

The Classical Age

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Idealist Thought of India

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The great history of India conceived by K. M. Munshi, the first undertaking of this magnitude to be carried out entirely by Indian scholars, is continued with Vol. III, which covers roughly the period from 320 to 750. After an interval of about ten months, it follows Vol. II, *The Age of Imperial Unity*, which embraced the period between 600 before our era and 320 after; the first volume, which appeared in 1952, had, naturally, dealt with the sources ('up to 600 B.C.'), or what is conventionally known as 'the Vedic period'. As is well known, the scientific editor is the esteemed historian R. C. Majumdar. To him, in this volume, has fallen the all important task of compiling the chapters on dynastic history which occupy the

first three hundred pages, with the exception of the history of the Deccan monarchies, which was entrusted to the epigraphist D. C. Sircar (who has undertaken also Ceylon and the Châlukyas), another exception being the period of the Pallavas and other kingdoms of the South, treated by R. Sathianathaier.

An original characteristic of the work is the important part—in this volume actually preponderant—occupied by the elements constituting Indian culture at the epoch under consideration: literature (G. V. Devasthali, H. D. Velankar, Srinivas Iyengar), political and juridical theory (U. N. Ghoshal), religion (Nalinaksha Dutt, A. D. Pusalker, A. M. Ghatage, D. C. Sircar and others), art (S. K. Saraswati, N. R.

Ray), general social questions (U. N. Ghoshal). Finally R. C. Majumdar returns to describe India's exchanges with the outside world and adds a summary of the expansion of Indian culture in Asia.

When *The History and Culture of the Indian People* is finished, which may require from three to four years at most, we shall have at our disposal, on putting together the varied information dispersed throughout the projected ten volumes, a series of fairly detailed monographs on the great typical systems regulating ancient India and their prolongations up to the threshold of modern times, on the styles of literature both in the Aryan and Dravidian languages, on social and economic facts, etc.: all domains more or less unsuitable to the strict chronological framework which the plan of the production demands.

The work, in its material plan, leaves little to be desired, except that in our opinion the subdivisions could have been better organised, and a more deliberate choice made between the style of erudition and the 'essay' type of writing. Annotations (unevenly distributed) serve to indicate the epigraphic or literary source supporting the most important statements, or to direct the reader to some modern monograph on the subject. The book ends with a bibliography which is not without omissions, especially regarding French works, but which is none the less welcome, and has also some useful genealogical tables, a good index, ample illustrations including, in particular, four maps. In many ways the work is

superior, for the quality of its information, to the two preceding volumes.

The title stresses the main feature which creates the unity of the present volume. If ever the word 'classic' had any sense, it would apparently apply to the India of that period: As in the century of Louis XIV, an enlightened empire made itself the protector of literature and the arts; India seems to have known a prosperity, a 'golden age' (far more than under Louis XIV), which she was never again to experience, and lastly, the social and cultural standards elaborated in the preceding centuries gave birth to a blossoming mass of brilliant works, conceived as so many illustrations of those standards, and as if to respond to the pre-established notion of classicism. This privileged period assumes its full significance when it is compared with the two Middle Ages which enclose it: the properly so-called Indian Middle Ages, which lasted from the end of the Vedic epoch and whose apogee was marked by the third century, a period of political disintegration following on an attempted humanist renaissance (under the auspices of Buddhism) with Kanishka (middle of the second century or end of the first century). After came the Middle Ages common to the whole of our Western civilisation, which, provoked in India by the Mussulman invasions, were prolonged with various vicissitudes until the beginning of the Mogul empire, that is to say, up to the sixteenth century.

