

## Western Encounter with Indian Civilization(\*)

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The Western encounter with Indian civilization took place in the form of Catholic and Protestant Christianity, British liberalism, Marxism and modern science. It is only when we have diligently followed the history of that encounter, that we can see that the stated grounds on which it took place concealed those that were the real ones, and because the latter remained unperceived until very late, the spectacular Western energy that went into that encounter, remained also singularly fruitless. That that is what happened, requires detailed demonstration; that is, if we examine the aims which each of these forces had set out to achieve in India and not remain content with looking at their unintended and subsidiary results. When the actual grounds of the encounter began to emerge in a sufficiently clear light, not only they remained confined to the most perceptive among the Westerners but now concealed something of immeasurably greater importance than the failure of that encounter itself, namely, the unresolved question of human order and disorder.

We can see that the idea of order, in which man's being is firmly grounded, has been the central concern of all civilizations, from the most primitive to the most highly evolved. But what we yet do not see is the paradox that, both in India and the West, the different conceptions of order, and the social institutions based upon those conceptions, produced also profound disorder. What is it, then, in the nature of man that his ideas of order constitute the very source of his disorder? It is upon the resolution of this paradoxical question that the future of human civilization ultimately depends.

When one comes to the Indian side of this question, one is faced with two difficulties of a very special kind. The first one consists in the fact that from the very beginning of their systematic thought, at least a millennium before Christ, Indian thinkers saw human reality as immensely varied and complex, finding its expressions at different levels of consciousness besides. Therefore they saw human situation with many eyes and spoke

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about it with many tongues. The result was a radical relativism which remained ever afterwards an essential characteristics of Indian thought as well as of Indian life. One of its many consequences has been that practically all statements about Indian position on the issues governing human life would need to be qualified, even as they were qualified by ancient Indians themselves no sooner than they made them. This puts a severe pressure not only on language but on human patience as well. The alternative is undoubtedly far less strenuous but thoroughly misleading.

The second difficulty arises directly from the first. Since human reality is exceedingly complex, and has numerous levels of expression, Indian philosophers put aside as altogether inadequate the law of excluded middle. While that law made language intelligible, it falsified reality, for hardly anything of human reality is susceptible to the logic of either/or. It was too restrictive a logical rule to have ever been an infallible instrument of thinking about man and his position in the world. It is not that the law of contradiction was wholly abandoned in India, but only that its value for making reality manifest was clearly seen as limited. As a consequence, particularly in the higher reaches of Indian thought, one finds propositions that assert and deny a thing at the same time, or assert of a thing two opposite attributes simultaneously. To anyone conditioned to the Aristotelian law of contradiction, such propositions would seem literally meaningless, for they would not be propositions at all. Nor would human communication remain a cheerful activity if every statement were to be qualified, often by its opposite no sooner than it was made. For then one would not be saying anything definite which could be assessed for its truth or falsehood. In speaking about the Indian side of the encounter, in so far as that encounter was taken seriously, one simply cannot avoid making precisely such statements. To avoid doing so, may serve the purpose of clarity, but it would do so at the expense of truth.

Before coming to the question of human order and disorder, to the resolution of which Europe's encounter with India had contributed little even though that question has been through successive centuries at the very heart of Indian thinking about human existence, there is yet another factor which we must take into account. It consists in the use of the word 'Hinduism', which was manufactured by the Portuguese missionaries who had arrived at the westcoast of India very early in the sixteenth century. In search of a unified system of religious beliefs of the Hindus which they would endeavour to replace with Christianity, they brought into use a word which, from the moment it was used, served only to create a wholly

erroneous approach to Indian civilization. For there never was any such thing as 'Hinduism'. Not only was it a wrong name, but the concept of 'religion' when grafted on 'Hinduism' put one on a false track. Hence every account of what is called Hinduism has suffered from the fallacy of wrong identity. It was inevitable that the persistent question: what is Hinduism?, could never be answered satisfactorily. One cannot define a thing that is non-existent.

