock has experienced an isolated evolution like this. No other country except China can trace back its language and literature, its religious beliefs and rites, its dramatic and social customs through an uninterrupted development of more than 3,000 years.

Still India was not isolated, and throughout this long period of history she had continuous and living contacts with Iranians and Greeks, Chinese and Central Asians and others. If her basic culture survived these contacts there must have been something in that culture itself which gave it the dynamic strength to do so, some inner vitality and understanding of life. For this three or four thousand years of cultural growth and continuity is remarkable. Max Müller, the famous scholar and Orientalist, emphasizes this: ‘There is, in fact, an unbroken continuity between the most modern and the most ancient phases of Hindu

thought, extending over more than three thousand years.' Carried away by his enthusiasm, he said (in his lectures delivered before the University of Cambridge, England in 1882): 'If we were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow—in some parts a very paradise on earth—I should point to India. If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life—again I should point to India.'

Nearly half a century later Romain Rolland wrote in the same strain: 'If there is one place on the face of the earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India.'

The Upanishads

The Upanishads, dating from about 800 BC, take us a step further in the development of Indo-Aryan thought, and it is a big step. The Aryans have long been settled down and a stable, prosperous civilization has grown up, a mixture of the old and the new, dominated by Aryan thought and ideals, but with a background of more primitive forms of worship. The Vedas are referred to with respect, but also in a spirit of gentle irony. The Vedic gods no longer satisfy and the ritual of the priests is made fun of. But there is no attempt to break with the past; the past is taken as a starting point for further progress.

The Upanishads are instinct with a spirit of inquiry, of mental adventure, of a passion for finding out the truth about things. The search for this truth is, of course, not by the objective methods of modern science, yet there is an element

of the scientific method in the approach. No dogma is allowed to come in the way. There is much that is trivial and without any meaning or relevance for us today. The emphasis is essentially on self-realization, on knowledge of the individual self and the absolute self, both of which are said to be the same in essence. The objective external world is not considered unreal but real in a relative sense, an aspect of the inner reality.

There are many ambiguities in the Upanishads and different interpretations have been made. But that is a matter for the philosopher or scholar. The general tendency is towards monism and the whole approach is evidently intended to lessen the differences that must have existed then, leading to fierce debate. It is the way of synthesis. Interest in magic and such like supernatural knowledge is sternly discouraged, and ritual and ceremonies without enlightenment are said to be in vain—‘those engaged in them, considering themselves men of understanding and learned, stagger along aimlessly like blind men led by the blind, and fail to reach the goal.’ Even the Vedas are treated as the lower knowledge; the higher one being that of the inner mind. There is a warning given against philosophical learning without discipline of conduct. And there is a continuous attempt to harmonize social activity with spiritual adventure. The duties and obligations imposed by life were to be carried out, but in a spirit of detachment.

Probably the ethic of individual perfection was over-emphasized and hence the social outlook suffered. ‘There is nothing higher than the person,’ say the Upanishads. Society must have been considered as stabilized and hence the mind of man was continually thinking of individual perfection, and in quest of this it wandered about in the heavens and in the innermost recesses of the heart. This old Indian approach was not a narrow nationalistic one, though there must have been a feeling that India was the hub of the world, just as China and Greece and Rome have felt at various times. ‘The whole world of mortals is an inter-dependent organism,’ says the Mahabharata.

The metaphysical aspects of the questions considered in the Upanishads are difficult for me to grasp, but I am impressed by this approach to a problem which has so often been shrouded by dogma and blind belief. It was the philosophical approach and not the religious one. I like the vigour of the thought, the questioning, the rationalistic background. The form is terse, often of question

and answer between pupil and teacher, and it has been suggested that the Upanishads were some kind of lecture notes made by the teacher or taken down by his disciples. Professor F. W. Thomas in *The Legacy of India* says: ‘What gives to the Upanishads their unique quality and unfailing human appeal is an earnest sincerity of tone, as of friends conferring upon matters of deep concern.’ And C. Rajagopalachari thus eloquently speaks of them: ‘The spacious imagination, the majestic sweep of thought, and the almost reckless spirit of exploration with which, urged by the compelling thirst for truth, the Upanishad teachers and pupils dig into the “open secret” of the universe, make this most ancient of the world’s holy books still the most modern and most satisfying.’

The dominating characteristic of the Upanishads is the dependence on truth. ‘Truth wins ever, not falsehood. With truth is paved the road to the Divine.’ And the famous invocation is for light and understanding: ‘Lead me from the unreal to the real! Lead me from darkness to light! Lead me from death to immortality.’

Again and again the restless mind peeps out, ever seeking, ever questioning: ‘At whose behest doth mind light on its perch? At whose command doth life, the first, proceed? At whose behest do men send forth this speech? What god, indeed, directed eye and ear?’ And again: ‘Why cannot the wind remain still? Why has the human mind no rest? Why, and in search of what, does the water run out and cannot stop its flow even for a moment?’ It is the adventure of man that is continually calling and there is no resting on the way and no end of the journey. In the *Aitareya Brahmana* there is a hymn about this long endless journey which we must undertake, and every verse ends with the refrain: *Charaiveti, Charaiveti*—‘Hence, O traveller, march along, march along!’

There is no humility about all this quest, the humility before an all-powerful deity, so often associated with religion. It is the triumph of mind over the environment. ‘My body will be reduced to ashes and my breath will join the restless and deathless air, but not I and my deeds. O mind, remember this always, remember this.’ In a morning prayer the sun is addressed thus: ‘O sun of resplendent glory, I am the same person as makes thee what thou art!’ What superb confidence!

What is the soul? It cannot be described or defined except negatively: ‘It is not this, not this.’ Or, in a way, positively: ‘That thou art!’ The individual soul is like a spark thrown out and reabsorbed by the blazing fire of the absolute soul.

‘As fire, though one, entering the world, takes a separate form according to whatever it burns, so does the inner Self within all things become different, according to whatever it enters, yet itself is without form.’ This realization that all things have that same essence removes the barriers which separate us from them and produces a sense of unity with humanity and nature, a unity which underlies the diversity and manifoldness of the external world. ‘Who knoweth all things are Self; for him what grief existeth, what delusion, when (once) he gazeth on the oneness?’ ‘Aye, who seeth all things in that Self, and Self in everything; from That he’ll no more hide.’

It is interesting to compare and contrast the intense individualism and exclusiveness of the Indo-Aryans with this all-embracing approach, which overrides all barriers of caste and class and every other external and internal difference. This latter is a kind of metaphysical democracy. ‘He who sees the one spirit in all, and all in the one spirit, henceforth can look with contempt on no creature.’ Though this was theory only, there can be no doubt that it must have affected life and produced that atmosphere of tolerance and reasonableness, that acceptance of free-thought in matters of faith, that desire and capacity to live and let live, which are dominant features of Indian culture, as they are of the Chinese. There was no totalitarianism in religion or culture, and they indicate an old and wise civilization with inexhaustible mental reserves.

There is a question in the Upanishads to which a very curious and yet significant answer is given. ‘The question is: “What is this universe? From what does it arise? Into what does it go?” And the answer is: “In freedom it rises, in freedom it rests, and into freedom it melts away.”’ What exactly this means I am unable to understand except that the authors of the Upanishads were passionately attached to the idea of freedom and wanted to see everything in terms of it. Swami Vivekananda was always emphasizing this aspect.

It is not easy for us, even imaginatively, to transplant ourselves to this distant period and enter the mental climate of that day. The form of writing itself is something that we are unused to, odd looking, difficult to translate, and the background of life is utterly different. We take for granted so many things today because we are used to them although they are curious and unreasonable enough. But what we are not used to at all is much more difficult to appreciate or understand. In spite of all these difficulties and almost insuperable barriers, the

message of the Upanishads has found willing and eager listeners throughout Indian history and has powerfully moulded the national mind and character. ‘There is no important form of Hindu thought, heterodox Buddhism included, which is not rooted in the Upanishads,’ says Bloomfield.

Early Indian thought penetrated to Greece, through Iran, and influenced some thinkers and philosophers there. Much later Plotinus came to the east to study Iranian and Indian Philosophy and was especially influenced by the mystic element in the Upanishads. From Plotinus many of these ideas are said to have gone to St. Augustine, and through him influenced the Christianity of the day.⁴

The rediscovery by Europe, during the past century and a half, of Indian philosophy created a powerful impression on European philosophers and thinkers. Schopenhauer, the pessimist, is often quoted in this connection. ‘From every sentence (of the Upanishads) deep, original and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit ... In the whole world there is no study ... so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads ... (They) are products of the highest wisdom ... It is destined sooner or later to become the faith of the people.’ And again: ‘The study of the Upanishads has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death.’ Writing on this, Max Müller says: ‘Schopenhauer was the last man to write at random, or to allow himself to go into ecstasies over so-called mystic and inarticulate thought. And I am neither afraid nor ashamed to say that I share his enthusiasm for the Vedanta, and feel indebted to it for much that has been helpful to me in my passage through life.’ In another place Max Müller says: ‘The Upanishads are the ... sources of ... the Vedanta philosophy, a system in which human speculation seems to me to have reached its very acme.’ ‘I spend my happiest hours in reading Vedantic books. They are to me like the light of the morning, like the pure air of the mountains—so simple, so true, if once understood.’

But perhaps the most eloquent tribute to the Upanishads and to the later book, the Bhagavad Gita, was paid by A.E. (G.W. Russell) the Irish poet:

Goethe, Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau among moderns have something of this vitality and wisdom, but we can find all they have said and much more in the grand sacred books of the East. The Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads contain such godlike fullness of wisdom on all things that I feel the authors must have looked with calm remembrance back through a

thousand passionate lives, full of feverish strife for and with shadows, ere they could have written with such certainty of things which the soul feels to be sure.⁵

The Advantages and Disadvantages of an Individualistic Philosophy

There is, in the Upanishads, a continual emphasis on the fitness of the body and clarity of mind, on the discipline of both body and mind, before effective progress can be made. The acquisition of knowledge, or any achievement, requires restraint, self-suffering, self-sacrifice. This idea of some kind of penance, *tapasya*, is inherent in Indian thought, both among the thinkers at the top and the unread masses below. It is present today as it was present some thousands of years ago, and it is necessary to appreciate it in order to understand the psychology underlying the mass movements which have convulsed India under Gandhiji's leadership.

It is obvious that the ideas of the authors of the Upanishads, the rarefied mental atmosphere in which they moved, were confined to a small body of the elect who were capable of understanding them. They were entirely beyond the comprehension of the vast mass of the people. A creative minority is always small in numbers but, if it is in tune with the majority, and is always trying to pull the latter up and make it advance, so that the gap between the two is lessened, a stable and progressive culture results. Without that creative minority a civilization must inevitably decay. But it may also decay if the bond between a creative minority and the majority is broken and there is a loss of social unity in society as a whole, and ultimately that minority itself loses its creativeness and becomes barren and sterile; or else it gives place to another creative or vital force which society throws up.

It is difficult for me, as for most others, to visualize the period of the Upanishads and to analyse the various forces that were at play. I imagine, however, that in spite of the vast mental and cultural difference between the small thinking minority and the unthinking masses, there was a bond between them or, at any rate, there was no obvious gulf. The graded society in which they lived had its mental gradations also and these were accepted and provided for.

This led to some kind of social harmony and conflicts were avoided. Even the new thought of the Upanishads was interpreted for popular purposes so as to fit in with popular prejudices and superstitions, thereby losing much of its essential meaning. The graded social structure was not touched; it was preserved. The conception of monism became transformed into one of monotheism for religious purposes, and even lower forms of belief and worship were not only tolerated but encouraged, as suited to a particular stage of development.

