

The Resurgent India

A Monthly National Review

May 2016



“Let us all work for the Greatness of India.”

– The Mother

Year 7

Issue 2

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Editor : Ms. Garima Sharma, B-45, Batra Colony, Village Bharatpur, P.O. Kaushal Ganj, Bilaspur Distt. Rampur (U.P)

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SUCCESSFUL FUTURE

(Full of Promise and Joyful Surprises)

Botanical name: Gaillardia Pulchella

Common name: Indian blanket, Blanket flower, Fire-wheels

Year 7

Issue 2

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A Declaration

We do not fight against any creed, any religion.

We do not fight against any form of government.

We do not fight against any social class.

We do not fight against any nation or civilisation.

We are fighting division, unconsciousness, ignorance, inertia and falsehood.

We are endeavouring to establish upon earth union, knowledge, consciousness, Truth, and we fight whatever opposes the advent of this new creation of Light, Peace, Truth and Love.

- The Mother

(Collected works of the Mother 13, p. 124-25)

NEW CHANGES IN POLICY TOWARDS WOMEN

The past year has seen a rise in the spate of violence – both psychological and physical – against women. It has, however, been accompanied by increasing sensitization and resistance among women. The most prominent events of the past year have centred around the temple entry movements led by women in major parts of the country, election of a first-time all-women’s Panchayat in Haryana through the rising demand for qualified and educated women, contestation of religious injustice through the Sharaya Banu and other cases seeking reform of Muslim Personal Law, and the protests following the recent brutal rape cases in Kerala.

The silent uprising for the empowerment of women has been a gradual process, which has been unfolding since the protests for a strong legal bill following the Nirbhaya rape case of 2012. However, in the past year, that process has accelerated. During the previous regime of the Congress government, the legal action against sexual harassment through the Justice Verma Committee Report occurred after a lot of protests, tribulations and tears, with the government continuing to drag its feet in taking action. However, this government has been proactive in promoting the cause of women empowerment. And the unlikely, and inadvertent, agent of change is Maneka Gandhi.

By the virtue of being the Minister of Women and Child Development, and by the sheer fortune of being a part of the proactive Modi cabinet, Mrs Gandhi has found herself in a spot where taking policy action has become a necessity. As a result, the Ministry departments and divisions in Women and Child Development are facing the same choice that every bureaucrat is facing, under the current government – come up with policy work or else face a negative performance stigma. This is now beginning to show some results, albeit at a purely superficial level, as yet.

The policies of the government send out a clear message that they treat women as individuals – as active contributors to the system, rather than as a weak group demanding welfare dole-outs.

THE DISEMPOWERING LOGIC OF WELFARE

This is radically different from the approach of the Congress-led government. The UPA's whole economy, whole approach towards welfare and governance and the whole treatment of "marginalized" sections of society, was based on subsidies – throw money and legal bills at the problem and divide them along their community lines. It was a subsistence economy oiled by the wheels of sly political expediency. In case of treatment of women, it allied with intellectuals to further weaken their position in society, by showing apathy towards innumerable women engaged in agricultural and informal sectors by not ensuring equal sexual division of labour, by creating vicious Parliamentary politics through the debate on 33% reservation for women and by generating unworkable policies for the girl-child and adolescent girls that actually ensured that they became a liability and an opportunity for their parents to earn money. It is unfortunate that majority of the UPA-era policies promise monetary and material benefits to the parents in return for keeping their daughters well. These policies – a brain-child of university academics – were doomed to failure right from the start, while the very idea of 33% reservation made it look as if women are second-class citizens that are taking away rather than contributing to the system.

The major policies (refer to Table 1 in the Appendix) simply enumerate the aims, but the detailed conditions invariably try to ensure compliance by offering some kind of material benefits or incentives. Existent policy responses by the government adopted three approaches: (1) bans on the use of technology for sex-selective abortion for non-medical purposes; (2) financial incentives for parents to raise daughters; and (3) advocacy and media outreach to encourage parents to perceive girls to be as valuable as boys. The last mode was the least used by the previous government and the most used by the present government.

There are major problems with these welfare schemes:

First, are we more concerned about addressing the image of the state in question by talking about skewed sex ratio, while not caring

about the actual implementation and the amount of funds transferred? This is akin to throwing money at the issues, without really addressing them.

Second, these schemes, even as they disburse questionably low funding, have also tied up the benefits of the scheme with explicit population control objectives. By instituting conditions like the small family norm, these schemes are presenting poor families with uncomfortable choices. For instance, one of the conditions of the Bhagalakshmi Scheme is that in case the benefit is to be extended to a third girl child the father or the mother should have undergone a terminal family planning method.

Third, the welfare matrix constructs an image of the woman as a passive beneficiary of government spending, without any active contributions to the society, the economy and the politics. This is far from the facts. According to research¹, direct land transfers to women are likely to benefit not just women but also children. Evidence both from India and from many other parts of the world shows that women, especially in poor households, spend most of the earnings they control on basic household needs, while men spend a significant part of theirs on personal goods, such as alcohol, tobacco, etc.

Fourth, the teeming welfare schemes are at odds with the deteriorating social condition of women. According to data², the overall sex ratio of the population in India decreased from 972 female (per 1000 male) in 1901 to 940 in 2011. Child sex ratio fallen from 945 girls per 1000 boys in 1991 to 927 in 2001 and 919 in 2011. This is despite the existing number of policies to address the declining child sex ratio specifically.

YET ANOTHER FLAWED BELIEF: CAN MERE RESERVATION ACCOMPLISH EMPOWERMENT?

Then there has been much discussion on 33% reservation for women in the Parliament. The popular perception is that it will lead to empowerment. However, besides the deeper flawed logic of this belief, even the facts on ground show a different reality.

The track record of women's representation in political parties in India and their performance as candidates in elections, as well as their high electoral turn-outs, certainly indicates an immense scope for improvement and underlying potential for scaling up the empowerment outcomes. But the question before us is whether the perennial demand for reservation can actually be a workable solution here. Based on existing research, when we look at the experience of major countries in terms of ensuring political representation, the following central points emerge:

First, reservation, as the Pakistan experience shows, leads to the creation of a glass ceiling, wherein women contest only the seats reserved for them, leaving the rest of the general seats to the male candidates. Political parties are afflicted by such a dynamic.

Second, the policy of implementing voluntary quotas by political parties has worked very well in countries like South Africa, Germany and Sweden.³ With even one political party voluntarily implementing quotas for women within its organizational structure, an enabling environment is created for positive spill-over effects for other parties to follow that route. In India, where the major national parties unfortunately compete in not giving adequate representation to women in their internal party structures, such an approach might yield positive outcomes. This is especially because, as the data already documented shows, regional parties have a much larger share of women MPs in their fold, showing that inter-party competition can drive organizational changes.

Finally, there is a need to cultivate a political culture that can be conducive to the development of strong potential women candidates. The experiment failed in Pakistan, thereby ensuring that reservation just became an ornamental formality. It is herein that we need to understand the linkage between political empowerment and economic contribution of women, as will be discussed in the next section. Unless women's contribution to the economy is recognized through which women are acknowledged as agents, the policy of reservation will invariably end up constructing a rhetoric of women as passive

recipients of welfare dole-outs, rather than active members of the political community crafting their own policy choices.

MOVING ON FROM THE OLD RHETORIC

Despite the flaws behind their fundamental thinking, these are kind of policies that the Congress regime has propagated over the decades. They have been responsible for major injustices suffered by the women, and the change could only come once the women actively protested against the government after the 2012 rape case. And the Nature let that too take its full course, since, beneath the drudgery and corruption, certain ideas needed to be realized in the public thinking. Now that time is up. The new women's uprising even broke away from the so-called women's movements and NGOs that have existed in no rare number in India.

The current government is both a harbinger of change and has no choice but to be more 'productive'. The first stirrings of the new shift are already visible in the India of today in the dual form of institutional change and social change. In terms of institutional change, it is visible in the recommendations of the draft National Policy for Women, 2016, which will be revised from the 2001, to keep pace with the changing realities. Instead of social welfare dole-outs, the thrust of the new policy clearly recognizes women as equal economic agents to fight 'social prejudices and stereotypes', by advocating measures like overhaul of personal laws to facilitate gender equality, criminalisation of marital rape as a human rights issue, rights of sex workers and the transgender community, recognizing the validity of pre-nuptial agreements in order to ensure that divorced women get their due, recognizing the validity of dependent care paid leave for all employees to reduce the burden of unpaid care falling on women, and new forms of sexual abuse through technological mediums.

Even though all of these recommendations have their flipside and the working of actual policy may produce many grey areas for women, yet what is common to all is the shift in public policy, in

recognizing women as independent contributors to the system. Even where the policy seeks to give relief from entrenched stereotypes, it does so by vesting women with rights rather than favourable entitlements.

In social practise and change, this is supplemented by the massive silent uprising that has taken place among the women across the country, through issues such as the reinforcement of the woman voter, temple-entry protests across a series of reputed temples in the South, election of a first-time all-women's Panchayat in Haryana through the rising demand for qualified and educated women, contestation of religious injustice through the Sharaya Banu case and the protests following the recent brutal rape cases in Kerala.

Who would have ever thought that in the remote villages of Haryana, men would someday actively search for well-educated women to take as brides, making qualifications the main criteria of marriage? This change was possible only after the implementation of the Panchayati Raj Bill, 2015 by the BJP-led Khattar government in the state. It made matriculation an essential criteria for general candidates and passing of class VIII for women candidates, besides, payment of electricity bills, working toilet, disposing off bank loans and not being chargesheeted in criminal cases with imprisonment of up to 10 years. Supreme Court upheld the Bill in its judgement on 10th December, 2015. Rajasthan had passed a similar Bill in Panchayat elections in 2014.

And the incentive because of which people are preferring educated women is also not negative – it is an incentive to contest elections, rather than some typical monetary dole-out. The criticisms against it are quite weak, since the policy will only exclude a select batch of current generation women, but will ensure a secure future. It will – and already has – also incentivise both modern and traditional parents to get their girls educated.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

Despite this change on the ground and the actual empowerment

of women that is now happening, the future looks tough. Women are becoming an equal part of a modern society that is increasingly sinking under the load of its continuous needs and desires, in the process destroying their own environment and institutions and also creating personal psychological problems for themselves.

Till now, it has been an easy ride for the feminist movement. They simply had to fight an enemy whose presence could be palpably felt – it is much easier to contest obvious structures like patriarchy and much more difficult to see the subtler challenges. The challenges that are facing women today are much more psychological and subtle in nature – a natural outcome of the fact that overt prejudices are being overpowered through a rise in women’s collective consciousness. These challenges have transformed from being general and collective to being a lot more individualised, while the movements continue to treat women’s challenges as a mere matter of general material institutional reform.

What public policy and its petitioners in the form of social movements fail to recognize is that welfare, as understood through the broadened idea of integral well-being, cannot be treated as a metric that can be ensured through the facilitation or erosion of certain sociological indicators. Rather, as progress is made, challenges don’t disappear but keep becoming more subtle and difficult to navigate. Women stand at precisely such a turn today.