It was natural that, made desperate by the existence of conflicting beliefs, a common name was sought under which the elusive, easily confusing, and complex diversity of faiths and living, could be brought nevertheless. But that led to the double error of identity, first in gathering the apparently diverse faiths and practices into a fictitious 'Hinduism', and then in taking that to be a 'religion'. This error still persists and seriously distracts from the real thing. The very first step towards understanding the nature of Indian civilization, even before we explore its meaning for the future of mankind, is to see that its most fundamental concept has been *dharmā*, and that *dharmā* is not 'religion'.

With this indispensable recognition the way is open to seeing that Indian civilization is not 'Hindu' but Dharmic civilization. The prevalent notion, to which modern Indian thinkers have contributed no less, has been the source of nearly as many misunderstandings about it in the West as there are in India. But the word 'Hindu' is itself nowhere to be found in any of the ancient texts. There is profoundest significance in that ancient Indians did not give to themselves any specific identity as a people. The only identity they gave to themselves was in terms of *dharmā* - which they conceived to be the identity of man anywhere. The undeniable fact that for several centuries a vast majority of the people of India have identified themselves as Hindus, does not in the least lessen the irony that that identity was given to them by invading Arabs, and formed no part whatever of their own traditions.

Keeping in mind these preliminary remarks, let us consider the following question: What was the nature of Indian conception of order which can clearly be shown as running through the very long history of Dharmic thinking about man? Not until do we have an incontestable answer to this question, can we perceive that despite its immense thrust and energy, Europe's encounter with India remained a tragically superficial affair. And it is only then that we can see that the question is not primarily one which can interest the academic historian alone, but on the contrary, it is a question of deepest meaning to all men and women who anxiously reflect

not on such remote things as the future of mankind but on the substance of their own lives and relationships.

The one concern from which everything in Indian thought flowed, and on which every movement of Indian life ultimately depended, was the idea of *dharmā*, order, which was not any positive order but the order that was inherent in all life. Derived from the Sanskrit root-word *dhṛ* (to support, to sustain), *dharmā* means that whereby whatever lives, is sustained, upheld, supported. Its chief application is to human life which is bound by it in the same way as the analogous *ṛta* bound the universe of gods. *Ṛta* and *dharmā* together constitute the fundamental order of the whole universe. *Ṛta* was, however, spoken of less and less even in ancient times; whereas *dharmā* became the dominant concern.

That is because man occupied the central place in all Indian thought. That leads us to two main characteristics of the Indian conception of order which we may observe straight away. In the first place, it was not derived from belief in the existence of God, and hence was not theocentric. *Dharmā*, in being concerned with man, is manifestly anthropocentric. The main nine systems of Indian philosophy, Buddhist, Jain, Materialist, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā and Idealistic Monism, are evidently not God-centred. Indian explanations of order and disorder, *dharmā* and *adharma*, are located in man's being. But because they arose in a culture that simply did not think in terms of contesting polarities of either/or kind, the fact that Dharmic thought was man-centred did not place man in opposition to Nature or to animals. Those were included in the sweep of *dharmā*; to Dharmic culture there was no absolute discontinuity between man and animal any more than there was between man and gods. Therefore its anthropocentricity is essentially different from Western anthropocentricity. In the systems of philosophy and in the *dharmāśāstra* while God is not the measure of man, man, in being the measure of man, is not separated from plants, animals and gods.

In the second place, *dharmā* is not just conceptual order; it was not built exclusively upon some self-evident postulates; and in that sense it is not purely rationalistic order. It begins with universally observable facts pertaining to human life, derives from them such inferences that can legitimately be drawn; moves from a lower level of generalization to a higher one, examines the questions they give rise to, and keeping the contrariness of human facts constantly in view, it seeks to discover the true nature of order and disorder in which, respectively, man's life is sustained and plunged into darkness. However, thoroughly empirical in its method,

Indian conception of order did not turn into empiricism. Neither did its rigorous rationality turn into rationalism. Quite clearly there are no isms in Dharmic perspectives. This had the supreme merit of human realities not being forced somehow in pre-conceived theoretical moulds, rational or empirical.

The Mahābhārata defines *dharma* in the following ways: *Dharma* is so called because it sustains and upholds the people; hence whatever sustains, is *dharma* - this is certain. *Dharma* is propounded with the aim of securing the good of all living beings; hence whatever fulfills that aim, is *dharma* - this is certain.