Thus the ideology of the Upanishads did not permeate to any marked extent to the masses and the intellectual separation between the creative minority and the majority became more marked. In course of time this led to new movements—a powerful wave of materialistic philosophy, agnosticism, atheism. Out of this again grew Buddhism and Jainism, and the famous Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, wherein yet another attempt was made to bring about a synthesis between rival creeds and ways of thought. The creative energy of the people, or of the creative minority, is very evident during these periods, and again there appears to be a bond between that minority and the majority. On the whole they pull together.

In this way period succeeds period with bursts of creative effort in the fields of thought and action, in literature and the drama, in sculpture and architecture, and in cultural, missionary and colonial enterprises far from India's borders. In between, there are periods of disharmony and conflict, due both to inner causes and intrusions from outside. Yet they are ultimately overcome and a fresh period of creative energy supervenes. The last great period of such activity in a variety of directions was the classical epoch which began in the fourth century after Christ. By about 1000 AC, or earlier, signs of inner decay in India are very evident, although the old artistic impulse continued to function and produce fine work. The coming of new races with a different background brought a new driving force to India's tired mind and spirit, and out of that impact arose new problems and new attempts at solution.

It seems that the intense individualism of the Indo-Aryans led, in the long run, to both the good and the evil that their culture produced. It led to the production of very superior types, not in one particular limited period of history, but again and again, age after age. It gave a certain idealist and ethical background to the whole culture, which persisted and still persists, though it may not influence

practice much. With the help of this background and by sheer force of example at the top, they held together the social fabric and repeatedly rehabilitated it when it threatened to go to pieces. They produced an astonishing flowering of civilization and culture which, though largely confined to the upper circles, inevitably spread to some extent to the masses. By their extreme tolerance of other beliefs and other ways than their own, they avoided the conflicts that have so often torn society asunder, and managed to maintain, as a rule, some kind of equilibrium. By allowing, within the larger framework, considerable freedom to people to live the life of their choice, they showed the wisdom of an old and experienced race. All these were very remarkable achievements.

But that very individualism led them to attach little importance to the social aspect of man, of man's duty to society. For each person life was divided and fixed up, a bundle of duties and responsibilities within his narrow sphere in the graded hierarchy He had no duty to, or conception of, society as a whole, and no attempt was made to make him feel his solidarity with it. This idea is perhaps largely a modern development and cannot be found in any ancient society. It is unreasonable, therefore, to expect it in ancient India. Still, the emphasis on individualism, on exclusiveness, on graded castes is much more evident in India. In later ages it was to grow into a very prison for the mind of our people—not only for the lower castes, who suffered most from it, but for the higher ones also. Throughout our history it was a weakening factor, and one might perhaps say that along with the growth of rigidity in the caste system, grew rigidity of mind and the creative energy of the race faded away.

Another curious fact seems to stand out. The extreme tolerance of every kind of belief and practice, every superstition and folly, had its injurious side also, for this perpetuated many an evil custom and prevented people from getting rid of the traditional burdens that prevented growth. The growing priesthood exploited this situation to their own advantage and built up their powerful vested interests on the foundation of the superstitions of the masses. That priesthood was probably never quite so powerful as in some branches of the Christian Church, for there were always spiritual leaders who condemned its practices, and there was a variety of beliefs to choose from, but it was strong enough to hold and exploit the masses.

So this mixture of free thought and orthodoxy lived side by side, and out of them scholasticism grew, and a puritanical ritualism. The appeal was always made to the ancient authorities, but little attempt was made to interpret their truths in terms of changing conditions. The creative and spiritual forces weakened, and only the shell of what used to be so full of life and meaning remained.

Aurobindo Ghose has written:

If an ancient Indian of the time of the Upanishad, of the Buddha, or the later classical age were to be set down in modern India ... he would see his race clinging to forms and shells and rags of the past and missing nine-tenths of its nobler meaning ... he would be amazed by the extent of the mental poverty, the immobility, the static repetition, the cessation of science, the long sterility of art, the comparative feebleness of the creative intuition.

Materialism

One of our major misfortunes is that we have lost so much of the world's ancient literature—in Greece, in India, and elsewhere. Probably this was inevitable as these books were originally written on palm-leaves or on *bhurjapatra*, the thin layers of the bark of the birch tree which peel off so easily, and later on paper. There were only a few copies of a work in existence and if they were lost or destroyed, that work disappeared, and it can only be traced by references to it, or quotations from it, in other books. Even so, about fifty or sixty thousand manuscripts in Sanskrit or its variations have already been traced and listed, and fresh discoveries are being constantly made. Many old Indian books have so far not been found in India at all but their translations in Chinese or Tibetan have been discovered. Probably an organized search for old manuscripts in the libraries of religious institutions, monasteries and private persons would yield rich results. That, and the critical examination of these manuscripts and, where considered desirable, their publication and translation, are among the many things we have to do in India when we succeed in breaking through our shackles and can function for ourselves. Such study is bound to throw light on many phases of Indian history and especially on the social background behind historic events and changing ideas. The fact that in spite of repeated losses and destruction, and without any organized attempt to discover them, over fifty

thousand manuscripts have been brought out, shows how extra-ordinarily abundant must have been the literary, dramatic, philosophical and other productions of old times. Many of the manuscripts discovered still await thorough examination.

Among the books that have been lost is the entire literature on materialism which followed the period of the early Upanishads. The only references to this, now found, are in criticisms of it and in elaborate attempts to disprove the materialist theories. There can be no doubt, however, that the materialist philosophy was professed in India for centuries and had, at the time, a powerful influence on the people. In the famous *Arthashastra*, Kautilya's book on political and economic organization, written in the fourth century BC, it is mentioned as one of the major philosophies of India.

We have then to rely on the critics and persons interested in disparaging this philosophy, and they try to pour ridicule on it and show how absurd it all is. That is an unfortunate way for us to find out what it was. Yet their very eagerness to discredit it shows how important it was in their eyes. Possibly much of the literature of materialism in India was destroyed by the priests and other believers in the orthodox religion during subsequent periods.

The materialists attacked authority and all vested interest in thought, religion and theology. They denounced the Vedas and priesthood and traditional beliefs, and proclaimed that belief must be free and must not depend on pre-suppositions or merely on the authority of the past. They inveighed against all forms of magic and superstition. Their general spirit was comparable in many ways to the modern materialistic approach; it wanted to rid itself of the chains and burden of the past, of speculation about matters which could not be perceived, of worship of imaginary gods. Only that could be presumed to exist which could be directly perceived, every other inference or presumption was equally likely to be true or false. Hence matter in its various forms and this world could only be considered as really existing. There was no other world, no heaven or hell, no soul separate from the body. Mind and intelligence and everything else have developed from the basic elements. Natural phenomena did not concern themselves with human values and were indifferent to what we consider good or bad. Moral rules were mere conventions made by men.

We recognize all this; it seems curiously of our day and not of more than two thousand years ago. How did these thoughts arise, these doubts and conflicts, this rebellion of the mind of man against traditional authority? We do not know enough of social and political conditions then, but it seems clear that it was an age of political conflict and social turmoil, leading to a disintegration of faith and to keen intellectual inquiry and a search for some way out, satisfying to the mind. It was out of this mental turmoil and social maladjustment that new paths grew and new systems of philosophy took shape. Systematic philosophy, not the intuitionist approach of the Upanishads, but based on close reasoning and argument, begins to appear in many garbs, Jain, Buddhist, and what might be called Hindu, for want of a better word. The Epics also belong to this period and the Bhagavad Gita. It is difficult to build up an accurate chronology of this age, as thought and theory overlapped and acted and reacted on each other. Buddha came in the sixth century BC. Some of these developments preceded him, others followed, or often there was a parallel growth.

About the time of the rise of Buddhism, the Persian Empire reached the Indus. This approach of a great Power right to the borders of India proper must have influenced people's thoughts. In the fourth century BC Alexander's brief raid into north-west India took place. It was unimportant in itself, but it was the precursor of far-reaching changes in India. Almost immediately after Alexander's death, Chandragupta built up the great Maurya Empire. That was, historically speaking, the first strong, wide-spread and centralized state in India. Tradition mentions many such rulers and overlords of India and one of the epics deals with the struggle for the suzerainty of India, meaning thereby probably northern India. But, in all probability, ancient India, like ancient Greece, was a collection of small states. There were many tribal republics, some of them covering large areas; there were also petty kingdoms; and there were, as in Greece, city states with powerful guilds of merchants. In Buddha's time there were a number of these tribal republics and four principal kingdoms in Central and Northern India (including Gandhara or part of Afghanistan). Whatever the form of organization, the tradition of city or village autonomy was very strong, and even when an overlordship was acknowledged there was no interference with the internal working of the state. There was a kind of primitive democracy, though, as in Greece, it was probably confined to the upper classes.

Ancient India and Greece, so different in many ways, have so much in common that I am led to believe that their background of life was very similar. The Peloponnesian war, ending in the breakdown of Athenian democracy might in some ways be compared to the Mahabharata War,⁶ the great war of ancient India. The failure of Hellenism and of the free city state led to a feeling of doubt and despair, to a pursuit of mysteries and revelations, a lowering of the earlier ideals of the race. The emphasis shifted from this world to the next. Later, new schools of philosophy—the Stoic and the Epicurean—developed.

It is dangerous and misleading to make historical comparisons on slender, and sometimes contradictory, data. Yet one is tempted to do so. The period in India after the Mahabharata war, with its seemingly chaotic mental atmosphere, reminds one of the post-Hellenic period of Greece. There was a vulgarization of ideals and then a groping for new philosophies. Politically and economically similar internal changes might have been taking place, such as the weakening of the tribal republic and city state and the tendency to centralize state power.

But this comparison does not take us very far. Greece never really recovered from these shocks, although Greek civilization flourished for some additional centuries in the Mediterranean and influenced Rome and Europe. In India there was a remarkable recovery and the thousand years from the Epic Period and the Buddha onwards were full of creative energy. Innumerable great names in philosophy, literature, drama, mathematics, and the arts stand out. In the early centuries of the Christian era a remarkable burst of energy resulted in the organization of colonial enterprises which took the Indian people and their culture to distant islands in the eastern seas.

The Epics. History, Tradition, and Myth

The two great epics of ancient India—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—probably took shape in the course of several hundred years, and even subsequently additions were made to them. They deal with the early days of the Indo-Aryans, their conquests and civil wars, when they were expanding and consolidating themselves, but they were composed and compiled later. I do not know of any books anywhere which have exercised such a continuous and

pervasive influence on the mass mind as these two. Dating back to a remote antiquity, they are still a living force in the life of the Indian people. Not in the original Sanskrit, except for a few intellectuals, but in translations and adaptations, and in those innumerable ways in which tradition and legend spread and become a part of the texture of a people's life. They represent the typical Indian method of catering all together for various degrees of cultural development, from the highest intellectual to the simple unread and untaught villager. They make us understand somewhat the secret of the old Indians in holding together a variegated society divided up in many ways and graded in castes, in harmonizing their discords, and giving them a common background of heroic tradition and ethical living. Deliberately they tried to build up a unity of outlook among the people, which was to survive and overshadow all diversity.

Among the earliest memories of my childhood are the stories from these epics told to me by my mother or the older ladies of the house, just as a child in Europe or America might listen to fairy tales or stories of adventure. There was for me both adventure and the fairy element in them. And then I used to be taken every year to the popular open-air performances where the Ramayana story was enacted and vast crowds came to see it and join in the processions. It was all very crude, but that did not matter, for everyone knew the story by heart and it was carnival time.