There is, however, a certain amount of fallacy in this idea of classicism, as well as in that of a 'renaissance' which,

in the time of Max Müller, was already applied to the Gupta epoch. A sort of crystallisation has formed itself around the Guptas, due above all to the obscurities and gaps in our information concerning the previous epochs. The history of India has been constructed out of literary material (essentially from the epigraphs, highly formalised, of royal panegyrics), composed by holders of the Brahmanic ideals; a history written by Buddhists, or even simply by non-Indians, would doubtless have had another orientation. The empire of the Guptas—short-lived and not devoid of internal and external strife—was merely one of those fairly numerous empires which saw the light in India, generally as a result of outside pressure, since the times of the Mauryan kings up to Akbar and beyond. As to works of art, poems and sculptures, in so far as they are datable, account must also be taken of the considerable losses which seem to have marked the centuries involving the Christian era. It is unlikely that the disciplinary systems which began to be established towards the end of the Vedic period should have only begun to bear fruit in the fifth or sixth century. Mr. Ghoshal points out that the Gupta era is that of the decline of political speculations, whilst in the juridical domain, which constitutes one of the keystones of the Indian system, there is a movement of transition towards new forms: it would accordingly appear that, on certain points, that privileged age did not attain the creative standard somewhat too generously attributed to it.

The fact however remains that the period of the Gupta monarchy was an important moment in Indian history. It was during that period that the Hindu *dharma*, or codified social order, attained its full development, giving birth to well-known structures, such as the systemisation of the caste régime, etc. We witness, so to speak, the realisation, the illustration in practice, in the courts and gatherings, of everything that the old texts had been able to teach concerning both lay and religious ritual. Even the Vedic sacrifices had their revival. The Guptas moreover allowed (as is excellently brought out in the book under review) certain oligarchic clans, certain small republics, some of which, like the Licchavi, dated back to the time of Buddha, to live quietly in their shade. These clans tended to form themselves into vassal States, and this brings us face to face with the problem of Indian feudality, which so far has never been squarely confronted.

The empire of the Guptas pursued its course within stricter limits, but with continued strengthening of Hindu characteristics, among the Pallavas in the south-east, the Chālukyas at Bādāmi in the western Deccan: it was they who became the true successors of the Guptas rather than the empire of Harsha (seventh century), to which an undue importance has been attached, and which should actually be defined in the light of the Harsha-Pulakeçin-Mahendravarmā synchronism. As Mr. Majumdar says, if heroes make history, it is equally true, especially in India, where outstanding

personalities are comparatively rare, that history makes heroes.

The chapter on religion, however instructive it may be, bears further witness to our incapacity to reconstitute an authentic image of Indian religious life between the fourth and eighth centuries. Only the sectarian Hinduism of the later epochs, with its chiefs of regional groups, its exclusive habits, and the differentiated handling of the neo-Aryan languages, made it possible to approach the problem. What we have here are doctrines seen through the medium of literary texts: the height of the puranic period, with its unworldly mixture, feebly localised, of great religious schemes robed in conventional mythology. From out of this mass, some salient features are noticeable: Vedism driven back to the status of an archaeological vestige; the appearance on the scene of some sectarian movements within the great frame-works of Vishnuism, Shivaism, Tantrism (the latter still somewhat unstable). As regards Buddhist theories, noticeable is the development of the Great Vehicle with the corresponding reduction of the forms of the Little Vehicle which preserved their vitality only in certain outlying points of the Indian world. Jainism also suffered losses, at least in its native land of Magadha, losses which were not made good by its later push to the West. Buddhism had also soon lost its early bonds with the native land of Buddha and with the great centres of his early preaching: there is a centrifugal force in these Indian religions, which will be observed later in several other Hindu sects.

The work, which touches on so many realms of Indian culture, would lend itself to many other reflections of which the authors themselves have often suggested the nature. It suffices to repeat that, taken as a whole, the work is a tribute to the competence, as well as the open-mindedness of the historians who have collaborated in it under the inspiring aegis of Mr. K. M. Munshi. It will be one of the good works of reference placed at the disposal of students and, more generally, of the reader anxious to follow in some detail the developments of a great civilisation.

It has often been observed that Indian meditations or conjectural opinions have had more autonomy, more internal connexions than are usually accorded to them in classic or modern descriptions, which all admit, whether tacitly or not, the primacy of the *advaita* or 'non-dualism' partly negativist, represented by Śaṁcara and his successors.