What comes from love of all beings, is *dharma*: this is the criterion to judge *dharma* from *adharma*. These were the most general definitions, and like all such definitions they immediately gave rise to several serious questions. For one thing, they were relativistic in character; for what sustains people, and what secures their good, keeps changing with time and place. There is not any one conception of the good, or of order, that is inherent in man, but there are many conceptions concerning them. In that case, *dharma* ceases to be something fundamental, or it remains so very general that, for that reason, it remains also practically useless. No matter what ethical contents one poured into this definition of *dharma* as order inherent in man, the problem would still remain. Neither is the asserted certainty of the truth of the above propositions of the Mahābhārata a genuine certainty. It is a certainty of purely logical kind, one that is built into all tautological propositions which no fact of the world can either confirm or deny. These were precisely the problems that were raised in the Mahābhārata itself, and it is there that one finds the most extensive, often the most anguished, discussion about the nature of human order and disorder, *dharma* and *adharma*.

At one place, Yudhishthira, depicted as the very embodiment of *dharma*, and yet along with his brothers drawn into a devastating war against their cousins, announces almost with despair: "wether we know or we do not know *dharma*, whether it is knowable or not, *dharma* is finer than the finest edge of a sword or more substantial than a mountain. On first sight, it appears clear and solid like a town; on a close logical look, it vanishes from the view." Since order was defined also as the 'the Good', a still perplexed Yudhishthira announces at another place: "Were there only one *śāstra*, and only one means of gaining the Good, the situation would be clear; but there are many *śāstras*, and by describing the Good in different ways they have hidden its meaning."

The essential problem is the incoherent nature of man. Faced with the pain of change, man wants the comfort of permanence, then he seeks deliverance from the tyranny of permanent. He will not submit to the slow annihilation by time and aspires to be eternal: then he turns his back on eternity, and rejoices that he must end like all things that are finite. He will not accept that the world is a chaos, where things are somewhat related and at other times not, so he invents the idea of order; but only to give it up, arguing that order imposes also a pattern which destroys impulse and falsifies life. He fears what is contingent, and seeks power over it by discovering necessary laws; but this idea of necessity robs him his freedom, so he discards it for the abandon of what is contingent. He wishes to abrogate his particular person, his particular time, so he longs for transcendence: then unable to bear that state of being, he claims that the individual is inviolable and must not be swallowed by the transcendent. His life meaningless, he invests it with meaning; like an animal, he wishes to be god; subject to disease, he celebrates his body; lonely, he longs for love; alienated, he searches for his true identity. Then he reverses it all. He reviles his body, punishes love, feels guilty, suffers, slips into the mask of transcendence.

These contrary elements of man's being may be summarized in the following way. There is in him a perpetual conflict between:

- (1) home - homelessness  
householder vs. the ascetic  
relationship vs. solitariness
- (2) comfort - ecstasy  
domesticated sex vs. sex unbound  
(sex bound) (as in Tantra)
- (3) power - renunciation  
king vs. saint
- (4) locality - universality  
caste, village vs. the world
- (5) history - transcendence  
change vs. permanence  
experience vs. stillness
- (6) relative - absolute  
doubt vs. certainty  
atheism vs. theism
- (7) human effort - fate  
control vs. resignation  
pride vs. humility
- (8) logic - mysticism  
speech vs. silence

These contrary elements of human nature were sought to be reconciled, in search of coherence, in several different ways. Their details apart, the general structure of Dharmic reconciliation is clear enough. Let me mention here only two aspects of it.

(i) To the Dharmic mind, nothing was really so conflicting as to be unresolvable. What seemed contradictory, and therefore irreconcilable, was in fact only contrary. The method was to acknowledge contrary needs and desires as parts of human nature, and hence its incoherence, and then to show that there is a time for everything, and it is within man's reach, through experience of the entire range of contrary needs and desires, to arrive at a state of complete coherence, where what is contrary is naturally reconciled.

(ii) But this method required a highly developed state of being: since that was not to be met frequently, and to ordinary men and women the conflicts were far too pressing and immediate to be resolved by means of what they perceived as an abstraction, the Dharmic law-giver built that method of reconciliation into the social structure itself. For instance, the Dharmic structure ensured the satisfaction of the two contrary needs for home and homelessness, for relationship and solitariness. The greatest emphasis placed upon the life of a householder, was accompanied by the provision that after he had fulfilled his obligations to family and society, a man is free to retire from the exacting demands of those relationships. And because contrary needs were reconciled by being provided for in the social structure itself, the individual was saved strife and violence, to himself and to others, in resolving them.