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APPENDIX

	Scheme	Year	Objective
1	Rashtriya Mahila Kosh	1993	Access to credit for low income women
2	Balri Rakshak Yojana (Punjab)	2005	Addressing skewed sex ratio, terminal method, reduce infant mortality rate
3	Chiranjeevi Scheme (Gujarat)	2005	Financial support for pregnant women for private nursing treatment
4	Girl Child Protection Scheme (Andhra Pradesh)	2005	Enhancing status of girl child and the small family norm
5	Mukhya Mantri Kanyadan Yojana (Madhya Pradesh)	2006	Financial support to girls of marriageable age, including widows and divorcees
6	Balika Samridhi Yojana (Gujarat)	2006-07	Education, status, increasing marriage age and employment of girl
7	Indira Gandhi Balika Suraksha Yojana (Himachal Pradesh)	2007	Improve skewed sex ratio, small family norm and gender equality
8	Ladli Lakshmi Yojana (Madhya Pradesh)	2007	Fostering positive attitude towards girl child
9	Ujjawala	2007	Protection of women from trafficking for sexual exploitation
10	Ladli Scheme (Delhi)	2008	Ending discrimination against girls and promoting their education
11	Mukhya Mantri Kanya Vivah Yojana (Bihar)	2008	Economic support for marriage of girls from economically weaker families
12	The Mother and Child Tracking System	2009	Universal delivery of healthcare services to mother and child
13	Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana	2010	Conditional maternity benefit scheme for mothers aged over 19 years
14	Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls - Sabla	2012	Offers health, education and skills benefits to at-risk girls between 10 and 19 years old
15	Beti Bachao Beto Padhao		Survival, protection and education of the girl child
16	Indira Awas Yojana		Housing assistance to BPL families, especially widows and single women

UTTARAKHAND FOREST FIRES: THE NEED TO CHANGE COLLECTIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The recent forest fires in Uttarakhand reflect a clear case of human greed, fuelling the drive for commercial expansion at the expense of the environment, **and calls for long-term changes in the collective psychology rather than localised, isolated solutions.**

FOREST FIRES IN INDIA: STATE OF NATURE

Forest fires are caused as a result of a chemical reaction between oxygen, fuel and heat. In themselves, forest fires do not have the negative connotations they have come to acquire today. For a long time, they have been used by local communities, globally, to clear land for fresh crops. The fires would get extinguished naturally. In case of forest fires, oxygen, especially in summer months during high temperatures, reacts with plants to cause wildfires. Increasing dryness due to rising temperatures compromises the ability of trees to retain moisture and also causes changes in the kind of trees that grow, thereby leading to forest fires.

The natural process is directly linked to soaring temperatures. It is set to keep worsening as a result of climate change. Forest fires ensure the release of immense amounts of black carbon into the atmosphere contributing to emissions, while the destruction of forests destroys the green sinks that absorb the carbon dioxide, fuelling climate change. Last year alone, by September 2015, forest fires had consumed nearly 9 million acres of land in the US.¹

In India, the prevalent drought conditions throughout the country have worsened the onset of forest fires. Uttarakhand has not witnessed rains since the last monsoon. This leaves very little moisture in the soil and helps to kindle fire at the very first instance, even by such things as casually leaving behind an un-extinguished cigarette.

In India, the overall condition is worsening, with the year 2016 being witness to the maximum number of forest fire incidents since the last four years. In December 2015, the environment ministry

released the India State of Forest Report. According to the report, India's forest cover is 701,673 sq. km which is about 21.34% of the country. As per the Forest Survey of India data, almost 50% of India's forest areas are fire prone. The major forest fire season in the country varies from February to June, with estimates that about 6.17% of Indian forests are subjected to severe fire damage annually.²

HOW DID WE REACH THIS STAGE?: POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT

Despite its many disadvantages, the forests of Uttarakhand are increasingly becoming peopled with the commercially-viable pine trees. Unlike the earlier decades, where forest fires would be a part of the natural ecosystem process, today they are a direct result of human greed. Globally, countries of South-east Asia, especially Indonesia, have seen the worst kind of such fires in recent times, due to its interest in palm-oil cultivation and other forest-clearing agricultural practices.

It is an entirely intentional man-made process, which has resulted from natural-resource exploitation for commercial purposes.

In the state of Uttarakhand, this process has been rigged and deliberate. It has played out in the name of development, through both legal and illegal means, involving timber mafia, commercial builders, and the collusion of local villagers. Illegally, timber mafia has found a viable way, through forest fires, to ensure the killing of trees so that villagers are forced to sell their timber. Commercial builders and prospective home-owners find a convenient way of clearing the land of forests so that they can build their commercial and residential buildings. Villagers, though to a much lesser extent and out of necessity and lack of awareness, seek to use dead fuel-wood for cooking and warming purposes.

The regular man-made fires were a direct consequence of a 1981 policy ban on felling of trees that are 1000 meters above the sea-level, leading to increasing destruction of forests. The policy was imposed by the Indira Gandhi government in response to the Chipko movement to save forests. However, the flipside is that only tall chir pine trees –

which are the main source of wildfires – could not be felled, while broad-leaf trees were executed ruthlessly. Currently, the government’s appeal to overturn the policy is pending with the Supreme Court.

This has encouraged the extermination of wildlife over a period of time, the gradual destruction of the traditional humid and evergreen broad-leaf forests of Uttarakhand has given way to chir pine forests instead, leading to the drying up of several water springs and local lakes in the areas near Nainital. This year, particularly, the water level has been exceptionally low, and with the added necessity of IAF helicopters lifting water from lakes to douse fires, the water scarcity has reached acute proportions.

The phase-out of broad-leaf forests has also led to unmitigated flood disasters, like the one in the state in 2013, due to excess monsoon. For, broad-leaf forests had traditionally provided the dense canopy of leaves that filter the inrush of monsoon rains and helped to reinvigorate lakes and water springs as well. They also provided humus to the soil, besides being the source of fodder, food, fuel, medicine and other local requirements. This is no longer the case.

According to a local expert, “all this changed with the growing population and European ideas applied to the exploitation of Himalayan forests. A rising population meant greater pressure on forests and European forestry meant entire hillsides were cleared for timber and replanted with commercially useful species, generally chir pine.”³

UNVIABLE DIAGNOSIS

The policy solutions that have been advocated for the protection of forests have, so far, been clearly obtuse. They reflect the imprint of Western greed-driven ideas that remain unengaged with the local ecosystem. Everyone clearly knows that deliberate destruction of broad-leaf forests for the purpose of commercial growth and timber smuggling which has led to forest fires are a result of human greed. Yet, the so-called experts are advocating merely legal-institutional solutions – such as prosecution of mafia, gradation of forest data, community participation and international best-practices – and the restoring of

natural forest balance.

The focus is on planting more trees. The government is planning to spend nearly Rs 41,000 crore to enhance India's green cover from the current 21.34% to 33%, with the states getting access to 90 per cent of the money – generated from the fees paid by private companies since 2006 to the Government of India for allowing them to set up projects in forest areas.⁴

All this is being done in the name of achieving the climate change targets. But what kind of Afforestation is being done? There is only a sporadic increase in forest cover in some states, like MP and Chhattisgarh, and a decline in others, like Uttarakhand.

Since 1995, the funds being channeled for plantations in Uttarakhand have been more than sufficient to ensure an adequate forest cover. Yet, the policy is indiscriminate – or deliberately obtuse – on what kind of plantations should be done. It only encourages pine tree plantations that neither help in times of floods nor prevent forest fires, besides encroaching upon the land of local villagers for commercial ends. As an expert points out, **“the government tries to pass off plantations as forests”⁵, while the actual generation of traditional forests would require no funds at all.**

This is similar to Europe and US. In Europe too, recent research has shown the sham being perpetrated in the name of combating climate change through Afforestation. Not very different from Uttarakhand, even though Afforestation in Europe has accelerated over decades, the plantation of commercially-viable conifer forests instead of broad-leaved ones has ensured that there is no net reduction of greenhouse gases.

In US, which is amongst the worst victim of wildfires, the causes are again driven by greed and deliberate destruction of forests. Fire leads to further fire. And the US, in the 20th century, in its quest for commercial success saw the natural forest fires as a threat to houses and lives and to the valuable timber and therefore started extinguishing them.

But even if we were to do proper Afforestation by planting broad-

leaf trees, to what extent can this work? Or even if community participation and regular prosecution of violators were there, to what extent can it be a long-term solution? These ideas have not even worked internationally. Mere solutions do not even remotely address the roots of the problem, which lies in a deterioration of human consciousness to such an extent that to satisfy our momentary material and psychological self-interest, we are willing to sacrifice the environment that sustains us.

A FUNDAMENTALLY FLAWED SYSTEM

Forest fires are just a small part of the larger environmental crisis facing us. Our intellectual advancement has ensured that Science has placed monstrous machinery at our disposal. **“A structure of the external life has been raised up by man’s ever active mind and life-will, a structure of an unmanageable hugeness and complexity, for the service of his mental, vital, physical claims and urges...Man has created a system of civilisation which has become too big for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual and moral capacity to utilise and manage, a too dangerous servant of his blundering ego and its appetites.”⁶**

From the collective point of view, this advancement of Science has led to material oneness in the life of humanity. But this intellectual advancement and spread of education has not gone hand-in-hand with the refinement of our morals and conscience. We have become coarser and more utilitarian than ever. Everyday, Science discovers new means of managing nature.

Take the instance of climate change. We are unwilling to own up responsibility for destroying the planet and have even refused to take action. We are engaging in exchanging credits and doing green projects in lieu of destruction we cause to the environment – just like throwing money at the problem after causing harm. Similarly, Science is now enabling us to explore ways to manipulate nature through technologies like geo-engineering to control global warming.

The reason for these blunders is that these issues pale in front of

our formidable individual and collective ego. There is both an intellectual ego and arrogance and an incessant vital craving for more and more satisfaction of our desires and animal propensities.

“All that is there is a chaos of clashing mental ideas, urges of individual and collective physical want and need, vital claims and desires, impulses of an ignorant life-push, hungers and calls for life satisfaction of individuals, classes, nations, a rich fungus of political and social and economic nostrums and notions, a hustling medley of slogans and panaceas for which men are ready to oppress and be oppressed, to kill and be killed, to impose them somehow or other by the immense and too formidable means placed at his disposal, in the belief that this is his way out to something ideal.”⁷

Yet, we hope we are now turning away from this path and groping for higher light. “A life of unity, mutuality and harmony born of a deeper and wider truth of our being is the only truth of life that can successfully replace the imperfect mental constructions of the past which were a combination of association and regulated conflict, an accommodation of egos and interests grouped or dovetailed into each other to form a society, a consolidation by common general life-motives, a unification by need and the pressure of struggle with outside forces. It is such a change and such a reshaping of life for which humanity is blindly beginning to seek, now more and more with a sense that its very existence depends upon finding the way.”⁸

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INDIA'S ECONOMY DURING THE BRITISH RULE (3)

A. THE DESTITUTION OF INDIAN PEASANTS AND THE DESTRUCTION OF AGRICULTURE UNDER THE LAND REVENUE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

"In 1774, Warren Hastings became Governor-General under the Regulating Act. The settlement of the lands for five years had proved a failure. The rights of the Zemindars, who were hereditary landlords, had been ignored, and the settlement had been made by auction. Bidders at the auction had been led by the eagerness of competition to make high offers, had squeezed the cultivators of the soil, and had yet failed to pay the promised revenue. The land system of Bengal had been misunderstood, the ancient landed families had been ruined, the cultivating population had been grievously oppressed.

In 1774, the European Collectors were recalled, the superintendence of collections was vested in Provincial Councils at Calcutta, Burdwan, Dacca, Murshedabad, Dinajpur, and Patna; and native Amils were appointed in districts to perform an impossible duty. In 1776 the policy of an equitable land settlement was discussed at Calcutta. Warren Hastings and Barwell proposed that estates should be sold by public auction or farmed out on leases, and settlements should be made with purchasers or lessees for lift."¹

"In 1777, the five-year settlement made in 1772 came to an end. The auction system was somewhat modified, and preference was now given to hereditary Zamindars. But the harshness of the system was greatly exaggerated when it was declared that the estates would be let, not for five years, but annually. Lands were thus let annually to Zamindars in 1778, 1779, and 1780. The country groaned under this economic tyranny, the revenues failed once more.

In 1781 great changes were introduced. Thirteen Articles and Regulations were prepared for the guidance of civil courts, which were afterwards incorporated in the Civil Code of ninety-five Articles

of Regulations, which were printed with translations in the Persian and Bengali languages. Civil Judges and Collectors were entrusted with the powers of magistrates to grapple with the increase of crime in the province. A Committee of Revenue was formed at Calcutta, and submitted a plan for a new settlement of the land revenue for one year only, preference being given to Zamindars. The settlement was effected, and the land revenue was increased by twenty-six lakhs, or about £260,000.