It is certain that the *Upanishads* and even the *Bhagavadgītā*, anonymous and collective works, were extremely composite, that the Brahmanic 'systems' are the issue of various preoccupations: in part to give a rational explanation of the world and of human thought, in part to satisfy 'philologically' (so to speak) the essence of certain speculative attempts. Bordering on the systems there had been a materialistic movement, traces of which can be found almost everywhere, and notably in primitive Jainism and Buddhism.

One way of writing the history of Indian thought is therefore to draw

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attention to these incongruous sources which combined, as was to be expected, with the traces of the cosmogonic and mythological thought of the earliest times. These had a tenacious survival in India. It is this aspect of discontinuity which has just been stressed, brilliantly if somewhat partially, by W. Ruben in his recent *Geschichte der Indischen Philosophie*.

An inverse method, no less plausible, is to show how the greater part of Indian conjectural opinions, whatever their origin, tended towards a type of thought that could be given the ready name of 'idealism', not so much because it denied the reality of the world (even the *Vedānta* under its strictest form does not go so far as that), but because it submitted reality to an absolute principle and aimed at escaping from matter by transforming it. With all possible internal shades of meaning, this has been the principal tendency of the *Vedānta*, from the *Upaniṣhads* down to our times, including the 'sectarian' systems which draw their doctrine from a *Vedānta* mixed with Sāṅkhya or reinforced by a theological superstructure. It was also the tendency of Buddhism which, starting from a certain measure of realism rejecting equally the internal absolute (soul) and the transcendent absolute (brahman), arrived equally at idealistic conceptions, in the course of which it sought for substitutes for the conception of the absolute (even if negative: and was not the *brahman* of the *Upaniṣhads* already so?): whether it was called *vijñāna*, 'conscience', *ālaya* 'substratum', *śūnya* 'void', or sometimes *dharma* 'entity',

or simply *tat*, 'that', *tanmātra*, 'only that', recalling the *tat tvam asi*, 'thou art That' of the *Chāndogya*.

Mr. Raju is accordingly justified when he considers idealism as the central theme of Indian traditions; which he does, after having attempted, somewhat lengthily and as if feeling his way, to define it with the help of the doctrines of classical antiquity or of the modern West. The cleavage which he operates on the dense mass of these traditions reveals at every level this need to establish, not only an absolute, but several stages between the world and the absolute, making it possible, within an idealistic framework, to safeguard the postulates of a thought which only step by step can detach itself from reality.

The work proceeds with a study on the thinkers of contemporary India. They, on the whole, preach 'activism'; they intend to integrate matter, no longer as formerly to 'explain it away'. For Tagore and Radhakrishnan, the hold which we have on the absolute is commanded by our interests and our needs. Tagore's Absolute is humanised, Radhakrishnan's is intellectualised. Certain polemical attitudes are noticeable; for instance, Bhagavan Das reproaches the ancient doctrines for not having included the world of nature in the Absolute. The poet Iqbal (whom Mr. Raju includes in his study, as representative of the Sufi tendencies in India) glorifies desire, propounds a superman of the instincts, whilst Aurobindo, less aggressive, imagines a superman who would make use of the power of *brahman* to transform the

world. Gandhi applied Indian metaphysics to the affairs of this world. For Radhakrishnan as for others, it is possible (and therefore, necessary) to make a positive approach to the Absolute. Only Krishnamurti, who has no longer anything Indian about him but the tinsel of his Sanskrit terminology, resolutely rejects tradition; all the others admit it (on the metaphysical plane, not necessarily on the social plane), while feeling free

to reinterpret it according to their views. On the whole they remain faithful to the great ideological figurations dear to traditional India: concepts of the *sakti*, of the *māyā*, of the *karma*. Even when they seem to discuss them or to endow them with new shades of expression, they are merely underlining their adhesion to modes of thought which seem to be an indissoluble part of their being.