The least that is involved in any realistic conception of order, is the condition that there be room in it for every expression of individual development, provided that the general flow of social life was not disrupted, either by the anarchy of ideas or by the anarchy of individual desires. The immense importance attached to non-violence, *ahimsā*, as the essential condition of order, weaving it into the daily acts of the individual, only reflected the principal that every being has a right to live, and every individual the right to order his life according to his given temperament, capacity and circumstance. Wherever either of these two basic conditions was disregarded, in the name of faith or ideology, there was the disorder of violence to human being.

Ideas and opinions are, in the Indian view, relative to historical context and there is nothing absolute about them. What is absolute, and therefore a universal, is *dharma*, the order inherent in life. Criticism of any one set of

ideas can be on the basis only of another set of ideas, which are likewise relative to time and place. Then why aggressiveness and violence?

That *dharma* was a secular order, and not any order derived from revelation or commandment of God, or from any theological doctrine can be seen by the numerous references to what its embodiments are. But if it was not theological, it was not ideological either. The Mahābhārata speaks of ten embodiments of *dharma*: good name, truth, self-control, cleanness of mind and body, simplicity, endurance, resoluteness of character, giving and sharing, austerities, continence. And there are five ways to man reaching the order in which his being is firmly grounded; they are: non-violence, an attitude of equality, peace and tranquillity, lack of aggression and cruelty, and absence of envy. While each individual has a relation to himself, he has also relationships with others. In Dharmic view the two are not separate.

At the same time, both individual and the other are enveloped in disorder. The two most general conclusions that were reached very early in Dharmic thinking have been: (i) all opposites necessarily imply each other: there is no Absolute Synthesis in which they are reconciled, they can only be transcended in a state of being which is beyond language, for language must employ opposites and, therefore, cannot describe it; and (ii) that all possible perversions of an idea are contained in that idea itself. While the first of these moved the Dharmic mind in a radically supra-social direction, the second, the abiding worry of law-givers, cast a fearful look at the first as well, for its implications were radically anarchic, in the philosophic sense of that word.

By the time Europe's encounter with Indian society began, the latter had already had a long history of disorder, disorder in the sense of Dharmic tradition itself. An that, too, was foreseen and provided for in the Indian conception of order. It had provided for the tension between order and disorder, *dharma* and *adharma*, that is present at the very centre of man's being.

It is neither possible nor, perhaps, necessary to go into the details of the Indian history of order and disorder. What is important for our discussion is the fact that Europe's encounter with India did not take place, as it could have, on the ground that is provided by the question I brought up at the beginning of the paper. That question is: What is it in the nature of man that his ideas of order constitute also the very source of his disorder? The immense disorder in European history has been discussed in Europe in the first place. While the disorder brought in Europe's life because of



the excesses of the Christian faith was demonstrated in the period of the Enlightenment; the disorder created by the philosophies of the Enlightenment, with belief in the supremacy of human reason, was discussed comparatively recently. The works of Michael POLANYI and Friedrich VON HAYEK, to mention only two names in that field, are of utmost significance in relation to the question mentioned above.

The first encounter of Europe with Indian civilization was no encounter really, in the deepest meaning of that word. The real encounter, in the sense of a real meeting between the two, is yet to take place.

But relationship between two civilizations, as between two individuals, requires openness to influence as its first condition. It requires, in other words, an acknowledgment of one's inadequacy. If one were wholly sufficient unto oneself, and also wholly coherent, then one would not need relationship in the ordinary meaning of that word. In the history of mankind each society has hitherto spoken to the others mostly from the notion of its own adequacy and strength. That invariably resulted in aggression and untruth. Neither Europe nor India has been an exception to this, although that attitude did not belong to the best traditions of either. What is required, above all, is that in the name of universality we do not disregard genuine differences in expressions of life, or become blind to universal perceptions in the light of historical differences. Relationship requires an honest understanding of both. That could be achieved with the help only of the other. The other must neither be swallowed up nor excluded. And in that lies the hope for the future.