In this way Indian mythology and old tradition crept into my mind and got mixed up with all manner of other creatures of the imagination. I do not think I ever attached very much importance to these stories as factually true, and I even criticized the magical and supernatural element in them. But they were just as imaginatively true for me as were the stories from the Arabian Night or the *Panchatantra*, that storehouse of animal tales from which Western Asia and Europe have drawn so much.⁷ As I grew up other pictures crowded into my mind: fairy stories, both Indian and European, tales from Greek mythology, the story of Joan of Arc, *Alice in Wonderland*, and many stories of Akbar and Birbal, Sherlock Holmes, King Arthur and his Knights, the Rani of Jhansi, the young heroine of the Indian Mutiny, and tales of Rajput chivalry and heroism. These and many others filled my mind in strange confusion, but always there was the background of Indian mythology which I had imbibed in my earliest years.

If it was so with me, in spite of the diverse influences that worked on my mind, I realized how much more must old mythology and tradition work on the minds of others and, especially, the unread masses of our people. That influence is a good influence both culturally and ethically, and I would hate to destroy or throw away all the beauty and imaginative symbolism that these stories and allegories contain.

Indian mythology is not confined to the epics; it goes back to the Vedic period and appears in many forms and garbs in Sanskrit literature. The poets and the dramatists take full advantage of it and build their stories and lovely fancies round it. The Ashoka tree is said to burst into flower when touched by the foot of a beautiful woman. We read of the adventures of Kama, the god of love, and his wife, Rati (or rapture), with their friend Vasanta, the god of spring. Greatly daring, Kama shoots his flowery arrow at Shiva himself and is reduced to ashes by the fire that flashed out of Shiva's third eye. But he survives as Ananga, the bodiless one.

Most of the myths and stories are heroic in conception and teach adherence to truth and the pledged word, whatever the consequences, faithfulness unto death and even beyond, courage, good works and sacrifice for the common good. Sometimes the story is pure myth, or else it is a mixture of fact and myth, an exaggerated account of some incident that tradition preserved. Facts and fiction are so interwoven together as to be inseparable, and this amalgam becomes an imagined history, which may not tell us exactly what happened but does tell us something that is equally important—what people believed had taken place, what they thought their heroic ancestors were capable of, and what ideals inspired them. So, whether fact or fiction, it became a living element in their lives, ever pulling them up from the drudgery and ugliness of their everyday existence to higher realms, ever pointing towards the path of endeavour and right living, even though the ideal might be far off and difficult to reach.

Goethe is reported to have condemned those who said that the old Roman stories of heroism, of Lucretia and others, were spurious and false. Anything, he said, that was essentially false and spurious could only be absurd and unfruitful and never beautiful and inspiring, and that 'if the Romans were great enough to invent things like that, we at least should be great enough to believe them.'

Thus this imagined history, mixture of fact and fiction, or sometimes only fiction, becomes symbolically true and tells us of the minds and hearts and purposes of the people of that particular epoch. It is true also in the sense that it becomes the basis for thought and action, for future history. The whole conception of history in ancient India was influenced by the speculative and ethical trends of philosophy and religion. Little importance was attached to the writing of a chronicle or the compilation of a bare record of events. What those people were more concerned with was the effect and influence of human events and actions on human conduct. Like the Greeks, they were strongly imaginative and artistic and they gave rein to this artistry and imagination in dealing with past events, intent as they were on drawing some moral and lesson from them for future behaviour.

Unlike the Greeks, and unlike the Chinese and the Arabs, Indians in the past were not historians. This was very unfortunate and it has made it difficult for us now to fix dates or make up an accurate chronology. Events run into each other, overlap and produce an enormous confusion. Only very gradually are patient scholars today discovering the clues to the maze of Indian history. There is really only one old book, Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, a history of Kashmir written in the twelfth century AC, which may be considered as history. For the rest we have to go to the imagined history of the epics and other books, to some contemporary records, to inscriptions, to artistic and architectural remains, to coins, and to the large body of Sanskrit literature, for occasional hints; also, of course, to the many records of foreign travellers who came to India, notably Greeks and Chinese, and, during a later period, Arabs.

This lack of historical sense did not affect the masses, for as elsewhere and more so than elsewhere, they built up their view of the past from the traditional accounts and myth and story that were handed to them from generation to generation. This imagined history and mixture of fact and legend became widely known and gave to the people a strong and abiding cultural background. But the ignoring of history had evil consequences which we pursue still. It produced a vagueness of outlook, a divorce from life as it is, a credulity, a woolliness of the mind where fact was concerned. That mind was not at all woolly in the far more difficult, but inevitably vaguer and more indefinite, realms of philosophy; it was both analytic and synthetic, often very critical, sometimes, sceptical. But where

fact was concerned, it was uncritical, because, perhaps, it did not attach much importance to fact as such.

The impact of science and the modern world have brought a greater appreciation of facts, a more critical faculty, a weighing of evidence, a refusal to accept tradition merely because it is tradition. Many competent historians are at work now, but they often err on the other side and their work is more a meticulous chronicle of facts than living history. But even today it is strange how we suddenly become overwhelmed by tradition, and the critical faculties of even intelligent men cease to function. This may partly be due to the nationalism that consumes us in our present subject state. Only when we are politically and economically free will the mind function normally and critically.

Very recently there has been a significant and revealing instance of this conflict between the critical outlook and nationalist tradition. In the greater part of India the *Vikram Samvat* calendar is observed; this is based on a solar reckoning, but the months are lunar. Last month, in April 1944, according to this calendar, 2,000 years were completed and a new millennium began. This has been the occasion for celebrations throughout India, and the celebrations were justified, both because it was a big turning point in the reckoning of time and because Vikram, or Vikramaditya, with whose name the calendar is associated, has long been a great hero in popular tradition. Innumerable stories cling to his name, and many of these found their way in medieval times in different garbs to various parts of Asia, and later to Europe.

Vikram has long been considered a national hero, a beau ideal of a prince. He is remembered as a ruler who pushed out foreign invaders. But his fame rests on the literary and cultural brilliance of his court, where he collected some of the most famous writers, artists and musicians—the ‘nine gems’ of his court as they are called. Most of the stories deal with his desire to do good to his people, and to sacrifice himself or his personal interest at the slightest provocation in order to benefit someone else. He is famous for his generosity, service for others, courage, and lack of conceit. Essentially he has been popular because he was considered a good man and a patron of the arts. The fact that he was a successful soldier or a conqueror hardly comes out in the stories. That emphasis on the goodness and self-sacrificing nature of the man is characteristic of the Indian mind and of Indian ideals. Vikramaditya’s name, like that of Caesar, became a

kind of symbol and tide, and numerous subsequent rulers added it to their names. This has added to the confusion, as there are many Vikramadityas mentioned in history.

But who was this Vikram? And when did he exist? Historically speaking everything is vague. There is no trace of any such ruler round about 57 BC, when the Vikram Samvat era should begin. There was, however, a Vikramaditya in North India in the fourth century AC, and he fought against Hun invaders and pushed them out. It is he who is supposed to have kept the ‘nine gems’ in his court and around whom all these stories gather. The problem then is this: How is this Vikramaditya who existed in the fourth century AC to be connected with an era which begins in 57 BC? The probable explanation appears to be that an era dating from 57 BC existed in the Malava State in Central India, and, long after Vikram, this era and calendar were connected with him and renamed after him. But all this is vague and uncertain.

What has been most surprising is the way in which quite intelligent Indians have played about with history in order somehow to connect the traditional hero, Vikram, with the beginning of the era 2,000 years ago. It has also been interesting to find how emphasis is laid on his fight against the foreigner and his desire to establish the unity of India under one national state. Vikram’s realm was, in fact, confined to North and Central India.

It is not Indians only who are affected by nationalist urges and supposed national interest in the writing or consideration of history. Every nation and people seem to be affected by this desire to gild and better the past and distort it to their advantage. The histories of India that most of us have had to read, chiefly written by Englishmen, are usually long apologies for and panegyrics of British rule, and a barely veiled contemptuous account of what happened here in the millenniums preceding it. Indeed, real history for them begins with the advent of the Englishman into India; all that went before is in some mystic kind of way a preparation for this divine consummation. Even the British period is distorted with the object of glorifying British rule and British virtues. Very slowly a more correct perspective is developing. But we need not go to the past to find instances of the manipulation of history to suit particular ends and support one’s own fancies and prejudices. The present is full of this, and if the

present, which we have ourselves seen and experienced, can be so distorted, what of the past?

Nevertheless, it is true that Indians are peculiarly liable to accept tradition and report as history, uncritically and without sufficient examination. They will have to rid themselves of this loose thinking and easy way of arriving at conclusions.

But I have digressed and wandered away from the gods and goddesses and the days when myth and legend began. Those were the days when life was full and in harmony with nature, when man's mind gazed with wonder and delight at the mystery of the universe, when heaven and earth seemed very near to each other, and the gods and goddesses came down from Kailasa or their other Himalayan haunts, even as the gods of Olympus used to come down, to play with and sometimes punish men and women. Out of this abundant life and rich imagination grew myth and legend and strong and beautiful gods and goddesses, for the ancient Indians, like the Greeks, were lovers of beauty and life. Professor Gilbert Murray⁸ tells us of the sheer beauty of the Olympian system. That description might well apply to the early creations of the Indian mind also. 'They are artists' dreams, ideals, allegories; they are symbols of something beyond themselves. They are gods of half-rejected tradition, of unconscious make-believe, of aspiration. They are gods to whom doubtful philosophers can pray, with all a philosopher's due caution, as to many radiant and heart-searching hypotheses. They are not gods in whom anyone believes as a hard fact.' Equally applicable to India is what Professor Murray adds: 'As the most beautiful image carved by man was not the god, but only a symbol to help towards conceiving the god; so the god himself, when conceived, was not the reality but only a symbol to help towards conceiving the reality ... Meanwhile they issued no creeds that contradicted knowledge, no commands that made man sin against his own inner light.'

Gradually the days of the Vedic and other gods and goddesses receded into the background and hard and abstruse philosophy took their place. But in the minds of the people these images still floated, companions in joy and friends in distress, symbols of their own vaguely-felt ideals and aspirations. And round them poets wrapped their fancies and built the houses of their dreams, full of rich embroidery and lovely fantasy. Many of these legends and poets' fancies have been delightfully adapted by F.W Bain in his series of little books

containing stories from Indian mythology. In one of these, *The Digit of the Moon*, we are told of the creation of woman. ‘In the beginning, when Twashtri (the Divine Artificer) came to the creation of woman he found that he had exhausted his materials in the making of man and that no solid elements were left. In this dilemma, after profound meditation, he did as follows: he took the rotundity of the moon, and the curves of the creepers, and the clinging of tendrils, and the trembling of grass, and the slenderness of the reed, and the bloom of flowers, and the lightness of leaves, and the tapering of the elephants’s trunk, and the glances of deer, and the clustering of rows of bees, and the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, and the weeping of clouds, and the fickleness of the winds, and the timidity of the hare, and the vanity of the peacock, and the softness of the parrot’s bosom, and the hardness of adamant, and the sweetness of honey, and the cruelty of the tiger, and the warm glow of fire, and the coldness of snow, and the chattering of jays, and the cooing of the *kokila*, and the hypocrisy of the crane, and the fidelity of the *chakravaka*; and compounding all these together, he made woman and gave her to man’.

The Mahabharata

It is difficult to date the epics. They deal with remote periods when the Aryans were still in the process of settling down and consolidating themselves in India. Evidently many authors have written them or added to them in successive periods. The Ramayana is an epic poem with a certain unity of treatment; the Mahabharata is a vast and miscellaneous collection of ancient lore. Both must have taken shape in the pre-Buddhist period, though additions were no doubt made later.