All the great Zamindars of Bengal, all the ancient landed families, suffered under this system of annual settlements, frequent enhancements, and harsh methods of realization, such as they had never known before. Descendants of old houses found their estates pass into the hands of money-lenders and speculators from Calcutta; widows and minor proprietors saw their peaceful subjects oppressed by rapacious agents appointed from Calcutta. It so happened that the three largest estates in Bengal, each paying a revenue of over a hundred thousand pounds sterling, were then under the administration of three distinguished ladies, who have left their names engraved in the memories of their countrymen. Burdwan, with its revenue of over £350,000, was held by the widow of the celebrated Tilak Chand, and mother of the equally celebrated Tej Chand. Rajshahi, with its revenue of over £60,000, was held by the venerable Rani Bhavani, whose name is cherished in India to this day for her high rank and abilities, as well as for her pious life and munificent charities. And Dinajpur, with its revenue of over £140,000, lost its Raja in 1780, and his widow was the guardian of the heir, then five years old.”²

“Hastings shared with all other Englishmen of his age the ineradicable conviction that India was a great estate for the profit of the East India Company and its servants, and he applied the whole forces of his vigorous mind to make India pay. The good of the people was made subservient to this primary object of the Company's administration; the rights of princes and people, of Zamindars and Ryots, were sacrificed to this dominant idea of the commercial rulers of India. Land revenue was increased even after the famine of 1770

had swept away one-third of the population of Bengal; landed families who had owned their estates for centuries were made to bid for them as annual farmers against money-lenders and speculators; cultivators flying from their homes and villages or rising in insurrection were driven back by soldiers to their homes with cruel severity; and a great portion of the money so raised was annually sent in the shape of Investments to the gratified shareholders in England. No administrator however gifted, and no administration however perfect, could prevent national poverty and famines when the whole of their fiscal policy was to drain the resources of one country for the traders of another.

This was the main cause of the failure of the administration of Warren Hastings, and his harsh, despotic, and arbitrary measures deepened the evils. There is a verdict on the conduct of great rulers which is more true and more abiding than that of historians, and that verdict is the verdict of the people. The people of India look back with pain and horror on the administration of Hastings which impoverished the country..."³

"Pitt's India Bill became law on the 13th August 1784. It placed the administration of the Company under the control of the Crown, and thus compelled some reforms. The Directors of the Company felt that they must put their house in order. They selected a nobleman of high character and broad sympathies to succeed Warren Hastings, and in their letter of the 12th April 1786 they gave the new Governor-General, Lord Cornwallis, full instructions for his guidance.

In this memorable letter the Directors expressed their disapprobation of the frequent changes in the revenue system of Bengal and their desire to pursue any one system under watchful superintendence. They condemned the endeavors which had been made to continually increase the land-tax, and to oust Zamindars in favor of farmers, Sazawals, and Amins, who had no permanent interest in the well-being of the cultivators. They expressed their opinion that the most likely means of avoiding defalcations would be to introduce a Permanent Settlement of the land revenue, estimated on reasonable principles, for the due payment of which the hereditary tenure of the

possessor would be the best and the only necessary security. They directed that the settlement should be made in all practicable instances with the Zemindars, and they declared that ‘a moderate jumma or assessment, regularly and punctually collected, unites the consideration of our interests with the happiness of the natives and security of the landholders more rationally than any imperfect collection of any exaggerated jumma to be enforced with severity and vexation.’ And while they intended the settlement to be ultimately made permanent, they desired that the first settlement should be concluded for ten years only.”⁴

B. THE RUTHLESSNESS OF A CONTINUOUS AND EVER INCREASING ECONOMIC DRAIN IMPOSED ON INDIA BY THE ENGLISH

“Lord Cornwallis, when left India in 1793, had so adjusted the finances as to limit the total expenditure to under seven millions, showing a surplus revenue of a million and a half. Within twelve years from this date, the restless and warlike policy of the Marquis of Wellesley had increased the expenditure to fifteen millions, showing a deficit of over two millions. It was this which gave offence to the Court of Directors.

That venerable head of a mercantile body looked with indifference on peace or war in India so long as their surplus was safe; the pecuniary returns from their territories was the main standard by which they judged administration; and when the surplus was changed into a deficit they never forgave. They disapproved of the wars of Wellesley because the wars were expensive; and they recalled the great Proconsul from India in disgrace. All through the fifteen years, from 1795 to 1810, Bengal had showed a surplus, Madras and Bombay had showed deficits.

It is not an exaggeration to state that Bengal, with its Permanent Settlement, yielding a steady and unvarying income from the soil, enabled the British nation to build up their Indian Empire. Bengal paid the expenses of ambitious wars and annexations in Northern

and Southern India. Madras and Bombay never paid the total cost of their own administration during these years; Great Britain never contributed anything towards the acquisition of India,

On the departure of Lord Wellesley a balance in the finances was restored once more; and between 1810 and 1814 the peaceful administrators of India reduced the annual expenditure to a little above thirteen millions, showing an annual surplus of two to four millions, which delighted the souls of the Directors. But the surplus disappeared under the warlike administration of the Marquis of Hastings; and there was a deficit again in 1818, when the last Mahratta war was concluded. Lord Hastings avoided the wrath of the Directors by showing a surplus of two millions in 1822. Bombay did not yet pay its expenses. It showed a deficit of a million, five years after the dominions of the Peshwa had been annexed; and Bengal showed a surplus of three millions. It may therefore be said with strict truth, that the conquests of Lord Hastings, like the conquests of Lord Wellesley, were made out of resources furnished by Permanently Settled Bengal.

The Burmese war of Lord Amherst once more upset the finances of India, and there was a continuous deficit from 1824 to 1827. The revenues of India had now increased to twenty-two millions, owing to the extension of the Empire and the severity of the Land-Tax; but the expenditure during these years rose to twenty-three or twenty-four millions.

Then were witnessed the striking results of the policy of peace, retrenchment, and reform introduced by Lord William Bentinck. Even as a financial reformer, Lord William Bentinck stands alone among all British administrators ever sent out to India. For financial reforms in India consist, not in hunting after new sources of taxation which do not exist, but in retrenchment. The excessive Land-Tax was reduced everywhere, and fell within six years (1825 to 1831) from thirteen millions to eleven and a half millions; but the reduction in expenditure more than compensated this loss. When Lord William Bentinck arrived in India in 1828, the total expenditure was twenty-

four millions, showing a deficit of over a million. When he left India in 1835, the total expenditure was sixteen millions, showing a surplus of four millions.”⁵

“In 1792, the Indian Debt, bearing interest, little exceeded seven millions. In 1799, it had risen to ten millions. In consequence of Lord Wellesley's wars, it had risen in 1805 to nearly twenty-one millions, and by 1807 to twenty-seven millions. It remained almost stationary at this figure for many years, but in 1829 it had risen to thirty millions. Lord William Bentinck's beneficent administration had the effect of gradually reducing the debt, and on the 30th April 1836 it amounted to twenty-seven millions.

Under an equitable arrangement between the two nations, India should have paid for her own administration, and England should have remunerated the Company for building up an empire so beneficial to her trade and her power, and so advantageous to her sons seeking a career in the East. If both nations benefited by the founding of the British Empire in India, both nations should have contributed to the cost, – India paying for the administration of India, and Great Britain paying the home charges. But a different policy was pursued from the commencement of the British rule in India, and the result was a continuous Economic Drain from India, which has increased in volume with the lapse of years, and has impoverished an industrious, peaceful, and once prosperous nation.

‘This annual drain of pound 3,000,000 on British India,’ wrote Montgomery Martin in 1838, ‘amounted in thirty years, at 12 per cent, (the usual Indian rate) compound interest to the enormous sum of £723,997,917 sterling; or, at a low rate, as £ 2,000,000 for fifty years, to £ 8,400,000,000 sterling! So constant and accumulating a drain even on England would soon impoverish her; how severe then must be its effects on India, where the wages of a laborer is from two pence to three pence a day?’

‘For half a century we have gone on draining from two to three and sometimes four million pounds sterling a year from India, which

has been remitted to Great Britain to meet the deficiencies of commercial speculations, to pay the interest of debts, to support the home establishment, and to invest on England's soil the accumulated wealth of those whose lives have been spent in Hindustan. I do not think it possible for human ingenuity to avert entirely the evil effects of a continued drain of three or four million pounds a year from a distant country like India, and which is never returned to it in any shape.”⁶

C. DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIAN ECONOMY TO SERVE THE COMMERCIAL INTERESTS OF THE BRITISH

“Throughout the eighteenth century, the competitiveness of Indian textiles had prompted the introduction of extensive protectionist barriers in England to protect domestic producers. It was behind these walls that Britain’s infant textile sector could grow, responding to India’s entrenched labour cost advantage with mechanisation. This early modern strategy of import-substitution proved remarkably successful. Imitation ‘calicoes’ were manufactured in Britain from the early 1770s, and in 1781, mass production of British ‘muslins’ commenced. Only five years later, the first Lancashire cottons were being exported to India, a small fraction of the 500,000 pieces of industrial muslin being churned out annually. Industrial muscle had done the job: by 1793, a Lancashire mill operative had become 400 times more productive than the average Indian weaver.

In the run-up to the 1793 charter renewal, Manchester cotton manufacturers had petitioned the government that their goods should be received duty-free in India, while the wearing of Indian cottons should be banned in Britain. The government sensibly rejected this self-serving nonsense – for the time being. Underneath the surface, however, the Company’s well-established import-export business was being eaten away. Mill-made cottons took increasing slices of the Company’s market share of textiles in both Britain and its key re-export markets in Africa. Simultaneously, Napoleon’s ‘continental system’ had eliminated the important re-export trade with the rest of Europe. From £3 million worth of Indian textiles brought back to

England in 1798, the Company imported just £433,000 in 1807. Worse still, the goods it did import could no longer be sold at a profit, resulting in over £7 million of unwanted Bengal cottons piling up in the Company's London warehouses. This time the government could not ignore the mass of petitions that flooded into Westminster calling for an end to the Company's exclusive position. In addition, mounting Indian debts forced the Company to request a loan of £2,500,000 from the government in April 1812. This combination of industrial lobbying and financial distress left the Company in no position to resist the push for greater liberalisation. As a result, its commercial monopoly was removed for all except the China trade, which was extended for another 20 years. For many, notably the evangelical William Wilberforce, trade was no longer the main issue where the Company was concerned, but rather the promotion of Christianity.

After years of campaigning, Wilberforce and others managed to include in the 1813 Charter Act provisions for the establishment of a Church of England bishopric in India, as well as the removal of the Company's long-standing ban on missionary activity. As Smith had predicted, the Company was soon unable to compete against the surge of new entrepreneurs, and it ceased exporting merchandise to India in 1824, largely because there was little it could buy in India for sale back in Britain. For India's producers, this so called opening of trade brought little relief. In the wake of the Bengal Revolution, the East India Company had used its political position to establish monopoly control over Bengal's weavers. Its hunger for the weavers' output was still as strong, if not stronger, than ever before as it looked for new ways of returning the wealth of Bengal to Britain through increased exports of cloth. Exploitation certainly followed in the most cruel form, and for the weavers the result was dislocation and impoverishment. Paradoxically, however, it was the end of the Company's trading monopoly in 1813 that would turn this terrible situation into one of complete destitution. A 20 per cent increase in import duties on Indian goods was added in 1813 to ensure that open competition did not challenge the British producer."⁷

“Still more emphatic is the impartial verdict of H. H. Wilson, historian of India, ‘It is also a melancholy instance of the wrong done to India by the country on which she has become dependent. It was stated in evidence [in 1813] that the cotton and silk goods of India up to the period could be sold for a profit in the British market at a price from 50 to 60 per cent, lower than those fabricated in England. It consequently became necessary to protect the latter by duties of 70 and 80 per cent, on their value, or by positive prohibition. Had this not been the case, had not such prohibitory duties and decrees existed, the mills of Paisley and Manchester would have been stopped in their outset, and could scarcely have been again set in motion, even by the power of steam. They were created by the sacrifice of the Indian manufacture. Had India been independent, she would have retaliated, would have imposed prohibitive duties upon British goods, and would thus have preserved her own productive industry from annihilation. This act of self-defence was not permitted her; she was at the mercy of the stranger. British goods were forced upon her without paying any duty, and the foreign manufacturer employed the arm of political injustice to keep down and ultimately strangle a competitor with whom he could not have contended on equal terms.’

While such was the policy pursued in England to discourage Indian manufactures, the system pursued in India did not tend to improve them. The revenues of the country were spent on the Company's Investments, i.e. on the purchase of Indian goods for exportation and sale in Europe without any commercial return.

The method pursued in supplying these Investments was this. On being informed of the amount required by the Directors, the Board of Trade in India forwarded a copy of the order to the several factories where the goods were produced. The Commercial Residents at the factories divided the order among the several subordinate factories, and required the weavers to attend on a specified day to receive advances. Each weaver was debited for the advance made to him, and credited for the deliveries he made. If the weavers objected to the rate, the Board of Trade decided the matter according to its own judgment.

How this system was frequently abused appears from the evidence of many witnesses examined by the Commons Committee in 1813. **Thomas Munro deposed that in the Baramahal the Company's servants assembled the principal weavers and placed a guard over them until they entered into engagements to supply the Company only. When once a weaver accepted an advance he seldom got out of his liability. A peon was placed over him to quicken his deliveries if he delayed, and he was liable to be prosecuted in the courts of justice. The sending of a peon meant a fine of one anna (about 1.5 d.) a day on the weaver, and the peon was armed with a rattan, which was not unoften used to good purpose. Fine was sometimes imposed on the weavers, and their brass utensils were seized for its recovery.** The whole weaving population of villages were thus held in subjection to the Company's factories; and Mr. Cox deposed that 1500 weavers, not including their families and connections, were under his authority in the factory over which he presided.

The control under which the weaver population was held was not merely a matter of practice, but was legalised by Regulations. It was provided that a weaver who had received advances from the Company 'shall on no account give to any other persons whatever, European or Native, either the labour or the produce engaged to the Company'; that on his failing to deliver the stipulated cloths, the Commercial Resident shall be at liberty to place peons upon him in order to quicken his deliveries; that on his selling his cloths to others the weaver shall be liable to be prosecuted in the Dewani Adalat; that weavers possessed of more than one loom, and entertaining one or more workmen, shall be subject to a penalty of 35 per cent, on the stipulated price of every piece of cloth that they may fail to deliver according to the written agreement; that landlords and tenants are enjoined not to hinder the Commercial Residents or their officers from access to weavers; and that they are strictly prohibited from behaving with disrespect to the Commercial Residents of the Company.

Manufactures do not flourish when manufacturers are held under any sort of thralldom. But the worst result of this system was that, while the Company's servants assumed such power and authority over the manufacturers of India, other Europeans often assumed larger powers and used them with less restraint.

'The Englishman,' said Warren Hastings, 'is quite a different character in India; the name of an Englishman is both his protection and a sanction for offences which he would not dare to commit at home.'

'There is one general consequence,' said Lord Teignmouth, 'which I should think likely to result from a general influx of Europeans into the interior of the country and their intercourse with the natives, that, without elevating the character of the natives it would have a tendency to depreciate their estimate of the general European character.'

'I find no difference in traders,' said Thomas Munro, 'whether their habits are quiet or not when they quit this country ; they are very seldom quiet when they find themselves among an unresisting people over whom they can exercise their authority, for every trader going into India is considered as some person connected with the Government. I have heard that within these two or three years, I think in Bengal in 1810, private traders, indigo merchants, have put inhabitants of the country in the stocks, have assembled their followers and given battle to each other, and that many have been wounded.'

'I have always observed,' said Thomas Sydenham, 'that **Englishmen are more apt than those of any other nation to commit violences in foreign countries, and this I believe to be the case in India.**'

So frequent were the acts of violence committed by European traders and indigo planters in the interior of the country in the early years of the nineteenth century, that the Government was compelled to issue circulars to magistrates on the subject. In a circular dated 13th July 18 10 it was stated:

'The offences to which the following remarks refer, and which

have been established, beyond all doubt or dispute, against individual indigo planters, may be reduced to the following heads:’

‘First, Acts of violence which, although they amount not in the legal sense of the word to murder, have occasioned the death of natives.’

‘Second, The illegal detention of the natives in confinement, especially in stocks, with a view to the recovery of balances alleged to be due from them, or for other causes.’

‘Third, Assembling in a tumultuary manner the people attached to their respective factories, and others, and engaging in violent affrays with other indigo planters.’

‘Fourth, Illicit infliction of punishment, by means of rattan or otherwise, on the cultivators or other natives.’

And the circular directed magistrates to cause the destruction of the stocks, to report cases of flogging and inflicting corporal punishment on the cultivators, and to prevent European planters residing in the interior unless they conformed with the spirit of the Government orders. A further circular, issued on the 20th July 1810, directed magistrates to report cases in which indigo planters compelled the cultivators to receive advances, and adopted illicit means to compel them to cultivate indigo. **The oppression of indigo planters in Bengal continued, however, for half a century, until the people of Bengal rose and resisted, and the cultivation of indigo by European planters terminated in most parts of Bengal after the Indigo disturbance of 1859.”⁸**

“The parliamentary inquiries of 1813 brought no relief to Indian manufacturers. The prohibitive duties were not reduced. The Company's Investments were not stopped. On the contrary, it was distinctly sanctioned by the Committee of the whole House. ‘The whole or part of any surplus that may remain of the above described rents, revenues, and profits, after providing for the several appropriations, and defraying the several charges before mentioned, shall be applied to the provision of the Company's Investments in

India, in remittances to China for the provision of Investments there, or towards the liquidation of debts in India, or such other purposes as the Court of Directors, with the approbation of the Board of Commissioners, shall from time to time direct.'

In the Parliamentary debates of 1813, says the historian, H. H. Wilson, 'professions of a concern for the interests of India were, it is true, not unsparingly uttered, but it would be difficult to show that the majority of the party who engaged in the discussion were solely instigated by a disinterested regard for the welfare of the Indian subjects of the Crown... The merchants and manufacturers of the United Kingdom avowedly looked only to their own profits.'

The real object of the Parliamentary inquiry of 1813 was to promote the interests of the manufacturers of England. Napoleon Bonaparte had excluded British manufactures from the Continental ports; the merchants and manufacturers of England were laboring under difficulties; the country was menaced with distress unless some new vent for the sale of its industrial products could be discovered. Under these circumstances the national demand against the monopoly of the East India Company increased in force, and the monopoly of the Company's trade with India was abolished when their Charter was renewed in 1813. British traders thus obtained, for the first time, a free outlet into the great field of India; it was not in human nature that they should concern themselves much with the welfare of Indian manufacturers."⁹

"The earthquake that struck Dhaka in 1812 – demolishing the Company's agency building in Tejgaon – was only a portent of a far more savage economic disaster that was about to strike. In 1753, just before Plassey, Dhaka exported Rs 2,850,000 in textiles to Britain; by the end of the century, this had already fallen to Rs 1,362,000. But it took only four years following the removal of the Company's monopoly for exports to cease altogether, and in 1818, the Company's cloth 'factory' at Dhaka was wound up. The city imploded upon itself, and by 1840, its population had fallen from 150,000 to just 20,000, with jungle and malaria 'fast encroaching upon the town'. Once again, horrific

acts of mutilation are said to have accompanied this upheaval. **In a grisly repeat of earlier cruelties, when machine-made yarns were first introduced into Dhaka in 1821, the ‘thumb and index finger of some of the renowned artisans began to be chopped off in order to disable them from twisting finer yarns’, according to Syed Muhammed Taifoor. Taifoor adds that some reputed artisans also ‘chopped off their own finger-ends in order to avoid the tyranny of the middlemen’.**

Until 1813, India had a strongly positive balance of trade, operating as it had done for centuries as **‘the great workshop of cotton manufacture for the world’**. But in the next 20 years, exports to India of British cotton rose more than fifty-fold, while textile imports from India fell by three-quarters. The deliberate manipulation of trade and industrial policy resulted in the elimination of India’s handloom weavers; English weavers were also being driven to extinction by the same remorseless forces. In India, the Company’s role was simply passive – to observe, but to do nothing. By 1834, the Governor-General, William Bentinck, was reporting that **‘the misery hardly finds parallel in the history of commerce’, adding that ‘the bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India’**. This was not the free trade that Adam Smith had called for – even though his name was invoked repeatedly by the mill-owners in their quest to dominate India’s markets. Observing what Britain did rather than what its philosophers wrote, the German economist Friedrich List cited the cotton trade as a case study of the successful use of protectionism to build up national industrial strength.”¹⁰

“When Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, the evil had been done. But nevertheless there was no relaxation in the policy pursued before. Indian silk handkerchiefs still had a sale in Europe; and **a high duty on manufactured Indian silk was maintained. Parliament inquired how cotton could be grown in India for British looms, not how Indian looms could be improved, Select Committees tried to find out how British manufactures could find a sale in India, not how Indian manufactures could be revived. Long before 1858, when the East India Company’s rule ended, India had ceased to be a**

great manufacturing country. Agriculture had virtually become the one remaining source of the nation's subsistence.

British merchants still watched and controlled the Indian tariff after 1858. The import of British goods into India was facilitated by the reduction of import duties. The growth of looms and factories in Bombay aroused jealousy. In 1879, a year of famine, war, and deficit in India, a further sacrifice of import duties was demanded by Parliament. And in 1882 all import duties were abolished, except on salt and liquor.

But the sacrifices told on the Indian revenues. In spite of new taxes on the peasantry, and new burdens on agriculture, India could not pay her way. In 1894 the old import duties were revived with slight modifications. A 5 percent duty was imposed on cotton goods and yarns imported into India, and a countervailing duty of 5 percent were imposed on such Indian cotton fabrics as competed with the imported goods. In 1896 cotton yarns were freed from duty; but a duty of 3.5 per cent was imposed on cotton goods imported into India, and an excise duty of 3.5 percent was imposed on all goods manufactured at Indian mills. Coarse Indian goods, which did not in any way compete with Lancashire goods, were taxed, as well as finer fabrics. The miserable clothing of the miserable Indian laborer, earning less than 2.5 d.* a day, was taxed by a jealous Government. **The infant mill industry of Bombay, instead of receiving help and encouragement, was repressed by an excise duty unknown in any other part of the civilized world.**

During a century and a half the commercial policy of the British rulers of India has been determined, not by the interests of Indian manufacturers, but by those of British manufacturers. The vast quantities of manufactured goods which were exported from India by the Portuguese and the Dutch, by Arab and British merchants, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, have disappeared. India's exports now are mostly raw produce—largely the food of the people. Manufacturing industry as a source of national income has been

* d. = pence

narrowed. There remains Agriculture. Cultivation has largely extended under the peace and security assured by the British Rule, but no man familiar with the inner life of the cultivators will say that the extension of cultivation has made the nation more prosperous, more resourceful, and more secure against famines.

The history of the Land Revenue administration in India is of the deepest interest, because it is intimately connected with the material well-being of an agricultural nation. **In the earlier years of the British Rule, the East India Company regarded India as a vast estate or plantation, and considered themselves entitled to all that the land could produce, leaving barely enough to the tillers and the landed classes to keep them alive in ordinary years.** This policy proved disastrous to the revenues of the Company, and a reform became necessary. The Company then recognized the wisdom of assuring to the landed classes the future profits of agriculture. Accordingly, Lord Cornwallis permanently settled the Land Revenue in Bengal in 1793, demanding from landlords 90 percent of the rental, but assuring them against any increase of the demand in the future. The proportion taken by the Government was excessive beyond measure; but cultivation and rental have largely increased since 1793; and the peasantry and the landed classes have reaped the profits. The agriculturists of Bengal are more resourceful today, and more secure against the worst effects of famine than the agriculturists of any other Province in India.