Michelet, the French historian, writing in 1864, with special reference to the Ramayana, says: ‘Whoever has done or willed too much let him drink from this deep cup a long draught of life and youth ... Everything is narrow in the west—Greece is small and I stifle; Judea is dry and I pant. Let me look towards lofty Asia and the profound East for a little while. There lies my great poem, as vast as the Indian Ocean, blessed, gilded with the sun, the book of divine harmony wherein is no dissonance. A serene peace reigns there, and in the midst of

conflict an infinite sweetness, a boundless fraternity, which spreads over all living things, an ocean (without bottom or bound) of love, of pity, of clemency.'

Great as the Ramayana is as an epic poem, and loved by the people, it is really the Mahabharata that is one of the outstanding books of the world. It is a colossal work, an encyclopaedia of tradition and legend, and political and social institutions of ancient India. For a decade or more a host of competent Indian scholars have been engaged in critically examining and collating the various available texts, with a view to publishing an authorized edition. Some parts have been issued by them but the work is still incomplete and is proceeding. It is interesting to note that even in these days of total and horrible war, Russian oriental scholars have produced a Russian translation of the Mahabharata.

Probably this was the period when foreign elements were coming into India and bringing their customs with them. Many of these customs were unlike those of the Aryans, and so a curious mixture of opposing ideas and customs is observable. There was no polyandry among the Aryans, and yet one of the leading heroines of the Mahabharata story is the common wife of five brothers. Gradually the absorption of the earlier indigenous elements as well as of newcomers was taking place, and the Vedic religion was being modified accordingly. It was beginning to take that all-inclusive form which led to modern Hinduism.

This was possible, as the basic approach seems to have been that there could be no monopoly in truth, and there were many ways of seeing it and approaching it. So all kinds of different and even contradictory beliefs were tolerated.

In the Mahabharata a very definite attempt has been made to emphasize the fundamental unity of India, or Bharatvarsha as it was called, from Bharat, the legendary founder of the race. An earlier name was Aryavarta, the land of the Aryas, but this was confined to Northern India up to the Vindhya mountains in Central India. The Aryans had probably not spread beyond that mountain range at that period. The Ramayana story is one of Aryan expansion to the south. The great civil war, which occurred later, described in the Mahabharata, is vaguely supposed to have taken place about the fourteenth century BC. 'That war was for the overlordship of India (or possibly of northern India), and it marks the beginning of the conception of India as a whole, of Bharatvarsha. In this conception a large part of modern Afghanistan, then called Gandhara (from

which the name of the present city of Kandahar), which was considered an integral part of the country was included. Indeed the queen of the principal ruler was named Gandhari, the lady from Gandhara. Dilli or Delhi, not the modern city but ancient cities situated near the modern site, named Hastinapur and Indraprastha, becomes the metropolis of India.

Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), writing about the Mahabharata, has pointed out: ‘The foreign reader ... is at once struck by two features: in the first place its unity in complexity; and, in the second, its constant efforts to impress on its hearers the idea of a single centralized India, with a heroic tradition of her own as formative and uniting impulse.’⁹

The Mahabharata contains the Krishna legends and the famous poem, the Bhagavad Gita. Even apart from the philosophy of the Gita, it lays stress on ethical and moral principles in statecraft and in life generally. Without this foundation of *dharma* there is no true happiness and society cannot hold together. The aim is social welfare, not the welfare of a particular group only but of the whole world, for ‘the entire world of mortals is a self-dependent organism.’ Yet *dharma* itself is relative and depends on the times and the conditions prevailing, apart from some basic principles, such as adherence to truth, non-violence, etc. These principles endure and do not change, but otherwise *dharma*, that amalgam of duties and responsibilities, changes with the changing age. The emphasis on non-violence, here and elsewhere, is interesting, for no obvious contradiction appears to be noticed between this and fighting for a righteous cause. The whole epic centres round a great war. Evidently the conception of *ahimsa*, non-violence, had a great deal to do with the motive, the absence of the violent mental approach, self-discipline and control of anger and hatred, rather than the physical abstention from violent action, when this became necessary and inevitable.

The Mahabharata is a rich storehouse in which we can discover all manner of precious things. It is full of a varied, abundant and bubbling life, something far removed from that other aspect of Indian thought which emphasized asceticism and negation. It is not merely a book of moral precepts though there is plenty of ethics and morality in it. The teaching of the Mahabharat has been summed up in the phrase: ‘Thou shalt not do to others what is disagreeable to thyself’. There is an emphasis on social welfare and this is noteworthy, for the tendency of the

Indian mind is supposed to be in favour of individual perfection rather than social welfare. It says: 'Whatever is not conducive to social welfare, or what ye are likely to be ashamed of, never do'. Again: 'Truth, self-control, asceticism, generosity, non-violence, constancy in virtue—these are the means of success, not caste or family'. 'Virtue is better than immorality and life.' 'True joy entails suffering.' There is a dig at the seeker after wealth: 'The silkworm dies of its wealth'. And, finally, the injunction so typical of a living and advancing people; 'Discontent is the spur of progress'.

There is in the Mahabharata the polytheism of the Vedas, the monism of the Upanishads, and deisms, and dualisms, and monotheism. The outlook is still creative and more or less rationalistic, and the feeling of exclusiveness is yet limited. Caste is not rigid. There was still a feeling of confidence, but as external forces invaded and challenged the security of the old order, that confidence lessened somewhat and a demand for greater uniformity arose in order to produce internal unity and strength. New taboos grew up. The eating of beef, previously countenanced, is later absolutely prohibited. In the Mahabharata there are references to beef or veal being offered to honoured guests.

The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is part of the Mahabharata, an episode in the vast drama. But it stands apart and is complete in itself. It is a relatively small poem of 700 verses—'the most beautiful, perhaps the only true philosophical song existing in any known tongue,' so William von Humboldt described it. Its popularity and influence have not waned ever since it was composed and written in the pre-Buddhistic age, and today its appeal is as strong as ever in India. Every school of thought and philosophy looks up to it and interprets it in its own way. In times of crisis, when the mind of man is tortured by doubt and is torn by the conflict of duties, it has turned all the more to the Gita for light and guidance. For it is a poem of crisis, of political and social crisis and, even more so, of crisis in the spirit of man. Innumerable commentaries on the Gita have appeared in the past and they continue to come out with unfailing regularity. Even the leaders of thought and action of the present day—Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose, Gandhi—have

written on it, each giving his own interpretation. Gandhiji bases his firm belief in non-violence on it, others justify violence and warfare for a righteous cause.

The poem begins with a conversation between Arjuna and Krishna on the very field of battle before the great war begins. Arjuna is troubled, his conscience revolts at the thought of the war and the mass murder that it involves, the killing of friends and relatives—for what purpose? What conceivable gain can outweigh this loss, this sin? All his old standards fail him, his values collapse. Arjuna becomes the symbol of the tortured spirit of man, which, from age to age, has been torn by conflicting obligations and moralities. From this personal conversation we are taken step by step to higher and more impersonal regions of individual duty and social behaviour, of the application of ethics to human life, of the spiritual outlook that should govern all. There is much that is metaphysical in it, and an attempt to reconcile and harmonize the three ways for human advancement: the path of the intellect or knowledge, the path of action, and the path of faith. Probably more emphasis is laid on faith than on the others, and even a personal god emerges, though he is considered as a manifestation of the absolute. The Gita deals essentially with the spiritual background of human existence and it is in this context that the practical problems of everyday life appear. It is a call to action to meet the obligations and duties of life, but always keeping in view that spiritual background and the larger purpose of the universe. Inaction is condemned, and action and life have to be in accordance with the highest ideals of the age, for these ideals themselves may vary from age to age. The *yugadharma*, the ideal of the particular age, has always to be kept in view.

Because modern India is full of frustration and has suffered from too much quietism, this call to action makes a special appeal. It is also possible to interpret that action in modern terms as action for social betterment and social service, practical, altruistic, patriotic and humanitarian. Such action is desirable, according to the Gita, but behind it must lie the spiritual ideal. And action must be in a spirit of detachment, not much concerned with its results. The law of cause and effect holds good under all circumstances; right action must therefore necessarily yield right results, though these might not be immediately apparent.

The message of the Gita is not sectarian or addressed to any particular school of thought. It is universal in its approach for everyone, Brahmin or outcaste: ‘All paths lead to Me,’ it says. It is because of this universality that it has found

favour with all classes and schools. There is something in it which seems to be capable of being constantly renewed, which does not become out of date with the passing of time—an inner quality of earnest inquiry and search, of contemplation and action, of balance and equilibrium in spite of conflict and contradiction. There is a poise in it and a unity in the midst of disparity, and its temper is one of supremacy over the changing environment, not by seeking escape from it but fitting in with it. During the 2,500 years since it was written, Indian humanity has gone repeatedly through the processes of change and development and decay; experience has succeeded experience, thought has followed thought, but it has always found something living in the Gita, something that fitted into the developing thought and had a freshness and applicability to the spiritual problems that afflict the mind.

Life and Work in Ancient India

A great deal has been done by scholars and philosophers to trace the development of philosophic and metaphysical thought in the India of the past; much has also been done to fix the chronology of historic events and draw in broad outline political maps of those periods. But not much has so far been done to investigate the social and economic conditions of those days, how people lived, carried on their work, what they produced and how, and the way trade functioned. Greater attention is being paid to these vital questions now and some works by Indian scholars, and one by an American, have appeared. But a great deal remains to be done. The Mahabharata itself is a storehouse of sociological and other data and many more books will no doubt yield useful information. But they have to be critically examined from this particular point of view. One book of inestimable value is Kautilya's *Arthashastra* of the fourth century BC, which gives details of the political, social, economic, and military organization of the Maurya Empire.

An earlier account, which definitely takes us back to the pre-Buddhist period in India, is contained in the collection of the Jataka tales. These Jatakas were given their present shape sometime after the Buddha. They are supposed to deal with the previous incarnations of the Buddha and have become an important part

of Buddhist literature. But the stories are evidently much older and they deal with the pre-Buddhistic period and give us much valuable information about life in India in those days. Professor Rhys Davids has described them as the oldest, most complete and most important collection of folklore extant. Many of the subsequent collection of animal and other stories which were written in India and found their way to western Asia and Europe can be traced to the Jatakas.

The Jatakas deal with the period when the final amalgamation of the two principal races of India, the Dravidians and the Aryans, was taking place. They reveal ‘a multiform and chaotic society which resists more or less every attempt at classification and about which there can be no talk of an organization according to caste in that age.’¹⁰ The Jatakas may be said to represent the popular tradition as contrasted with the priestly or Brahminic tradition and the Kshatriya or ruling class tradition.

There are chronologies and genealogies of various kingdoms and their rulers. Kingship, originally elective, becomes hereditary according to the rule of primogeniture. Women are excluded from this succession, but there are exemptions. As in China, the ruler is held responsible for all misfortunes; if anything goes wrong the fault must lie with the king. There was a council of ministers and there are also references to some kind of State assembly. Nevertheless the king was an autocratic monarch though he had to function within established conventions. The high priest had an important position in court as an adviser and person in charge of religious ceremonies. There are references to popular revolts against unjust and tyrannical kings, who are sometimes put to death for their crimes.

Village assemblies enjoyed a measure of autonomy. The chief source of revenue was the land. The land-tax was supposed to represent the king’s share of the produce, and it was usually, but not always, paid in kind. Probably this tax was about one-sixth of the produce. It was predominantly an agricultural civilization and the basic unit was the self-governing village. The political and economic structure was built up from these village communities which were grouped in tens and hundreds. Horticulture, rearing of livestock, and dairy farming were practised on an extensive scale. Gardens and parks were common, and fruits and flowers were valued. The list of flowers mentioned is a long one; among the favourite fruits were the mango, fig, grape, plantain and the date.

There were evidently many shops of vegetable and fruit sellers in the cities, as well as of florists. The flower-garland was then, as now, a favourite of the Indian people.