A change then came over the policy of the East India Company. They were unwilling to extend the Permanent Settlement to other Provinces. They tried to fix a proper share of the rental as their due so that their revenue might increase with the rental. In Northern India they fixed their demand first at 83 percent of the rental, then at 75 per cent., then at 66 per cent. But even this was found to be impracticable, and at last, in 1855, they limited the State-demand to 50 percent of the rental. And this rule of limiting the Land Revenue to one-half the rental was extended to Southern India in 1864. An income-tax of 50 percent on the profits of cultivation is a heavier

assessment than is known in any other country under a civilized Government. But it would be a gain to India if even this high limit were never exceeded.

The rule of the East India Company terminated in 1858. The first Viceroys under the Crown were animated by a sincere desire to promote agricultural prosperity, and to widen the sources of agricultural wealth in India. Statesmen like Sir Charles Wood and Sir Stafford Northcote, and rulers like Lord Canning and Lord Lawrence, laboured with this object. They desired to fix the State-demand from the soil, to make the nation prosperous, to create a strong and loyal middle class, and to connect them by their own interest with British Rule in India. If their sound policy had been adopted, one source of national wealth would have been widened. The nation would have been more resourceful and self-relying today; famines would have been rarer. But the endeavors to make the nation prosperous weakened after the first generation of the servants of the Crown had passed away. Increase of revenue and increase of expenditure became engrossing objects with the rise of Imperialism. The proposal of Canning and of Lawrence was dropped in 1883."¹¹

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HISTORY OF INDIA – THE VEDIC AGE (19)

XI. THE PROBLEM OF VEDIC INTERPRETATION

“A Hypothesis of the sense of Veda must always proceed, to be sure and sound, from a basis that clearly emerges in the language of the Veda itself. Even if the bulk of its substance be an arrangement of symbols and figures, the sense of which has to be discovered, yet there should be clear indications in the explicit language of the hymns which will guide us to that sense. **Otherwise, the symbols being themselves ambiguous, we shall be in danger of manufacturing a system out of our own imaginations and preferences** instead of discovering the real purport of the figures chosen by the Rishis. In that case, however ingenious and complete our theory, it is likely to be a building in the air, brilliant, but without reality or solidity.

Our first duty, therefore, is to determine whether there is, apart from figure and symbol, in the clear language of the hymns a sufficient kernel of psychological notions to justify us in supposing at all a higher than the barbarous and primitive sense of the Veda. And afterwards we have to find, as far as possible from the internal evidence of the Suktas themselves, the interpretation of each symbol and image and the right psychological function of each of the gods. A firm and not a fluctuating sense, founded on good philological justification and fitting naturally into the context wherever it occurs, must be found for each of the fixed terms of the Veda. For, as has already been said, the language of the hymns is a language fixed and invariable; it is the carefully preserved and scrupulously respected diction consistently expressing either a formal creed and ritual or a traditional doctrine and constant experience. If the language of the Vedic Rishis were free and variable, if their ideas were evidently in a state of flux, shifting and uncertain, a convenient licence and incoherence in the sense we attach to their terminology and the relation we find between their ideas, might be justified or tolerated. But the hymns themselves on the very face of them bear exactly the contrary testimony. We have the right therefore to demand the same fidelity and scrupulousness in the interpreter as

in the original he interprets. **There is obviously a constant relation between the different notions and cherished terms of the Vedic religion; incoherence and uncertainty in the interpretation will prove, not that the face evidence of the Veda is misleading, but simply that the interpreter has failed to discover the right relations.**

If, after this initial labour has been scrupulously and carefully done, it can be shown by a translation of the hymns that the interpretations we had fixed fit in naturally and easily in whatever context, if they are found to illuminate what seemed obscure and to create intelligible and clear coherence where there seemed to be only confusion; if the hymns in their entirety give thus a clear and connected sense and the successive verses show a logical succession of related thoughts, and if the result as a whole be a profound, consistent and antique body of doctrines, then our hypothesis will have a right to stand besides others, to challenge them where they contradict it or to complete them where they are consistent with its findings. **Nor will the probability of our hypothesis be lessened, but rather its validity confirmed if it be found that the body of ideas and doctrines thus revealed in the Veda are a more antique form of subsequent Indian thought and religious experience, the natural parent of Vedanta and Purana.”¹**

“The interpretation of the Rigveda is perhaps the most difficult and disputed question with which the scholarship of today has to deal. This difficulty and dispute are not the creation of present-day criticism; it has existed in different forms since very early times. To what is this incertitude due? Partly, no doubt, it arises from the archaic character of a language in which many of the words were obsolete when ancient Indian scholars tried to systematise the traditional learning about the Veda, and especially the great number of different meanings of which the old Sanskrit words are capable. But there is another and more vital difficulty and problem. The Vedic hymns are full of figures and symbols, – of that there can be no least doubt, – and the question is what do these symbols represent, what is their religious or other significance? Are they simply mythological figures with no depth of meaning behind them? Are they the poetic images of an old Nature-worship,

mythological, astronomical, naturalistic, symbols of the action of physical phenomena represented as the action of the gods? Or have they another and more mystic significance? If this question could be solved with an indubitable certitude, the difficulty of language would be no great obstacle; certain hymns and verses might remain obscure, but the general sense, drift, purport of the ancient hymns could be made clear. But the singular feature of the Veda is that **none of these solutions, at least as they have been hitherto applied, gives a firm and satisfactory outcome. The hymns remain confused, bizarre, incoherent, and the scholars are obliged to take refuge in the gratuitous assumption that this incoherence is a native character of the text and does not arise from their own ignorance of its central meaning.** But so long as we can get no farther than this point, the doubt, the debate must continue.”²

Sri Aurobindo’s explanation of the ambiguous character of the Veda is based on a distinction between the inner (for the initiates) and the outer (for the profane) sense of the Vedic hymns. According to him “... these hymns were written in a stage of religious culture which answered to a similar period in Greece and other ancient countries, – I do not suggest that they were contemporary or identical in cult and idea, – a stage in which there was a double face to the current religion, an outer for the people, *profanum vulgus*, an inner for the initiates, the early period of the Mysteries. **The Vedic Rishis were mystics who reserved their inner knowledge for the initiates; they shielded it from the vulgar by the use of an alphabet of symbols which could not readily be understood without the initiation, but were perfectly clear and systematic when the signs were once known.** These symbols centred around the idea and forms of the sacrifice; for the sacrifice was the universal and central institution of the prevailing cult. The hymns were written round this institution and were understood by the vulgar as ritual chants in praise of the Nature-gods, Indra, Agni, Surya Savitri, Varuna, Mitra and Bhaga, the Aswins, Ribhus, Maruts, Rudra, Vishnu, Saraswati, with the object of provoking by the sacrifice the gifts of the gods, – cows, horses, gold and other forms of wealth of a pastoral people, victory over enemies, safety in travel, sons, servants, prosperity,

every kind of material good fortune. But behind this mask of primitive and materialistic naturalism, lay another and esoteric cult which would reveal itself if we once penetrated the meaning of the Vedic symbols. That once caught and rightly read, the whole Rigveda would become clear, consequent, a finely woven, yet straightforward tissue.

According to my theory the outer sacrifice represented in these esoteric terms an inner sacrifice of self-giving and communion with the gods. These **gods are powers outwardly of physical, inwardly of psychical nature.** Thus Agni outwardly is the physical principle of fire, but inwardly the god of the psychic godward flame, force, will, Tapas; Surya outwardly the solar light, inwardly the god of the illuminating revelatory knowledge; Soma outwardly the moon and the Soma-wine or nectarous moon plant, inwardly the god of the spiritual ecstasy, Ananda. The principal psychical conception of this inner Vedic cult was the idea of the Satyam Ritam Brihat, the Truth, the Law, the Vast. Earth, Air and Heaven symbolised the physical, vital and mental being, but this Truth was situated in the greater heaven, base of a triple Infinity actually and explicitly mentioned in the Vedic riks, and it meant therefore a state of spiritual and supramental illumination. To get beyond earth and sky to Swar, the Sun-world, seat of this illumination, home of the gods, foundation and seat of the Truth, was the achievement of the early Fathers, *pûrve pitarah*, and of the seven Angiras Rishis who founded the Vedic religion. The solar gods, children of Infinity, Adityah, were born in the Truth and the Truth was their home, but they descended into the lower planes and had in each plane their appropriate functions, their mental, vital and physical cosmic motions. They were the guardians and increasers of the Truth in man and by the Truth, *ritasya pathâ*, led him to felicity and immortality. They had to be called into the human being and increased in their functioning, formed in him, brought in or born, *devavîti*, extended, *devatâti*, united in their universality, *vaisvadevya*.

The sacrifice was represented at once as a giving and worship, a battle and a journey. It was the centre of a battle between the Gods aided by Aryan men on one side and the Titans or destroyers on the

opposite faction, Dasyus, Vritras, Panis, Rakshasas, later called Daityas and Asuras, between the powers of the Truth or Light and the powers of falsehood, division, darkness. It was a journey, because the sacrifice travelled from earth to the gods in their heaven, but also because it made ready the path by which man himself travelled to the home of the Truth. This journey opposed by the Dasyus, thieves, robbers, tearers, besiegers (vritras), was itself a battle. The giving was an inner giving. All the offerings of the outer sacrifice, the cow and its yield, the horse, the Soma were symbols of the dedication of inner powers and experiences to the Lords of Truth. The divine gifts, result of the outer sacrifice, were also symbols of inner divine gifts, the cows of the divine light symbolised by the herds of the Sun, the horse of strength and power, the son of the inner godhead or divine man created by the sacrifice, and so through the whole list. This symbolic duplication was facilitated by the double meaning of the Vedic words. *Go*, for instance, means both cow and ray; the cows of the dawn and the sun, Homer's *boes Eelioio*, are the rays of the Sungod, Lord of Revelation, even as in Greek mythology Apollo the Sungod is also the Master of poetry and of prophecy. ***Ghrita* means clarified butter, but also the bright thing; *soma* means the wine of the moon plant, but also delight, honey, sweetness, *madhu*.** This is the conception, all other features are subsidiary to this central idea. The suggestion seems to me a perfectly simple one, neither out of the way and recondite, nor unnatural to the mentality of the early human peoples.”³

An a priori objection that can be brought against such a theory by Western scholarship is that “... there is no need for all this mystification, that there is no sign of it in the Veda unless we choose to read it into the primitive mythology, that it is not justified by the history of religion or of the Vedic religion, that it was a refinement impossible to an ancient and barbaric mind. None of these objections can really stand. The Mysteries in Egypt and Greece and elsewhere were of a very ancient standing and they proceeded precisely on this symbolic principle, by which outward myth and ceremony and cult objects stood for secrets of an inward life or knowledge. It cannot therefore be argued that this mentality was non-existent, impossible in antique times or

any more impossible or improbable in India, the country of the Upanishads, than in Egypt and Greece. The history of ancient religion does show a transmutation of physical Nature-gods into representatives of psychical powers or rather an addition of psychical to physical functions; but the latter in some instances gave place to the less external significance. I have given the example of Helios replaced in later times by Apollo. Just so in the Vedic religion Surya undoubtedly becomes a god of inner light, the famous Gayatri verse and its esoteric interpretation are there to prove it as well as the constant appeal of the Upanishads to Vedic riks or Vedic symbols taken in a psychological and spiritual sense, eg, the four closing verses of the Isha Upanishad. Hermes, Athena represent in classical mythology psychical functions, but were originally Nature gods, Athena probably a dawn goddess. I contend that Usha in the Veda shows us this transmutation in its commencement. Dionysus the wine-god was intimately connected with the Mysteries; I assign a similar role to Soma, the wine-god of the Vedas.

But the question is whether there is anything to show that there was actually such a doubling of functions in the Veda. Now in the first place, how was the transition effected from the alleged purely materialistic Nature-worship of the Vedas to the extraordinary psychological and spiritual knowledge of the Upanishads unsurpassed in their subtlety and sublimity in ancient times? There are three possible explanations. First, this sudden spirituality may have been brought in from outside; it is hardily suggested by some scholars that it was taken from an alleged highly spiritual non-Aryan southern culture; but this is an assumption, a baseless hypothesis for which no proof has been advanced; it rests as a surmise in the air without foundation. Secondly, it may have developed from within by some such transmutation as I have suggested, but subsequent to the composition of all but the latest Vedic hymns. Still even then it was effected on the basis of the Vedic hymns; **the Upanishads claim to be a development from the Vedic knowledge, Vedanta repeatedly appeals to Vedic texts, regards Veda as a book of knowledge.** The men who gave the Vedantic knowledge

are everywhere represented as teachers of the Veda. Why then should we rigidly assume that this development took place subsequent to the composition of the bulk of the Vedic mantras? For the third possibility is that the whole ground had already been prepared consciently by the Vedic mystics. I do not say that the inner Vedic knowledge was identical with the Brahnavada. Its terms were different, its substance was greatly developed, much lost or rejected, much added, old ideas shed, new interpretations made, the symbolic element reduced to a minimum and replaced by clear and open philosophic phrases and conceptions. Certainly, **the Vedic mantras had already become obscure and ill-understood at the time of the Brahmanas.** And still the groundwork may have been there from the beginning. It is, of course, in the end a question of fact; but my present contention is only that there is no *a priori* impossibility, but rather a considerable probability or at least strong possibility in favour of my suggestion. I will put my argument in this way. The later hymns undoubtedly contain a beginning of the Brahnavada; how did it begin, had it no root origins in the earlier mantras? **It is certain that some of the gods, Varuna, Saraswati, had a psychological as well as a physical function.** I go farther and say that this double function can everywhere be traced in the Veda with regard to other gods, as for instance, Agni and even the Maruts. Why not then pursue the inquiry on these lines and see how far it will go? There is at least a *prima facie* ground for consideration, and to begin with, I demand no more. An examination of the actual text of the hymns can alone show how far the inquiry will be justified or produce results of a high importance.”⁴

A. The Three Necessary Processes

“I hold that three processes are necessary for a valid interpretation of the Veda. **First, there must be a straightforward rendering word by word of the text** which shall stick to a plain and simple sense at once suggested by the actual words no matter what the result may be. Then, this result has to be taken and **it has to be seen what is its actual purport and significance.** That meaning must be consistent, coherent

with itself; it must show each hymn as a whole in itself proceeding from idea to idea, linked together in sequence, as any literary creation of the human mind must be linked, which has not been written by lunatics or is not merely a string of disconnected cries. It is impossible to suppose that these Rishis, competent metrists, possessed of a style of great power and nobility, composed without the sequence of ideas which is the mark of all adequate literary creation. And if we suppose them to be divinely inspired, mouthpieces of Brahman or the Eternal, there is no ground for supposing that the divine wisdom is more incoherent in its Word than the human mind; it should rather be more luminous and satisfying in its totality. Finally, **if a symbolic interpretation is put on any part of the text, it must arise directly and clearly from suggestions and language of the Veda itself and must not be brought in from outside.**"⁵

(i) Straightforward Rendering of the Text

"A few words may be useful on each of these points. The first rule I follow is to try to get at the simplest and straightforward sense to which the Rik is open, not to strain, twist and involve. The Vedic style is terse, but natural, it has its strong brevities and some ellipses, but all the same it is essentially simple and goes straight to its object. Where it seems obscure, it is because we do not know the meaning of the words or miss the clue to the idea. Even if at one or two places, it seems to be tortured, that is no reason why we should put the whole Veda on the rack or even in these places torture it still worse in the effort to get at a sense. Where the meaning of a word has to be fixed, this difficulty comes either because we have no clue to the true meaning or because it is capable in the language of several meanings. In the latter case I follow certain fixed canons. First, if the word is one of the standing terms of the Veda intimately bound up with its religious system, then I must first find one single meaning which attaches to it wherever it occurs; I am not at liberty to vary its sense from the beginning according to my pleasure or fancy or sense of immediate fitness. If I interpret a book of obscure Christian theology, I am not at

liberty to interpret freely the constantly recurring word *grace* sometimes as the influx of the divine favour, sometimes as one of the three Graces, sometimes as charm of beauty, sometimes as grace marks in an examination, sometimes as the name of a girl. If in one it evidently bears this or that sense and can have no other, if it has no reference to the ordinary meaning, then indeed it is different; but I must not put in one of these other meanings where the normal sense fits the context. In other cases I may have greater freedom, but this freedom must not degenerate into licence. **Thus the word *ritam* may signify, we are told, truth, sacrifice, water, motion and a number of other things. Sayana interprets freely and without obvious rule or reason according to any of them** and sometimes gives us two alternatives; not only does he interpret it variously in different hymns, but in three different senses [in] the same hymn or even in the same line. I hold this to be quite illegitimate. ***Ritam* is a standing term of the Veda and I must take it consistently.** If I find truth to be its sense in that standing significance, I must so interpret it always, unless in any given passage it evidently means water or sacrifice or the man who has gone and cannot mean truth. **To translate so striking a phrase as *ritasya panthâh* in one passage as ‘the path of truth’, in another ‘the path of sacrifice’, in another ‘the path of water’, in another ‘the path of the one who has gone’ is a sheer licence, and if we follow such a method, there can be no sense for the Veda except the sense of our own individual caprice.** Then again we have the word *Deva*, which undoubtedly means in ninety-nine places out of a hundred, one of the shining ones, a god. Even though this is not so vital a term as *ritam*, still I must not take it in the sense of a priest or intelligent man or any other significance, where the word *god* gives a good and sufficient meaning unless it can be shown that it is undoubtedly capable of another sense in the mouth of the Rishis. On the other hand a word like *ari* means sometimes a fighter, one’s own champion, sometimes a hostile fighter, assailant, enemy, sometimes it is an adjective and seems almost equivalent to *arya* or even *ârya*. But mark that these are all well-connected senses. Dayananda insists on a greater freedom of interpretation to suit the context. *Saindhava* he says means a horse or rocksalt; where it is a

question of eating we must interpret as salt, where it is a question of riding, as horse. That is quite obvious; but the whole question in the Veda is what is the bearing of the context, what are its connections? If we interpret according to our individual sense of what the context ought to mean, we are building on the quicksands. The only safe rule is to fix the sense usually current in the Veda and admit variations only where they are evident from the context. Where the ordinary sense makes a good meaning, I ought to accept it; it does not at all matter that that is not the meaning I should like it to have or the one suitable to my theory of the Veda. But how to fix the meaning? We can evidently do it only on the totality or balance of the evidence of all the passages in which the word occurs and, after that, on its suitability to the general sense of the Veda. If I show that *ritam* in all passages can mean truth, in a great number of passages but not by any means all sacrifice, in only a few water, and in hardly any, motion, and this sense, truth, fits in with the general sense of the Veda, then I consider I have made out an unanswerable case for taking it in that significance. In the cases of many words this can be done; in others we have to strike a balance. **There remain the words of which frankly we do not know the meaning. Here we have to use the clue of etymology** and then to test the meaning or possible meanings we arrive at by application to the passages in which the word occurs, taking into consideration where necessary not only the isolated riks, but the context around, and even the general sense of Veda. In a few cases the word is so rare and obscure that only a quite conjectural meaning can be attached to it.”⁶

(ii) *Actual Purport and Significance*

“When we have got the rendering of the text, we have to [see] to what it amounts. Here what we have to do is to see the connection of the ideas in the verse itself, next its connection with the ideas in the verses that precede and follow and with the general sense of the hymn; next parallel passages and ideas and hymns and finally the place of the whole in the scheme of ideas of the Veda. Thus in IV.7 we have the line अग्ने कदा त आनुषग् भुवद् देवस्य चेतनं, and I render it, “O Flame, when may

there be in uninterrupted sequence the awakening (to knowledge or consciousness) of thee the god (the shining or luminous One)?" But the question I have to put is this, "Does this mean the constant burning of the physical fire on the altar and the ordered sequence of the physical sacrifice, or does it mean the awakening to constant developing knowledge or ordered conscious action of knowledge of the divine Flame in man?" I note that in the next rik (3) Agni is described as the possessor of truth (or of sacrifice?), the entirely wise, ऋतावानं विचेतसं, in 4 as the vision or knowledge perception shining for each creature, केतुं भृगवाणं विशे विशे, in 5 as the Priest who knows, होतारं चिकित्वासं, in 6 as the bright one in the secrecy who has perfect knowledge, चित्रं गुहा हितं सुवेदं, in 7 as coming possessed of the truth for the sacrifice when the gods rejoice in the seat of the Truth, [in 8] as the messenger विद्वान् संचिकित्वान् विदुष्टः. **All this is ample warrant for taking Agni not merely as a physical flame on the altar, [but] as a flame of divine knowledge guiding the sacrifice and mediating between man and the gods.** The balance is also, though not indisputably, in favour of taking it as a reference to the inner sacrifice under the cover of the outer symbols; for why should there be so much stress on divine knowledge if the question were only of a physical sacrifice for physical fruits? I note that he is the priest, sage, messenger, eater, swift traveller and warrior. How are these ideas, both successive and interwoven in the Veda, connected together? Is it the physical sacred flame that is all these things or the inner sacred flame? There is sufficient to warrant me in provisionally taking it for the inner flame; but to be sure I cannot rely on this one rik. I have to note the evolution of the same ideas in other hymns, to study all the hymns dedicated to Agni or in which he is mentioned, to see whether there are passages in which he is indubitably the inner flame and what light they shed on his whole physiognomy. Only then shall I be in a position to judge certainly the significance of the Vedic Fire."⁷

(iii) A Symbolic Interpretation Must Arise Directly from the Language of the Veda Itself

"This example will show the method I follow in regard to the

third question, the interpretation of the Vedic symbols. That there are a mass of figures and symbols in the hymns, there can be no doubt. The instances in this 7th hymn of the Fourth Mandala are sufficient by themselves to show how large a part they play. In the absence of any contemporary evidence of the sense which the Rishis attached to them, we have to seek for their meaning in the Veda itself. Obviously, where we do not know we cannot do without a hypothesis, and my hypothesis is that of the outer ritual form as a significant symbol of an inner spiritual meaning. But this or any hypothesis can have no real value if it is brought in from outside, if it is not suggested by the words and indications of the Veda itself. **The Brahmanas are too full of ingenuities; they read too much and too much at random into the text. The Upanishads give a better light and we may get hints from later work and even from Sayana and Yaska, but it would be dangerous at once to read back literally the ideas of a later mentality into this exceedingly ancient Scripture. We must start from and rely on the Veda to interpret the Veda.** We have to see, first, whether there are any plain and evident psychological and spiritual conceptions, what they are, what clue they give us, secondly, whether there are any indications of psychological meanings for physical symbols and how the outer physical is related to the inner psychological side. Why for instance is the Flame Agni called the seer and knower? why are the rivers called the waters that have knowledge? why are they said to ascend or get into the mind? and a host of other similar questions. The answer again must be found by a minute comparative study of the Vedic hymns themselves.”⁸

B. THE THREE DIFFERENT TESTS OR BASES

(i) *The Philological Test*

“The problem of Vedic interpretation depends, in my view, on three different tests, philological, historic and psychological. If the results of these three coincide, then only can we be sure that we have understood the Veda. But to erect this Delphic tripod of interpretation is no facile undertaking. It is easy to misuse philology. I hold no philology to be sound and valid which has only discovered one

or two by laws of sound modification and for the rest depends upon imagination and licentious conjecture, – identifies for instance ethos with swadha, derives uloka from urvaloka or prachetasa from prachi and on the other ignores the numerous but definitely ascertainable caprices of Pracritic detrition between the European and Sanscrit tongues or considers a number of word-identities sufficient to justify inclusion in a single group of languages. **By a scientific philology I mean a science which can trace the origins, growth and structure of the Sanscrit language, discover its primary, secondary and tertiary forms and the laws by which they develop from each other, trace intelligently the descent of every meaning of a word in Sanscrit from its original root sense, account for all similarities and identities of sense, discover the reason of unexpected divergences, trace the deviations which separated Greek and Latin from the Indian dialect, discover and define the connection of all three with the Dravidian forms of speech.** Such a system of comparative philology could alone deserve to stand as a science side by side with the physical sciences and claim to speak with authority on the significance of doubtful words in the Vedic vocabulary. The development of such a science must always be a work of time and gigantic labour.”⁹