Hunting was a regular occupation, chiefly for the food it provided. Flesh-eating was common and included poultry and fish; venison was highly esteemed. There were fisheries and slaughter-houses. The principal articles of diet were, however, rice, wheat, millet and corn. Sugar was extracted from sugar-cane. Milk and its various products were then, as they are now, highly prized. There were liquor shops, and liquor was apparently made from rice, fruits and sugar-cane.

There was mining for metals and precious stones. Among the metals mentioned are gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, tin, and brass. Among the precious stones were diamonds, rubies, corals, also pearls. Gold, silver and copper coins are referred to. There were partnerships for trade, and loans were advanced on interest.

Among the manufactured goods are silks, woollens and cotton textiles, rugs, blankets and carpets. Spinning, weaving and dyeing are flourishing and widespread industries. The metallurgical industry produces weapons of war. The building industry uses stone, wood, and bricks. Carpenters make a variety of furniture, etc., including carts, chariots, ships, bedsteads, chairs, benches, chests, toys, etc. Cane-workers make mattresses, baskets, fans, and sunshades. Potters function in every village. From flowers and sandalwood a number of perfumes, oils and ‘beauty’ products are made, including sandalwood powder. Various medicines and drugs are manufactured and dead bodies are sometimes embalmed.

Apart from the many kinds of artisans and craftsmen who are mentioned, various other professions are referred to: teachers, physicians and surgeons, merchants and traders, musicians, astrologers, greengrocers, actors, dancers, itinerant jugglers, acrobats, puppet-players, pedlars.

Domestic slavery appears to have been fairly common, but agricultural and other work was done with the help of hired labour. There were even then some untouchables—the *chandals* as they were called, whose chief business was the disposal of dead bodies.

Trade associations and craft-guilds had already assumed importance. ‘The existence of trade associations,’ says Fick, ‘which grew partly for economical reasons, better employment of capital, facilities of intercourse, partly for protecting the legal interest of their class, is surely to be traced to an early period of Indian culture.’ The Jatakas say that there were eighteen craft-unions but they actually mention only four: the woodworkers and the masons, the smiths, the leather workers, and the painters.

Even in the Epics there are references to trade and craft organizations. The Mahabharata says: ‘the safeguard of corporation (guilds) is union.’ It is said that ‘the merchant-guilds were of such authority that the king was not allowed to establish any laws repugnant to these trade unions. The heads of guilds are mentioned next after priests as objects of a king’s anxious concern.’¹¹ The chief of the merchants, the *shreshti* (modern seth), was a man of very considerable importance.

One rather extraordinary development emerges from the Jataka accounts. This is the establishment of special settlements or villages of people belonging to particular crafts. Thus there was a carpenters’ village, consisting, it is said, of 1000 families; a smiths’ village, and so on. These specialized villages were usually situated near a city, which absorbed their special products and which provided them with the other necessities of life. The whole village apparently worked on co-operative lines and undertook large orders. Probably out of this separate living and organization the caste system developed and spread out. The example set by the Brahmins and the nobility was gradually followed by the manufacturers’ corporations and trade guilds.

Great roads, with travellers’ rest houses and occasional hospitals, covered north India and connected distant parts of the country. Trade flourished not only in the country itself but between Indian and foreign countries. There was a colony of Indian merchants living at Memphis in Egypt about the fifth century BC as the discovery of modelled heads of Indians there has shown. Probably there was trade also between India and the islands of South-East Asia.

Overseas trade involved shipping and it is clear that ships were built in India both for the inland waterways and for ocean traffic. There are references in the Epics to shipping duties being paid by ‘merchants coming from afar.’

The Jatakas are full of references to merchants' voyages. There were overland caravans across deserts going westward to the seaport of Broach and north towards Gandhara and Central Asia. From Broach ships went to the Persian Gulf for Babylon (Baveru). There was a great deal of river traffic and, according to the Jatakas, ships travelled from Benares, Patna, Champa (Bhagalpur) and other places to the sea and thence to southern ports and Ceylon and Malaya. Old Tamil poems tell us of the flourishing port of Kaveripattinam on the Kaveri river in the South, which was a centre of international trade. These ships must have been fairly large as it is said in the Jatakas that 'hundreds' of merchants and emigrants embarked on a ship.

In the 'Milinda' (this is the first century AC Milinda is the Greek Bactrian king of North India who became an ardent Buddhist) it is said: 'As a shipowner who has become wealthy by constantly levying freight in some seaport town will be able to traverse the high seas, and go to Vanga (Bengal) or Takkola, or China or Sovira, or Surat or Alexandria, or the Koromandel coast or Further India, or any other place where ships do congregate.'¹²

Among the exports from India were: 'Silks, muslins, the finer sorts of cloth, cutlery and armour, brocades, embroideries and rugs, perfumes and drugs, ivory and ivory work, jewellery and gold (seldom silver); these were the main articles in which the merchant dealt.'¹³

India, or rather North India, was famous for her weapons of war, especially for the quality of her steel, her swords and daggers. In the fifth century BC a large body of Indian troops, cavalry and infantry, accompanied the Persian army to Greece. When Alexander invaded Persia, it is stated in the famous Persian epic poem, Firdusi's 'Shahnamah', that swords and other weapons were hurriedly sent for by the Persians from India. The old (pre-Islamic) Arabic word for sword is 'muhannad', which means 'from Hind' or Indian. This word is in common use still.

Ancient India appears to have made considerable progress in the treatment of iron. There is an enormous iron pillar near Delhi which has baffled modern scientists who have been unable to discover by what process it was made, which has enabled it to withstand oxidation and other atmospheric changes. The inscription on it is in the Gupta script which was in use from the fourth to the

seventh century AC. Some scholars are, however, of opinion that the pillar itself is much older than this inscription, which was added later.

Alexander's invasion of India in the fourth century BC was, from a military point of view, a minor affair. It was more of a raid across the border, and not a very successful raid for him. He met with such stout resistance from a border chieftain that the contemplated advance into the heart of India had to be reconsidered. If a small ruler on the frontier could fight thus, what of the larger and more powerful kingdoms further south? Probably this was the main reason why his army refused to march further and insisted on returning.

The quality of India's military strength was seen very soon after Alexander's return and death, when Seleucus attempted another invasion. He was defeated by Chandragupta and driven back. Indian armies then had an advantage which others lacked; this was the possession of trained war-elephants, which might be compared to the tanks of today. Seleucus Nikator obtained 500 of these war-elephants from India for this campaign against Antigonus in Asia Minor in 302 BC, and military historians say that these elephants were the decisive factor in the battle which ended in the death of Antigonus and the flight of his son Demetrius.

There are books on the training of elephants, the breeding of horses, etc.; each one of these called a *shastra*. This word has come to mean scripture or holy writ, but it was applied indiscriminately to every kind of knowledge and science, varying from mathematics to dancing. In fact the line between religious and secular knowledge was not strictly drawn. They overlapped and everything that seemed useful to life was the object of inquiry.

Writing in India goes back to the most ancient times. Old pottery belonging to the Neolithic period is inscribed with writing in the Brahmi characters. Mohenjo Daro has inscriptions which have not so far been wholly deciphered. The Brahmi inscriptions found all over India are undoubtedly the basic script from which devanagari and others have arisen in India. Some of Ashoka's inscriptions are in the Brahmi script; others, in the north-west, are in the Kharoshti script.

As early as the sixth or seventh century BC Panini wrote his great grammar of the Sanskrit language.¹⁴ He mentions previous grammars and already in his time Sanskrit had crystallized and become the language of an ever-growing literature. Panini's book is something more than a mere grammar. It has been described by the Soviet professor Th. Stcherbatsky of Leningrad, as 'one of the greatest

productions of the human mind.' Panini is still the standard authority on Sanskrit grammar, though subsequent grammarians have added to it and interpreted it. It is interesting to note that Panini mentions the Greek script. This indicates that there were some kind of contacts between India and the Greeks long before Alexander came to the East.

The study of astronomy was especially pursued and it often merged into astrology. Medicine had its textbooks and there were hospitals. Dhanwantari is the legendary founder of the Indian science of medicine. The best known old textbooks, however, date from the early centuries of the Christian era. These are by Charak on medicine and Sushruta on surgery. Charak is supposed to have been the royal court physician of Kanishka who had his capital in the north-west. These textbooks enumerate a large number of diseases and give methods of diagnosis and treatment. They deal with surgery, obstetrics, baths, diet, hygiene, infant-feeding, and medical education. The approach was experimental, and dissection of dead bodies was being practised in the course of surgical training. Various surgical instruments are mentioned by Sushruta, as well as operations, including amputation of limbs, abdominal, caesarean section, cataract, etc. Wounds were sterilized by fumigation. In the third or fourth century BC there were also hospitals for animals. This was probably due to the influence of Jainism and Buddhism with their emphasis on non-violence.

In mathematics the ancient Indians made some epoch-making discoveries, notably that of the zero sign, of the decimal place-value system, of the use of the minus sign, and the use in algebra of letters of the alphabet to denote unknown quantities. It is difficult to date these, as there was always a big time-lag between the discovery and its practical application. But it is clear that the beginnings of arithmetic, algebra, and geometry were laid in the earliest period. Ten formed the basis of enumeration in India even at the time of the Rig Veda. The time and number sense of the ancient Indians was extraordinary. They had a long series of number names for very high numerals. The Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Arabs had apparently no terminology for denominations above the thousand or at most the myriad ($10^{15} = 10,000$). In India there were eighteen specific denominations (10^{16}), and there are even longer lists. In the story of Buddha's early education he is reported to have named denominations up to 10^{17} .

At the other end of the scale there was a minute division of time of which the smallest unit was approximately one-seventeenth of a second, and the smallest lineal measure is given as something which approximates to 1.37×7^{18} inches. All these big and small figures were no doubt entirely theoretical and used for philosophical purposes. Nevertheless, the old Indians, unlike other ancient nations, had vast conceptions of time and space. They thought in a big way. Even their mythology deals with ages of hundreds of millions of years. To them the vast periods of modern geology or the astronomical distances of the stars would not have come as a surprise. Because of this background, Darwin's and other similar theories could not create in India the turmoil and inner conflict which they produced in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century. The popular mind in Europe was used to a timed scale which did not go beyond a few thousand years.

In the *Arthashastra* we are given the weights and measures which were in use in North India in the fourth century BC. There used to be careful supervision of the weights in the market places.

In the epic period we have frequent mention of some kind of forest universities, situated not far from a town or city, where students gathered round well-known scholars for training and education, which comprised a variety of subjects, including military training. These forest abodes were preferred so as to avoid the distractions of city life and enable the students to lead a disciplined and continent life. After some years of this training they were supposed to go back and live as householders and citizens. Probably these forest schools consisted of small groups, though there are indications that a popular teacher would attract large numbers.

Benares has always been a centre of learning, and even in Buddha's day it was old and known as such. It was in the Deer Park near Benares that Buddha preached his first sermon; but Benares does not appear to have been at any time anything like a university, such as existed then and later in other parts of India. There were numerous groups there, consisting of a teacher and his disciples, and often between rival groups there was fierce debate and argument.

But in the north-west, near modern Peshawar, there was an ancient and famous university at Takshashila or Taxila. This was particularly noted for science, especially medicine, and the arts, and people went to it from distant

parts of India. The Jatakas stories are full of instances of sons of nobles and Brahmins travelling, unattended and unarmed, to Taxila to be educated. Probably students came also from Central Asia and Afghanistan, as it was conveniently situated.

It was considered an honour and a distinction to be a graduate of Taxila. Physicians who had studied in the school of medicine there were highly thought of, and it is related that whenever Buddha felt unwell his admirers brought to him a famous physician who had graduated from Taxila. Panini, the great grammarian of the sixth-seventh century BC, is said to have studied there.