(ii) *The Psychological Test*

“But even such a science, when completed, could not, owing to the paucity of our records be, by itself, a perfect guide. It would be necessary to discover, fix and take always into account the actual ideas, experiences and thought-atmosphere of the Vedic Rishis; for it is these things that give colour to the words of men and determine their use. The European translations represent the Vedic Rishis as cheerful semisavages full of material ideas and longings, ceremonialists, naturalistic Pagans, poets endowed with an often gorgeous but always incoherent imagination, a rambling style and inability either to think in connected fashion or to link their verses by that natural logic which all except children and the most rudimentary intellects observe. In the light of this conception they interpret Vedic words and evolve a meaning

out of the verses. **Sayana and the Indian scholars perceive in the Vedic Rishis ceremonialists and Puranists like themselves with an occasional scholastic and Vedantic bent; they interpret Vedic words and Vedic mantras accordingly.** Wherever they can get words to mean priest, prayer, sacrifice, speech, rice, butter, milk, etc, they do so redundantly and decisively. **It would be at least interesting to test the results of another hypothesis, – that the Vedic thinkers were clear-thinking men** with at least as clear an expression as ordinary poets have and at least as high ideas and as connected and logical a way of expressing themselves – allowing for the succinctness of poetical forms – as is found in other religious poetry, say the Psalms or the Book of Job or St. Paul’s Epistles. But there is a better psychological test than any mere hypothesis. If it be found, as I hold it will be found, that a scientific and rational philological dealing with the text reveals to us poems not of mere ritual or Nature worship, but hymns full of psychological and philosophical religion expressed in relation to fixed practices and symbolic ceremonies, if we find that the common and persistent words of Veda, words such as vaja, vani, tuvi, ritam, radhas, râti, raya, rayi, uti, vahni etc, – an almost endless list, – are used so persistently because they expressed shades of meaning and fine psychological distinctions of great practical importance to the Vedic religion, that the Vedic gods were intelligently worshipped and the hymns intelligently constructed to express not incoherent poetical ideas but well connected spiritual experiences, – then the interpreter of Veda may test his rendering by repeating the Vedic experiences through Yoga and by testing and confirming them as a scientist tests and confirms the results of his predecessors. He may discover whether there are the same shades and distinctions, the same connections in his own psychological and spiritual experiences. If there are, he will have the psychological confirmation of his philological results.”¹⁰

(iii) The Historical Test

“Even this confirmation may not be sufficient. For although the new version may have the immense superiority of a clear depth and

simplicity supported and confirmed by a minute and consistent scientific experimentation, although it may explain rationally and simply most or all of the passages which have baffled the older and the newer, the Eastern and the Western scholars, still the confirmation may be discounted as a personal test applied in the light of a previous conclusion. If, however, there is a historical confirmation as well, if it is found that Veda has exactly the same psychology and philosophy as Vedanta, Purana, Tantra and ancient and modern Yoga and all of them indicate the same Vedic results which we ourselves have discovered in our experience, then we may possess our souls in peace and say to ourselves that we [have discovered] the meaning of Veda; its true meaning if not all its significance. Nor need we be discouraged, if we have to disagree with Sayana and Yaska in the actual rendering of the hymns no less than with the Europeans. Neither of these great authorities can be held to be infallible. Yaska is an authority for the interpretation of Vedic words in his own age, but that age was already far subsequent to the Vedic and the sacred language of the hymns was already to him an ancient tongue. The Vedas are much more ancient than we usually suppose. Sayana represents the scholarship and traditions of a period not much anterior to our own. There is therefore no authoritative rendering of the hymns. The Veda remains its own best authority.”¹¹

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THE GREATNESS OF INDIA AND ITS CULTURE (18)

3. THE ANCIENT INDIAN SPIRIT, ITS FOUR POWERS AND THE SECRET OF ITS GREATNESS – THE ARYAN SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

I. THE SPIRIT OF ANCIENT INDIA

“The spirit of ancient India was aristocratic; its thought & life moulded in the cast of a high & proud nobility, an extreme & lofty strenuousness. The very best in thought, the very best in action, the very best in character, the very best in literature & art, the very best in religion and all the world well lost if only this very best might be attained, such was the spirit of ancient India. The Brahmin who devoted himself to poverty & crushed down every desire in the wholehearted pursuit of knowledge & religious self-discipline; the Kshatriya who, hurling his life joyously into the shock of chivalrous battle, held life, wife, children, possessions, ease, happiness as mere dust in the balance compared with honour & the Kshatriya dharma, the preservation of self-respect, the protection of the weak, the noble fulfilment of princely duty; the Vaishya, who toiling all his life to amass riches, poured them out as soon as amassed in self-forgetting philanthropy holding himself the mere steward & not the possessor of his wealth; the Shudra who gave himself up loyally to humble service, faithfully devoting his life to his dharma, however low, in preference to self-advancement & ambition; these were the social ideals of the age.

The imagination of the Indian tended as has been well said to the grand & enormous in thought and morals. The great formative images of legend & literature to the likeness with which his childhood was encouraged to develop & which his manhood most cherished were of an extreme & lofty type. He saw Harischundra give up all that life held precious & dear rather than that his lips should utter a lie or his plighted word be broken. He saw Prahlada buried under mountains, whelmed in the seas, tortured by the poison of a thousand venomous serpents, yet calmly true to his faith. He saw Buddha give up his royal state,

wealth, luxury, wife, child & parents so that mankind might be saved. He saw Shivi hew the flesh from his own limbs to save one small dove from the pursuing falcon; Karna tear his own body with a smile for the joy of making a gift; Duryodhan refuse to yield one inch of earth without noble resistance & warlike struggle. He saw Sita face exile, hardship, privation & danger in the eagerness of wifely love & duty, Savitri rescue by her devotion her husband back from the visible grip of death. These were the classical Indian types. These were the ideals into the mould of which the minds of men & women were trained to grow. The sense-conquering thought of the philosopher, the magnificent achievements of the hero, the stupendous renunciations of the Sannyasin, [the] unbounded liberality of the man of wealth, everything was exaggeration, extreme, filled with an epic inspiration, a world-defying enthusiasm.”¹

“The ancient Indian culture attached quite as much value to the soundness, growth and strength of the mind, life and body as the old Hellenic or the modern scientific thought, although for a different end and a greater motive. Therefore to everything that serves and belongs to the healthy fullness of these things, it gave free play, to the activity of the reason, to science and philosophy, to the satisfaction of the aesthetic being and to all the many arts great or small, to the health and strength of the body, to the physical and economical well-being, ease, opulence of the race, – there was never a national ideal of poverty in India as some would have us believe, nor was bareness or squalor the essential setting of her spirituality, – and to its general military, political and social strength and efficiency. Their aim was high, but firm and wide too was the base they sought to establish and great the care bestowed on these first instruments.”²

Thus one can safely say that, “...Indian civilisation has been the form and expression of a culture as great as any of the historic civilisations of mankind, great in religion, great in philosophy, great in science, great in thought of many kinds, great in literature, art and poetry, great in the organisation of society and politics, great in craft and trade and commerce. There have been dark spots, positive imperfections, heavy shortcomings;

what civilisation has been perfect, which has not had its deep stains and cruel abysses? There have been considerable lacunae, many blind alleys, much uncultured or ill-cultured ground: what civilisation has been without its unfilled parts, its negative aspects? But **our ancient civilisation can survive the severest comparisons of either ancient or mediaeval times. More high-reaching, subtle, many-sided, curious and profound than the Greek, more noble and humane than the Roman, more large and spiritual than the old Egyptian, more vast and original than any other Asiatic civilisation, more intellectual than the European prior to the eighteenth century, possessing all that these had and more, it was the most powerful, self-possessed, stimulating and wide in influence of all past human cultures.**"³

II. THE FOUR POWERS

The Four powers of the ancient Indian spirit are: (1) Spirituality, (2) Stupendous Vitality, (3) Strong Intellectuality and (4) The Synthetic Impulse of Mind and Life.

A. *Spirituality*

"Spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it. India saw from the beginning, – and, even in her ages of reason and her age of increasing ignorance, she never lost hold of the insight, – that life cannot be rightly seen in the sole light, cannot be perfectly lived in the sole power of its externalities. She was alive to the greatness of material laws and forces; she had a keen eye for the importance of the physical sciences; she knew how to organise the arts of ordinary life. But she saw that the physical does not get its full sense until it stands in right relation to the supra-physical; she saw that the complexity of the universe could not be explained in the present terms of man or seen by his superficial sight, that there were other powers behind, other powers within man himself of which he is normally unaware, that he is conscious only of a small part of himself, that the invisible always surrounds the visible, the suprasensible the sensible, even as infinity always surrounds the finite. She saw too

that man has the power of exceeding himself, of becoming himself more entirely and profoundly than he is, – truths which have only recently begun to be seen in Europe and seem even now too great for its common intelligence. She saw the myriad gods beyond man, God beyond the gods, and beyond God his own ineffable eternity; she saw that there were ranges of life beyond our life, ranges of mind beyond our present mind and above these she saw the splendours of the spirit. Then with that calm audacity of her intuition which knew no fear or littleness and shrank from no act whether of spiritual or intellectual, ethical or vital courage, she declared that there was none of these things which man could not attain if he trained his will and knowledge; he could conquer these ranges of mind, become the spirit, become a god, become one with God, become the ineffable Brahman. And with the logical practicality and sense of science and organised method which distinguished her mentality, she set forth immediately to find out the way. Hence from long ages of this insight and practice there was ingrained in her her spirituality, her powerful psychic tendency, her great yearning to grapple with the infinite and possess it, her ineradicable religious sense, her idealism, her Yoga, the constant turn of her art and her philosophy.

But this was not and could not be her whole mentality, her entire spirit; spirituality itself does not flourish on earth in the void, even as our mountaintops do not rise like those of an enchantment of dream out of the clouds without a base. When we look at the past of India, what strikes us next is her stupendous vitality, her inexhaustible power of life and joy of life, her almost unimaginably prolific creativeness.”⁴

B. Stupendous Vitality

“For three thousand years at least, – it is indeed much longer, – she has been creating abundantly and incessantly, lavishly, with an inexhaustible many-sidedness, republics and kingdoms and empires, philosophies and cosmogonies and sciences and creeds and arts and poems and all kinds of monuments, palaces and temples and public works, communities and societies and religious orders, laws and codes

and rituals, physical sciences, psychic sciences, systems of Yoga, systems of politics and administration, arts spiritual, arts worldly, trades, industries, fine crafts, – the list is endless and in each item there is almost a plethora of activity. She creates and creates and is not satisfied and is not tired; she will not have an end of it, seems hardly to need a space for rest, a time for inertia and lying fallow. She expands too outside her borders; her ships cross the ocean and the fine superfluity of her wealth brims over to Judaea and Egypt and Rome; her colonies spread her arts and epics and creeds in the Archipelago; her traces are found in the sands of Mesopotamia; her religions conquer China and Japan and spread westward as far as Palestine and Alexandria, and the figures of the Upanishads and the sayings of the Buddhists are reechoed on the lips of Christ. Everywhere, as on her soil, so in her works there is the teeming of a superabundant energy of life. European critics complain that in her ancient architecture, sculpture and art there is no reticence, no holding back of riches, no blank spaces, that she labours to fill every rift with ore, occupy every inch with plenty. Well, but defect or no, that is the necessity of her superabundance of life, of the teeming of the infinite within her. She lavishes her riches because she must, as the Infinite fills every inch of space with the stirring of life and energy because it is the Infinite.”⁵

C. Strong Intellectuality

“But this supreme spirituality and this prolific abundance of the energy and joy of life and creation do not make all that the spirit of India has been in its past. It is not a confused splendour of tropical vegetation under heavens of a pure sapphire infinity. It is only to eyes unaccustomed to such wealth that there seems to be a confusion in this crowding of space with rich forms of life, a luxurious disorder of excess or a wanton lack of measure, clear balance and design. For the third power of the ancient Indian spirit was a strong intellectuality, at once austere and rich, robust and minute, powerful and delicate, massive in principle and curious in detail. Its chief impulse was that of order and arrangement, but an order founded upon a seeking for the inner law and truth of

things and having in view always the possibility of conscientious practice. India has been preeminently the land of the Dharma and the Shastra. She searched for the inner truth and law of each human or cosmic activity, its dharma; that found, she laboured to cast into elaborate form and detailed law of arrangement its application in fact and rule of life. Her first period was luminous with the discovery of the Spirit; her second completed the discovery of the Dharma; her third elaborated into detail the first simpler formulation of the Shastra; but none was exclusive, the three elements are always present.