Taxila was thus a pre-Buddhist university and a seat of Brahminical learning. During the Buddhist period it became also a centre of Buddhist scholarship and attracted Buddhist students from all over India and across the border. It was the headquarters of the north-western province of the Maurya Empire.

The legal position of women, according to Manu, the earliest exponent of the law, was definitely bad. They were always dependent on somebody—on the father, the husband, or the son. Almost they were treated, in law, as chattels. And yet from the numerous stories in the Epics this law was not applied very rigidly and they held an honoured place in the home and in society. The old law-giver, Manu, himself says: ‘Where women are honoured the gods dwell’. There is no mention of women students at Taxila or any of the old universities; but some of them did function as students somewhere, for there is repeated mention of learned and scholarly women. In later ages also there were a number of eminent women scholars. Bad as the legal position of women was in ancient India, judged by modern standards, it was far better than in ancient Greece and Rome, in early Christianity, in the Canon Law of medieval Europe, and indeed right up to comparatively modern times at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The exponents of the law from Manu onwards refer to forms of partnership in business. Manu refers chiefly to priests; Yagnavalkya includes trade and agriculture. A later writer, Narada, says: ‘Loss, expense, profit of each partner are equal to, more than, or less than those of other partners according as his share (invested) is equal, greater, or less. Storage, food, charges (tolls), loss, freightage, expense of keeping, must be paid by each partner in accordance with the terms of agreement.’

Manu's conception of a state was evidently that of a small kingdom. This conception was, however, growing and changing, leading to the vast Maurya Empire of the fourth century BC and to international contacts with the Greek world.

Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador in India in the fourth century BC, totally denies the existence of slavery in India. But in this he was wrong as there were certainly domestic slaves, and there are references in Indian books of the period to improving the lot of the slaves. It is clear, however, that there was no large-scale slavery and no slave gangs for labour purposes, as were common in many countries then, and this may have led Megasthenes to believe that slavery was completely absent. It was laid down that 'Never shall an Aryan be subjected to slavery.' Who exactly was an Aryan, and who was not, it is difficult to say, but the Aryan fold at that time had come to mean rather vaguely all the four basic castes, including the shudras, but not the untouchables.

In China also, in the days of the early Han Dynasty, slaves were used primarily in domestic service. They were unimportant in agriculture or in large-scale works. Both in India and China these domestic slaves formed a very small proportion of the population, and in this important respect there was thus a vast difference between Indian and Chinese society and contemporary Greek and Roman society.

What were the Indians like in those distant days? It is difficult for us to conceive of a period so far and so different from ours, and yet some vague picture emerges from the miscellaneous data that we have. They were a light-hearted race, confident and proud of their traditions, dabbling in the search for the mysterious, full of questions addressed to nature and human life, attaching importance to the standards and values they had created, but taking life easily and joyously, and facing death without much concern.

Arrian, the Greek historian of Alexander's campaign in North India, was struck by this light-heartedness of the race. 'No nation,' he writes, 'is fonder of singing and dancing than the Indian.'

Mahavira and Buddha: Caste

Some such background existed in North India from the time of the Epics onwards to the early Buddhist period. It was ever changing politically and economically, and the processes of synthesis and amalgamation, as well as the specialization of labour, were taking place. In the realm of ideas there was continuous growth and often conflict. The early Upanishads had been followed by the development of thought and activity in many directions; they were themselves a reaction against priestcraft and ritualism. Men's minds had rebelled against much that they saw, and out of the rebellion had grown these early Upanishads as well as, a little later, the strong current of materialism, and Jainism and Buddhism, and the attempt to synthesize various forms of belief in the Bhagavad Gita. Out of all this again grew the six systems of Indian philosophy. Yet behind all this mental conflict and rebellion lay a vivid and growing national life.

Both Jainism and Buddhism were breakaways from the Vedic religion and its offshoots, though in a sense they had grown out of it. They deny the authority of the Vedas and, most fundamental of all matters, they deny or say nothing about the existence of a first cause. Both lay emphasis on non-violence, and build up organizations of celibate monks and priests. There is a certain realism and rationalism in their approach, though inevitably this does not carry us very far in our dealings with the invisible world. One of the fundamental doctrines of Jainism is that truth is relative to our standpoints. It is a rigorous ethical and non-transcendental system, laying a special emphasis on the ascetic aspect of life and thought.

Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, and Buddha were contemporaries, and both came from the Kshatriya warrior class. Buddha died at the age of eighty, in 544 BC, and the Buddhist era begins then. (This is the traditional date. Historians give a later date, 487 BC, but are now inclined to accept the traditional date as more correct.) It is an odd coincidence that I am writing this on the Buddhist New Year's Day, 2488—the day of the full moon of the month of Vaisakha—the *Vaisakhi Purnima*, as it is called. It is stated in Buddhist literature that Buddha was born on this full moon day of Vaisakha (May-June); that he attained enlightenment and finally died also on the same day of the year.

Buddha had the courage to attack popular religion, superstition, ceremonial, and priestcraft, and all the vested interests that clung to them. He condemned

also the metaphysical and theological outlook, miracles, revelations, and dealings with the supernatural. His appeal was to logic, reason, and experience; his emphasis was on ethics, and his method was one of psychological analysis, a psychology without a soul. His whole approach comes like the breath of the fresh wind from the mountains after the stale air of metaphysical speculation.

Buddha did not attack caste directly, yet in his own order he did not recognize it, and there is no doubt that his whole attitude and activity weakened the caste system. Probably caste was very fluid in his day and for some centuries later. It is obvious that a caste-ridden community could not indulge in foreign trade or other foreign adventures, and yet for fifteen hundred years or more after Buddha, trade was developing between India and neighbouring countries, and Indian colonies flourished. Foreign elements continued to stream into India from the north-west and were absorbed.

It is interesting to observe this process of absorption which worked at both ends. New castes were formed at the bottom of the scale, and any successful invading element became transformed soon into Kshatriyas or the ruling class. Coins of the period just before and after the beginning of the Christian era show this rapid change in the course of two or three generations. The first ruler has a foreign name. His son or grandson appears with a Sanskrit name and is crowned according to the traditional rites meant for Kshatriyas.

Many of the Rajput Kshatriya clans date back to the Shaka or Scythian invasions which began about the second century BC or from the later invasion of the White Huns. All these accepted the faith and institutions of the country and then tried to affiliate themselves to the famous heroes of the Epics. Thus the Kshatriya group depended on status and occupation rather than on descent, and so it was much easier for foreigners to be incorporated into it.

It is curious and significant that throughout the long span of Indian history there have been repeated warnings given by great men against priesthood and the rigidity of the caste system, and powerful movements have risen against them; yet slowly, imperceptibly, almost, it seems, as if it were the inevitable course of destiny, caste has grown and spread and seized every aspect of Indian life in its strangling grip. Rebels against caste have drawn many followers, and yet in course of time their group has itself become a caste. Jainism, a rebel against the parent religion and in many ways utterly different from it, was yet tolerant to

caste and adapted itself to it; and so it survives and continues in India, almost as an offshoot of Hinduism. Buddhism, not adapting itself to caste, and more independent in its thought and outlook, ultimately passes away from India, though it influences India and Hinduism profoundly. Christianity comes here eighteen hundred years ago and settles down and gradually develops its own castes. The Muslim social structure in India, in spite of its vigorous denunciation of all such barriers within the community, is also partly affected.

In our own period numerous movements to break the tyranny of caste have arisen among the middle classes and they have made a difference, but not a vital one, so far as the masses are concerned. Their method was usually one of direct attack. Then Gandhi came and tackled the problem, after the immemorial Indian fashion, in an indirect way, and his eyes were on the masses. He has been direct enough, aggressive enough, persistent enough, but without challenging the original basic functional theory underlying the four main castes. He has attacked the rank undergrowth and overgrowth, knowing well that he was undermining the whole caste structure thereby.¹⁹ He has already shaken the foundations and the masses have been powerfully affected. For them the whole structure holds or breaks altogether. But an even greater power than he is at work: the conditions of modern life—and it seems that at last this hoary and tenacious relic of past times must die.

But while we struggle with caste in India (which, in its origin, was based on colour), new and overbearing castes have arisen in the west with doctrines of racial exclusiveness, sometimes clothed in political and economic terms, and even speaking in the language of democracy.

Before the Buddha, seven hundred years before Christ, a great Indian, the sage and lawgiver Yagnavalkya, is reported to have said: ‘It is not our religion, still less the colour of our skin, that produces virtue; virtue must be practised. Therefore, let no one do to others that he would not have done to himself.’

Chandragupta and Chanakya. The Maurya Empire Established

Buddhism spread gradually in India. Although in origin a Kshatriya movement, and representing a conflict between the ruling class and the priests, its ethical and democratic aspect, and more especially its fight against priestcraft and ritualism, appealed to the people. It developed as a popular reform movement, attracting even some Brahmin thinkers. But generally Brahmins opposed it and called Buddhists heretics and rebels against the established faith. More important than the outward progress was the interaction of Buddhism and the older faith on each other, and the continuous undermining of Brahmins. Two and a half centuries later, the Emperor Ashoka became a convert to the faith and devoted all his energies to spreading it by peaceful missionary efforts in India and foreign countries.

These two centuries saw many changes in India. Various processes had long been going on to bring about racial fusion and to amalgamate the petty states and small kingdoms and republics; the old urge to build up a united centralized state had been working, and out of all this emerged a powerful and highly developed empire. Alexander's invasion of the north-west gave the final push to this development, and two remarkable men arose who could take advantage of the changing conditions and mould them according to their will. These men were Chandragupta Maurya and his friend and minister and counsellor, the Brahmin, Chanakya. This combination functioned well. Both had been exiled from the powerful Nanda kingdom of Magadha, which had its headquarters at Pataliputra (the modern Patna); both went to Taxila in the north-west and came in contact with the Greeks stationed there by Alexander. Chandragupta met Alexander himself; he heard of his conquests and glory and was fired by ambition to emulate him. Chandragupta and Chanakya watched and prepared themselves; they hatched great and ambitious schemes and waited for the opportunity to realize them.

Soon news came of Alexander's death at Babylon in 323 BC, and immediately Chandragupta and Chanakya raised the old and ever-new cry of nationalism and roused the people against the foreign invader. The Greek garrison was driven away and Taxila captured. The appeal to nationalism had brought allies to Chandragupta and he marched with them across north India to Pataliputra. Within two years of Alexander's death, he was in possession of that city and kingdom, and the Maurya Empire had been established.

Alexander's general, Seleucus, who had inherited after his chief's death the countries from Asia Minor to India, tried to re-establish his authority in north-west India and crossed the Indus with an army. He was defeated and had to cede a part of Afghanistan, up to Kabul and Herat, to Chandragupta, who also married the daughter of Seleucus. Except for south India, Chandragupta's Empire covered the whole of India, from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, and extended in the north to Kabul. For the first time in recorded history a vast centralized state had risen in India. The city of Pataliputra was the capital of this great empire.

What was this new state like? Fortunately we have full accounts, both Indian and Greek. Megasthenes, the ambassador sent by Seleucus, has left a record and, much more important is that contemporary account—Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the 'Science of Polity', to which reference has already been made. Kautilya is another name for Chanakya, and thus we have a book written, not only by a great scholar, but a man who played a dominating part in the establishment, growth and preservation of the empire. Chanakya has been called the Indian Machiavelli, and to some extent the comparison is justified. But he was a much bigger person in every way, greater in intellect and action. He was no mere follower of a king, a humble advisor of an all-powerful emperor. A picture of him emerges from an old Indian play—the *Mudra-Rakshasa*—which deals with this period. Bold and scheming, proud and revengeful, never forgetting a slight, never forgetting his purpose, availing himself of every device to delude and defeat the enemy, he sat with the reins of empire in his hands and looked upon the emperor more as a loved pupil than as a master. Simple and austere in his life, uninterested in the pomp and pageantry of high position, when he had redeemed his pledge and accomplished his purpose, he wanted to retire, Brahmin-like, to a life of contemplation.

There was hardly anything Chanakya would have refrained from doing to achieve his purpose; he was unscrupulous enough; yet he was also wise enough to know that this very purpose might be defeated by means unsuited to the end. Long before Clausewitz, he is reported to have said that war is only a continuance of state policy by other means. But, he adds, war must always serve the larger ends of policy and not become an end in itself; the statesman's objective must always be the betterment of the state as a result of war, not the

mere defeat and destruction of the enemy. If war involves both parties in a common ruin, that is bankruptcy of statesmanship. War must be conducted by armed forces; but much more important than the force of arms is the high strategy which saps the enemy's morale and disrupts his forces and brings about his collapse, or takes him to the verge of collapse, before armed attack. Unscrupulous and rigid as Chanakya was in the pursuit of his aim, he never forgot that it was better to win over an intelligent and high-minded enemy than to crush him. His final victory was obtained by sowing discord in the enemy's ranks, and, in the very moment of this victory, so the story goes, he induced Chandragupta to be generous to his rival chief. Chanakya himself is said to have handed over the insignia of his own high office to the minister of that rival, whose intelligence and loyalty to his old chief had impressed him greatly. So the story ends not in the bitterness of defeat and humiliation, but in reconciliation and in laying the firm and enduring foundations of a state, which had not only defeated but won over its chief enemy.

The Maurya Empire maintained diplomatic relations with the Greek world, both with Seleucus and his successors and with Ptolemy Philadelphus. These relations rested on the solid foundation of mutual commercial interest. Strabo tells us that the Oxus river in Central Asia formed a link in an important chain along which Indian goods were carried to Europe by way of the Caspian and the Black Sea. This route was popular in the third century BC. Central Asia then was rich and fertile, More than a thousand years later it began to dry up. The *Arthashastra* mentions that the king's stud had 'Arabian steeds'!

The Organization of the State

What was this new state like that arose in 321 BC and covered far the greater part of India, right up to Kabul in the north? It was an autocracy, a dictatorship at the top, as most empires were and still are. There was a great deal of local autonomy in the towns and village units, and elective elders looked after these local affairs. This local autonomy was greatly prized and hardly any king or supreme ruler interfered with it. Nevertheless, the influence and many-sided activities of the central government were all-pervasive, and in some ways this Mauryan state

reminds one of modern dictatorships. There could have been then, in a purely agricultural age, nothing like the control of the individual by the state which we see today. But, in spite of limitations, an effort was made to control and regulate life. The state was very far from being just a police state, interested in keeping external and internal peace and collecting revenue.

There was a widespread and rigid bureaucracy and there are frequent references to espionage. Agriculture was regulated in many ways, so were rates of interest. Regulation and periodical inspection took place of food, markets, manufacturers, slaughter-houses, cattle-raising, water rights, sports, courtesans, and drinking saloons. Weights and measures were standardized. The cornering and adulteration of foodstuffs were rigorously punished. Trade was taxed, and, so also in some respects, the practice of religion. When there was a breach of regulation or some other misdemeanour, the temple monies were confiscated. If rich people were found guilty of embezzlement or of profiting from national calamity, their property was also confiscated. Sanitation and hospitals were provided and there were medical men at the chief centres. The state gave relief to widows, orphans, the sick, and the infirm. Famine relief was a special care of the state, and half the stores in all the state warehouses were always kept in reserve for times of scarcity and famine.

All these rules and regulations were probably applied far more to the cities than to the villages; and it is also likely that practice lagged far behind theory. Nevertheless, even the theory is interesting. The village communities were practically autonomous.

Chanakya's *Arthashastra* deals with a vast variety of subjects and covers almost every aspect of the theory and practice of government. It discusses the duties of the king, of his ministers and councillors, of council meetings, of departments of government, of diplomacy, of war and peace. It gives details of the vast army which Chandragupta had, consisting of infantry, cavalry, chariots, and elephants.²⁰ And yet Chanakya suggests that mere numbers do not count for much; without discipline and proper leadership they may become a burden. Defence and fortifications are also dealt with.

Among the other matters discussed in the book are trade and commerce, law and law courts, municipal government, social customs, marriage and divorce, rights of women, taxation and revenue, agriculture, the working of mines and

factories, artisans, markets, horticulture, manufactures, irrigation and waterways, ships and navigation, corporations, census operations, fisheries, slaughter houses, passports, and jails. Widow remarriage is recognized; also divorce under certain circumstances.

There is a reference to *chinapatta*, silk fabrics of China manufacture, and a distinction is made between these and the silk made in India. Probably the latter was of a coarser variety. The importation of Chinese silk indicates trade contacts with China at least as early as the fourth century BC.

The king, at the time of his coronation, had to take the oath of service to the people—‘May I be deprived of heaven, of life, and of offspring if I oppress you.’ ‘In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness; in their welfare, whatever pleases himself he shall consider as not good, but whatever pleases his subjects, he shall consider as good.’ ‘If a king is energetic, his subjects will be equally energetic.’ Public work could not suffer or await the king’s pleasure; he had always to be ready for it. And if the king misbehaved, his people had the right to remove him and put another in his place.

There was an irrigation department to look after the many canals, and a navigation department for the harbours, ferries, bridges, and the numerous boats and ships that went up and down the rivers and crossed the seas to Burma and beyond. There was apparently some kind of navy, too, as an adjunct of the army.

Trade flourished in the empire and great roads connected the distant parts, with frequent rest-houses for travellers. The chief road was named King’s Way and this went right across the country from the capital to the north-west frontier. Foreign merchants are especially mentioned and provided for, and seem to have enjoyed a kind of extra-territoriality. It is said that the old Egyptians wrapped their mummies in Indian muslins and dyed their cloth with indigo obtained from India. Some kind of glass has also been discovered in the old remains. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador, tells us that the Indians loved finery and beauty, and even notes the use of the shoe to add to one’s height.

There was a growth of luxury in the Maurya Empire. Life becomes more complicated, specialized, and organized. ‘Inns, hostelries, eating-houses, serais, and gaming-houses are evidently numerous; sects and crafts have their meeting places and the latter their public dinners. The business of entertainment provides a livelihood for various classes of dancers, singers, and actors. Even the villages

are visited by them, and the author of the *Arthashastra* is inclined to discourage the existence of a common hall used for their shows as too great a distraction from the life of the home and the fields. At the same time there are penalties for refusal to assist in organizing public entertainment. ‘The king provides, in amphitheatres constructed for the occasion, dramatic, boxing, and other contests of men and animals, and also spectacles with displays of pictured objects of curiosity ... not seldom the streets were lighted for festivals.’²¹ There were also royal processions and hunts.

There were many populous cities in this vast empire, but the chief of them was the capital, Pataliputra, a magnificent city spread out along the banks of the Ganges, where the Sone river meets it (the modern Patna). Megasthenes describes it thus: ‘At the junction of this river (Ganges) with another is situated Palibothra, a city of eighty stadia (9.2 miles) in length and fifteen stadia (1.7 miles) in breadth. It is of a shape of a parallelogram and is girded with a wooden wall, pierced with loopholes for the discharge of arrows. It has a ditch in front for defence and for receiving the sewage of the city. This ditch, which encompassed it all round, is 600 feet in breadth and thirty cubits in depth, and the wall is crowned with 570 towers and has four and sixty gates.’

Not only was this great wall made of wood, but most of the houses also. Apparently this was a precaution against earthquakes, as that area was peculiarly liable to them. In 1934 the great Bihar earthquake forcibly reminded us of this fact. Because the houses were of wood, very elaborate precautions against fire were taken. Every householder had to keep ladders, hooks, and vessels full of water.

Pataliputra had a municipality elected by the people. It had thirty members, divided up into six committees of five members each, dealing with industries and handicrafts, deaths and births, manufactures, arrangements for travellers and pilgrims, etc. The whole municipal council looked after finance, sanitation, water supply, public buildings, and gardens.

Buddha’s Teaching

Behind these political and economic revolutions that were changing the face of India, there was the ferment of Buddhism and its impact on old-established faiths and its quarrels with vested interests in religion. Far more than the debates and arguments, of which India has always been so enamoured, the personality of a tremendous and radiant being had impressed the people and his memory was fresh in their minds. His message, old and yet very new and original for those immersed in metaphysical subtleties, captured the imagination of the intellectuals; it went deep down into the hearts of the people. ‘Go unto all lands,’ had said the Buddha to his disciples, ‘and preach this gospel. Tell them that the poor and the lowly, the rich and the high, are all one, and that all castes unite in this religion as do the rivers in the sea.’ His message was one of universal benevolence, of love for all. For ‘Never in this world does hatred cease by hatred; hatred ceases by love.’ And ‘Let a man overcome anger by kindness, evil by good.’

It was an ideal of righteousness and self-discipline. ‘One may overcome a thousand men in battle, but he who conquers himself is the greatest victor.’ ‘Not by birth, but by his conduct alone, does a man become a low-caste or a Brahmin.’ Even a sinner is not to be condemned, for ‘who would willingly use hard speech to those who have done a sinful deed, strewing salt, as it were, upon the wound of their fault?’ Victory itself over another leads to unhappy consequences—‘Victory breeds hatred, for the conquered is unhappy.’

All this he preached without any religious sanction or any reference to God or another world. He relies on reason and logic and experience and asks people to seek the truth in their own minds. He is reported to have said: ‘One must not accept my law from reverence, but first try it as gold is tried by fire.’ Ignorance of truth was the cause of all misery. Whether there is a God or an Absolute or not, he does not say. He neither affirms nor denies. Where knowledge is not possible we must suspend judgment. In answer to a question, Buddha is reported to have said: ‘If by the absolute is meant something out of relation to all known things, its existence cannot be established by any known reasoning. How can we know that anything unrelated to other things exists at all? The whole universe, as we know it, is a system of relations: we know nothing that is, or can be, unrelated.’ So we must limit ourselves to what we can perceive and about which we can have definite knowledge.

So also Buddha gives no clear answer about the existence of the soul. He does not deny it and he does not affirm it. He refuses to discuss this question, which is very remarkable, for the Indian mind of his day was full of the individual soul and the absolute soul, of monism and monotheism and other metaphysical hypotheses. But Buddha set his mind against all forms of metaphysics. He does, however, believe in the permanence of a natural law, of universal causation, of each successive state being determined by pre-existing conditions, of virtue and happiness and vice and suffering being organically related.

We use terms and descriptions in this world of experience and say ‘it is’ or ‘it is not’. Yet neither may be correct when we go behind the superficial aspect of things and our language may be inadequate to describe what is actually happening. Truth may lie somewhere in the middle of ‘is’ and ‘is not’ or beyond them. The river flows continuously and appears to be the same from moment to moment, yet the waters are ever changing. So also fire. The flame keeps glowing and even maintains its shape and form, yet it is never the same flame and it changes every instant. So everything continually changes and life in all its forms is a stream of becoming. Reality is not something that is permanent and unchanging, but rather a kind of radiant energy, a thing of forces and movements, a succession of sequences. The idea of time is just ‘a notion abstracted by mere usage from this or that event.’ We cannot say that one thing is the cause of something else for there is no core of permanent being which changes. The essence of a thing is its immanent law of relation to other so-called things. Our bodies and our souls change from moment to moment; they cease to be, and something else, like them and yet different, appears and then passes off. In a sense we are dying all the time and being reborn and this succession gives the appearance of an unbroken identity. It is ‘the continuity of an ever-changing identity.’ Everything is flux, movement, change.