In this third period the curious elaboration of all life into a science and an art assumes extraordinary proportions. The mere mass of the intellectual production during the period from Asoka well into the Mahomedan epoch is something truly prodigious, as can be seen at once if one studies the account which recent scholarship gives of it, and we must remember that that scholarship as yet only deals with a fraction of what is still lying extant and what is extant is only a small percentage of what was once written and known. There is no historical parallel for such an intellectual labour and activity before the invention of printing and the facilities of modern science; yet all that mass of research and production and curiosity of detail was accomplished without these facilities and with no better record than the memory and for an aid the perishable palm-leaf. Nor was all this colossal literature confined to philosophy and theology, religion and Yoga, logic and rhetoric and grammar and linguistics, poetry and drama, medicine and astronomy and the sciences; it embraced all life, politics and society, all the arts from painting to dancing, all the sixty-four accomplishments, everything then known that could be useful to life or interesting to the mind, even, for instance, to such practical side minutiae as the breeding and training of horses and elephants, each of which had its Shastra and its art, its apparatus of technical terms, its copious literature. In each subject from the largest and most momentous to the smallest and most trivial there was expended the same all-embracing, opulent, minute and thorough intellectuality. On one side there is an insatiable curiosity, the desire of life to know itself in every detail, on the other a spirit of organisation and scrupulous order, the desire of the mind to

tread through life with a harmonised knowledge and in the right rhythm and measure. Thus an ingrained and dominant spirituality, an inexhaustible vital creativeness and gust of life and, mediating between them, a powerful, penetrating and scrupulous intelligence combined of the rational, ethical and aesthetic mind each at a high intensity of action, created the harmony of the ancient Indian culture.

Indeed without this opulent vitality and opulent intellectuality India could never have done so much as she did with her spiritual tendencies. It is a great error to suppose that spirituality flourishes best in an impoverished soil with the life half-killed and the intellect discouraged and intimidated. The spirituality that so flourishes is something morbid, hectic and exposed to perilous reactions. It is when the race has lived most richly and thought most profoundly that spirituality finds its heights and its depths and its constant and many-sided fruition. In modern Europe it is after a long explosion of vital force and a stupendous activity of the intellect that spirituality has begun really to emerge and with some promise of being not, as it once was, the sorrowful physician of the malady of life, but the beginning of a large and profound clarity.”⁶

D. The Sounding of the Extremes and the Synthetic Impulse

“The European eye is struck in Indian spiritual thought by the Buddhistic and illusionist denial of life. But it must be remembered that this is only one side of its philosophic tendency which assumed exaggerated proportions only in the period of decline. In itself too that was simply one result, in one direction, of **a tendency of the Indian mind which is common to all its activities, the impulse to follow each motive, each specialisation of motive even, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, vital, to its extreme point and to sound its utmost possibility.** Part of its innate direction was to seek in each not only for its fullness of detail, but for its infinite, its absolute, its profoundest depth or its highest pinnacle. It knew that without a “fine excess” we cannot break down the limits which the dull temper of the normal mind opposes to

knowledge and thought and experience; and it had in seeking this point a boundless courage and yet a sure tread. Thus it carried each tangent of philosophic thought, each line of spiritual experience to its farthest point, and chose to look from that farthest point at all existence, so as to see what truth or power such a view could give it. It tried to know the whole of divine nature and to see too as high as it could beyond nature and into whatever there might be of supradivine. When it formulated a spiritual atheism, it followed that to its acme of possible vision. When, too, it indulged in materialistic atheism, – though it did that only with a side glance, as the freak of an insatiable intellectual curiosity, – yet it formulated it straight out, boldly and nakedly, without the least concession to idealism or ethicism.

Everywhere we find this tendency. The ideals of the Indian mind have included the height of self-assertion of the human spirit and its thirst of independence and mastery and possession and the height also of its self-abnegation, dependence and submission and self-giving. In life the ideal of opulent living and the ideal of poverty were carried to the extreme of regal splendour and the extreme of satisfied nudity. Its intuitions were sufficiently clear and courageous not to be blinded by its own most cherished ideas and fixed habits of life. If it was obliged to stereotype caste as the symbol of its social order, it never quite forgot, as the caste-spirit is apt to forget, that the human soul and the human mind are beyond caste. For it had seen in the lowest human being the Godhead, Narayana. It emphasised distinctions only to turn upon them and deny all distinctions. If all its political needs and circumstances compelled it at last to exaggerate the monarchical principle and declare the divinity of the king and to abolish its earlier republican city states and independent federations as too favourable to the centrifugal tendency, if therefore it could not develop democracy, yet it had the democratic idea, applied it in the village, in council and municipality, within the caste, was the first to assert a divinity in the people and could cry to the monarch at the height of his power, “O king, what art thou but the head servant of the demos?” Its idea of the golden age was a free spiritual anarchism. Its spiritual extremism could

not prevent it from fathoming through a long era the life of the senses and its enjoyments, and there too it sought the utmost richness of sensuous detail and the depths and intensities of sensuous experience. Yet it is notable that this pursuit of the most opposite extremes never resulted in disorder; and its most hedonistic period offers nothing that at all resembles the unbridled corruption which a similar tendency has more than once produced in Europe. For the Indian mind is not only spiritual and ethical, but intellectual and artistic, and both the rule of the intellect and the rhythm of beauty are hostile to the spirit of chaos. In every extreme the Indian spirit seeks for a law in that extreme and a rule, measure and structure in its application. Besides, this sounding of extremes is balanced by a still more ingrained characteristic, the synthetical tendency, so that having pushed each motive to its farthest possibility the Indian mind returns always towards some fusion of the knowledge it has gained and to a resulting harmony and balance in action and institution. Balance and rhythm which the Greeks arrived at by self-limitation, India arrived at by its sense of intellectual, ethical and aesthetic order and the synthetic impulse of its mind and life.

I have dwelt on these facts because they are apt to be ignored by those who look only at certain sides of the Indian mind and spirit which are most prominent in the last epochs. By insisting only upon these we get an inaccurate or incomplete idea of the past of India and of the integral meaning of its civilisation and the spirit that animated it. The present is only a last deposit of the past at a time of ebb; it has no doubt also to be the starting-point of the future, but in this present all that was in India's past is still dormant, it is not destroyed; it is waiting there to assume new forms. The decline was the ebb-movement of a creative spirit which can only be understood by seeing it in the full tide of its greatness; the renascence is the return of the tide and it is the same spirit that is likely to animate it, although the forms it takes may be quite new. To judge therefore the possibilities of the renascence, the powers that it may reveal and the scope that it may take, we must dismiss the idea that the tendency of metaphysical abstraction is the one note of the Indian spirit which dominates or inspires all its cadences.

Its real key-note is the tendency of spiritual realisation, not cast at all into any white monotone, but many-faceted, many-coloured, as supple in its adaptability as it is intense in its highest pitches. The note of spirituality is dominant, initial, constant, always recurrent; it is the support of all the rest. **The first age of India's greatness was a spiritual age when she sought passionately for the truth of existence through the intuitive mind and through an inner experience and interpretation both of the psychic and the physical existence. The stamp put on her by that beginning she has never lost, but rather always enriched it with fresh spiritual experience and discovery at each step of the national life. Even in her hour of decline it was the one thing she could never lose.**

But this spiritual tendency does not shoot upward only to the abstract, the hidden and the intangible; it casts its rays downward and outward to embrace the multiplicities of thought and the richness of life. Therefore **the second long epoch of India's greatness was an age of the intellect, the ethical sense, the dynamic will in action enlightened to formulate and govern life in the lustre of spiritual truth. After the age of the Spirit, the age of the Dharma; after the Veda and Upanishads, the heroic centuries of action and social formation, typical construction and thought and philosophy, when the outward forms of Indian life and culture were fixed in their large lines and even their later developments were being determined in the seed.** The great classical age of Sanskrit culture was the flowering of this intellectuality into curiosity of detail in the refinements of scholarship, science, art, literature, politics, sociology, mundane life. We see at this time too the sounding not only of aesthetic, but of emotional and sensuous, even of vital and sensual experience. But the old spirituality reigned behind all this mental and all this vital activity, and its later period, the post-classical, saw a lifting up of the whole lower life and an impressing upon it of the values of the spirit. This was the sense of the Puranic and Tantric systems and the religions of Bhakti. Later Vaishnavism, the last fine flower of the Indian spirit, was in its essence the taking up of the aesthetic, emotional and sensuous being into the service of the spiritual. It completed the curve of the cycle.

The evening of decline which followed the completion of the curve was prepared by three movements of retrogression. First there is, comparatively, a sinking of that superabundant vital energy and a fading of the joy of life and the joy of creation. Even in the decline this energy is still something splendid and extraordinary and only for a very brief period sinks nearest to a complete torpor; but still a comparison with its past greatness will show that the decadence was marked and progressive. Secondly, there is a rapid cessation of the old free intellectual activity, a slumber of the scientific and the critical mind as well as the creative intuition; what remains becomes more and more a repetition of ill-understood fragments of past knowledge. There is a petrification of the mind and life in the relics of the forms which a great intellectual past had created. Old authority and rule become rigidly despotic and, as always then happens, lose their real sense and spirit. Finally, spirituality remains but burns no longer with the large and clear flame of knowledge of former times, but in intense jets and in a dispersed action which replaces the old magnificent synthesis and in which certain spiritual truths are emphasised to the neglect of others. This diminution amounts to a certain failure of the great endeavour which is the whole meaning of Indian culture, a falling short in the progress towards the perfect spiritualisation of the mind and the life. The beginnings were superlative, the developments very great, but at a certain point where progress, adaptation, a new flowering should have come in, the old civilisation stopped short, partly drew back, partly lost its way. The essential no doubt remained and still remains in the heart of the race and not only in its habits and memories, but in its action it was covered up in a great smoke of confusion.”⁷

References:

1. **Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo**, Vol.07, pp.1095-97, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry
2. **Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo**, Vol.20, p.34, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry
3. **Ibid.**, p.79
4. **Ibid.**, pp.6-7
5. **Ibid.**, pp.7-8
6. **Ibid.**, pp.8-10
7. **Ibid.**, pp.10-14

THE OLD INDIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

“The old Indian system grew out of life, it had room for everything and every interest. There were monarchy, aristocracy, democracy. Every interest was represented in the government, while the Western system grew out of the mind. In Europe they are led by reason and want to make everything cut and dry without any chance of freedom or variation. If it is democracy, then democracy only and no room for anything else. They cannot be plastic.

India is now trying to imitate the West. Parliamentary government is not suited to India. But we always take up what the West has thrown off.”

- Sri Aurobindo

(Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo, Recorded
by A.B. Purani 2007, pp.584-85)

“Spirituality is India’s only politics, the fulfilment of the Sanatan Dharma its only Swaraj. I have no doubt we shall have to go through our Parliamentary period in order to get rid of the notion of Western democracy by seeing in practice how helpless it is to make nations blessed.”

- Sri Aurobindo

(Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo 36, p. 170)