All this is difficult for our minds to grasp, used as we are to set methods of thinking and of interpreting physical phenomena. Yet it is remarkable how near this philosophy of the Buddha brings us to some of the concepts of modern physics and modern philosophic thought.

Buddha’s method was one of psychological analysis and, again, it is surprising to find how deep was his insight into this latest of modern sciences. Man’s life was considered and examined without any reference to a permanent

self, for even if such a self exists, it is beyond our comprehension. The mind was looked upon as part of the body, a composite of mental forces. The individual thus becomes a bundle of mental states, the self is just a stream of ideas. ‘All that we are is the result of what we have thought.’

There is an emphasis on the pain and suffering of life, and the ‘Four Noble Truths’ which Buddha enunciated deal with this suffering, its cause, the possibility of ending it, and the way to do it. Speaking to his disciples, he is reported to have said: ‘and while ye experienced this (sorrow) through long ages, more tears have flowed from you and have been shed by you, while ye strayed and wandered on this pilgrimage (of life), and sorrowed and wept, because that was your portion which ye abhorred, and that which ye loved was not your portion, than all the water which is in the four great oceans.’

Through an ending of this state of suffering is reached *Nirvana*. As to what *Nirvana* is, people differ, for it is impossible to describe a transcendental state in our inadequate language and in terms of the concepts of our limited minds. Some say it is just extinction, a blowing out. And yet Buddha is reported to have denied this and to have indicated that it was an intense kind of activity. It was the extinction of false desire, and not just annihilation, but it cannot be described by us except in negative terms.

Buddha’s way was the middle path, between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. From his own experience of mortification of the body, he said that a person who has lost his strength cannot progress along the right path. This middle path was the Aryan eightfold path: right beliefs, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right mode of livelihood, right effort, right-mindedness, and right rapture. It is all a question of self-development, not grace. And if a person succeeds in developing along these lines and conquers himself, there can be no defeat for him: ‘Not even a god can change into defeat the victory of a man who has vanquished himself.’

Buddha told his disciples what he thought they could understand and live up to. His teaching was not meant to be a full explanation of everything, a complete revelation of all that is. Once, it is said, he took some dry leaves in his hand and asked his favourite disciple, Ananda, to tell him whether there were any other leaves besides those in his hand. Ananda replied: ‘The leaves of autumn are falling on all sides, and there are more of them than can be numbered.’ Then said

the Buddha: ‘In like manner I have given you a handful of truths, but besides these there are many thousands of other truths, more than can be numbered.’

The Buddha Story

The Buddha story attracted me even in early boyhood, and I was drawn to the young Siddhartha who, after many inner struggles and pain and torment, was to develop into the Buddha. Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia* became one of my favourite books. In later years, when I travelled about a great deal in my province, I liked to visit the many places connected with the Buddha legend, sometimes making a detour for the purpose. Most of these places lie in my province or not far from it. Here (on the Nepal frontier) Buddha was born, here he wandered, here (at Gaya in Bihar) he sat under the Bodhi tree and gained enlightenment, here he preached his first sermon, here he died.

When I visited countries where Buddhism is still a living and dominant faith, I went to see the temples and the monasteries and met monks and laymen, and tried to make out what Buddhism had done to the people. How had it influenced them, what impress had it left on their minds and faces, how did they react to modern life? There was much I did not like. The rational ethical doctrine had become overlaid with so much verbiage, so much ceremonial, canon law, so much, in spite of the Buddha, metaphysical doctrine and even magic. Despite Buddha’s warning, they had deified him, and his huge images, in the temples and elsewhere, looked down upon me and I wondered what he would have thought. Many of the monks were ignorant persons, rather conceited and demanding obeisance, if not to themselves then to their vestments. In each country the national characteristics had imposed themselves on the religion and shaped it according to their distinctive customs and modes of life. All this was natural enough and perhaps an inevitable development.

But I saw much also that I liked. There was an atmosphere of peaceful study and contemplation in some of the monasteries and the schools attached to them. There was a look of peace and calm on the faces of many of the monks, a dignity, a gentleness, an air of detachment and freedom from the cares of the world. Did all this accord with life today, or was it a mere escape from it? Could

it not be fitted into life's ceaseless struggle and tone down the vulgarity and acquisitiveness and violence that afflict us?

The pessimism of Buddhism did not fit in with my approach to life, nor did the tendency to walk away from life and its problems. I was, somewhere at the back of my mind, a pagan with a pagan's liking for the exuberance of life and nature, and not very much averse to the conflicts that life provides. All that I had experienced, all that I saw around me, painful and distressing as it was, had not dulled that instinct.

Was Buddhism passive and pessimistic? Its interpreters may say so; many of its own devotees may have drawn that meaning. I am not competent to judge of its subtleties and its subsequent complex and metaphysical development. But when I think of the Buddha no such feeling arises in me, nor can I imagine that a religion based mainly on passivity and pessimism could have had such a powerful hold on vast numbers of human beings, among them the most gifted of their kind.

The conception of the Buddha, to which innumerable loving hands have given shape in carven stone and marble and bronze, seems to symbolize the whole spirit of Indian thought, or at least one vital aspect of it. Seated on the lotus flower, calm and impassive, above passion and desire, beyond the storm and strife of this world, so far away he seems, out of reach, unattainable. Yet again we look and behind those still, unmoving features there is a passion and an emotion, strange and more powerful than the passions and emotions we have known. His eyes are closed, but some power of the spirit looks out of them and a vital energy fills the frame. The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away after all; his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement.

Personality counts today as ever, and a person who has impressed himself on the thought of mankind as Buddha has, so that even today there is something living and vibrant about the thought of him, must have been a wonderful man—a man who was, as Barth says, the 'finished model of calm and sweet majesty, of infinite tenderness for all that breathes and compassion for all that suffers, of perfect moral freedom and exemption from every prejudice.' And the nation and

the race which can produce such a magnificent type must have deep reserves of wisdom and inner strength.

Ashoka

The contacts between India and the western world which Chandragupta Maurya had established continued during the reign of his son, Bindusara. Ambassadors came to the court at Pataliputra from Ptolemy of Egypt and Antiochus, the son and successor of Seleucus Nikator of western Asia. Ashoka, grandson of Chandragupta, added to these contacts, and India became in his time an important international centre, chiefly because of the rapid spread of Buddhism.

Ashoka succeeded to this great empire about 273 BC. He had previously served as viceroy in the north-western province, of which Taxila, the university centre, was the capital. Already the empire included far the greater part of India and extended right into Central Asia. Only the south-east and a part of the south were beyond its sway. The old dream of uniting the whole of India under one supreme government fired Ashoka and forthwith he undertook the conquest of Kalinga on the east coast, which corresponds roughly with modern Orissa and part of Andhra. His armies triumphed in spite of the brave and obstinate resistance of the people of Kalinga. There was a terrible slaughter in this war, and when news of this reached Ashoka he was stricken with remorse and disgusted with war. Unique among the victorious monarchs and captains in history, he decided to abandon warfare in the full tide of victory. The whole of India acknowledged his sway, except for the southern tip, and that tip was his for the taking. But he refrained from any further aggression, and his mind turned, under the influence of Buddha's gospel, to conquests and adventures in other fields.

What Ashoka felt and how he acted are known to us in his own words in the numerous edicts he issued, carved in rock and metal. Those edicts, spread out all over India, are still with us, and they conveyed his messages not only to his people but to posterity. In one of the edicts it is said that:

Kalinga was conquered by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty when he had been consecrated eight years. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were thence carried away as captive, one

hundred thousand were there slain, and many times that number died.

Directly after the annexation of the Kalingas began His Sacred Majesty's zealous protection of the Law of Piety, his love of that Law, and his inculcation of that Law (Dharma). Thus arose His Sacred Majesty's remorse for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves the slaughter, death, and carrying away captive of the people. That is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty.

No longer, goes on the edict, would Ashoka tolerate any more killing or taking into captivity, not even of a hundredth or a thousandth part of the number killed and made captive in Kalinga. True conquest consists of the conquest of men's hearts by the law of duty or piety, and, adds Ashoka, such real victories had already been won by him, not only in his own dominions, but in distant kingdoms.

The edict further says:

Moreover, should any one do him wrong, that too must be borne with by His Sacred Majesty, so far as it can possibly be borne with. Even upon the forest folk in his dominions His Sacred Majesty looks kindly and he seeks to make them think aright, for, if he did not, repentance would come upon His Sacred Majesty. For His Sacred Majesty desires that all animate beings should have security, self-control, peace of mind, and joyousness.

This astonishing ruler, beloved still in India and in many other parts of Asia, devoted himself to the spread of Buddha's teaching, to righteousness and goodwill, and to public works for the good of the people. He was no passive spectator of events, lost in contemplation and self-improvement. He laboured hard at public business and declared that he was always ready for it: 'at all times and at all places, whether I am dining or in the ladies' apartments, in my bedroom or in my closet, in my carriage or in my palace gardens, the official reporters should keep me informed of the people's business ... At any hour and at any place work I must for the commonweal.'

His messengers and ambassadors went to Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Cyrene and Epirus, conveying his greeting and Buddha's message. They went to Central Asia also and to Burma and Siam, and he sent his own son and daughter, Mahendra and Sanghamitra, to Ceylon in the south. Everywhere an appeal was made to the mind and the heart; there was no force or compulsion. Ardent Buddhist as he was, he showed respect and consideration for all other faiths. He proclaimed in an edict: 'All sects deserve reverence for one reason or another.

By thus acting a man exalts his own sect and at the same time does service to the sects of other people.'

Buddhism spread rapidly in India from Kashmir to Ceylon. It penetrated into Nepal and later reached Tibet and China and Mongolia. In India, one of the consequences of this was the growth of vegetarianism and abstention from alcoholic drinks. Till then both Brahmins and Kshatriyas often ate meat and took wine. Animal sacrifice was forbidden.

Because of the growth of foreign contacts and missionary enterprises, trade between India and other countries must have also grown. We have records of an Indian colony in Khotan (now Sinkiang, Central Asia). The Indian universities, especially Taxila, also attracted more students from abroad.

Ashoka was a great builder and it has been suggested that he employed foreign craftsmen to assist in building some of his huge structures. This inference is drawn from the designs of some clustered columns which remind one of Persepolis. But even in those early sculptures and other remains the characteristically Indian art tradition is visible.

Ashoka's famous many-pillared hall in his palace at Pataliputra was partly dug out by archaeologists about thirty years ago. Dr Spooner, of the Archaeological Department of India, in his official report, said that this was 'in an almost incredible state of preservation, the logs which formed it being as smooth and perfect as the day they were laid, more than two thousand years ago.' He says further that the 'marvellous preservation of the ancient wood, whose edges were so perfect that the very lines of jointure were indistinguishable, evoked admiration of all who witnessed the experiment. The whole was built with a precision and reasoned care that could not possibly be excelled today ...' In short, the construction was absolute perfection of such work.

In other excavated buildings also in different parts of the country wooden logs and rafters have been found in an excellent state of preservation. This would be surprising anywhere, but in India it is more so, for the climate wears them away and all manner of insects eat them up. There must have been some special treatment of the wood; what this was is still, I believe, a mystery.

Between Pataliputra (Patna) and Gaya lie the impressive remains of Nalanda university, which was to become famous in later days. It is not clear when this

began functioning and there are no records of it in Ashoka's time.

Ashoka died in 232 BC, after ruling strenuously for forty-one years. Of him H.G. Wells says in his *Outline of History*:

Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star. From the Volga to Japan his name is still honoured. China, Tibet, and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserve the tradition of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory today than have ever heard the names of Constantine or Charlemagne.