

SWARAJ IN IDEAS

We speak today of Swaraj or self-determination in politics. Man's domination over man is felt in the most tangible form in the political sphere. There is however a subtler domination exercised in the sphere of ideas by one culture on another, a domination all the more serious in the consequence, because it is not ordinarily felt. Political subjection primarily means restraint on the outer life of a people and although it tends gradually to sink into the inner life of the soul, the fact that one is conscious of it operates against the tendency. So long as one is conscious of a restraint, it is possible to resist it or to bear it as a necessary evil and to keep free in spirit. Slavery begins when one ceases to feel the evil and it deepens when the evil is accepted as a good. Cultural subjection is ordinarily of an unconscious character and it implies slavery from the very start. When I speak of cultural subjection, I do not mean the assimilation of an alien culture. That assimilation need not be an evil; it may be positively necessary for healthy progress and in any case it does not mean a lapse of freedom. There is cultural subjection only when one's traditional cast of ideas and sentiments is superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost. This subjection is slavery of the spirit: when a person can shake himself free from it, he feels as though the scales fell from his eyes. He experiences a rebirth and that is what I call Swaraj in Ideas.

In these days when our political destinies are in the melting pot, one is tempted to express a doubt—till now vaguely felt but suppressed as uncultured—how far generally we have assimilated our 'Western' education and how far it has operated as an obsession. Certainly there has been some sort of assimilation—at least by some of us—but even of them it may be asked whether the alien culture has been accepted by them after a full and open-eyed struggle had been allowed to develop between it and their indigenous culture. It is admitted today—what was not sufficiently recognized in the earlier days of our Western education—that we had an indigenous culture of a high

degree of development, the comparative value of which cannot be said to have been yet sufficiently appraised. Under the present system we generally receive Western culture in the first instance and then we sometimes try to peer into our ancient culture as a curiosity and with the attitude of foreign oriental scholars and yet we say that this ancient culture of ours is no curiosity. Many of our educated men do not know and do not care to know much of this indigenous culture of ours, and when they seek to know, they do not feel, as they ought to feel, that they are discovering their own self.

There is no gainsaying the fact that this Western culture—which means an entire system of ideas and sentiments—has been simply imposed on us. I do not mean that it has been imposed on unwilling minds: we ourselves asked for this education, and we feel, and perhaps rightly, that it has been a blessing in certain ways. I mean only that it has not generally been assimilated by us in an open-eyed way with our old-world Indian mind. That Indian mind has simply lapsed in most cases for our educated men, and has subsided below the conscious level of culture. It operates still in the persisting routine of their family life and in some of their social and religious practices which have no longer, however, any vital meaning for them. It neither welcomes nor resists the ideas received through the new education. It dares not exert itself in the cultural sphere.

There can be no vital assimilation, in such a case, of the imposed culture. And yet the new ideas are assimilated in a fashion. They are understood and imaginatively realized; they are fixed in language and in certain imposed institutions. A drill in this language and in those institutions induces certain habits of soulless thinking which appear like real thinking. Springing as these ideas do from a rich and strong life—the life of the West—they induce in us a shadow mind that functions like a real mind except in the matter of genuine creativeness. One would have expected after a century of contact with the vivifying ideas of the West that there should be a vigorous outpour of Indian contribution in a distinctive Indian style to the culture and thought of the modern world,—contribution specially to the humane subjects like history, philosophy or literature, a contribution such as may be enjoyed by our countrymen who still happen to retain their vernacular mind and which might

be recognized by others as reflecting the distinctive soul of India. Barring the contribution of a few men of genius,—and genius is largely independent of the times,—there is not much evidence of such creative work done by our educated men.

I may refer also to more modest forms of creativeness, creativeness such as is evidenced in the daily business of our lives, e.g. in the formation of judgments about our real position in the world. We speak of world movements and have a fair acquaintance with the principles and details of Western life and thought, but we do not always sufficiently realize where we actually stand today and how to apply our bookish principles to our situation in life. We either accept or repeat the judgments passed on us by Western culture, or we impotently resent them but have hardly any estimates of our own, wrung from an inward perception of the realities of our position.

In the field of politics, for example, we are only today beginning to realize that we have for long wrongly counted on principles that have application only to countries that are already free and already established and have not had sufficient perception of the dark thing they call 'power' which is more real than any logic or political scholarship. In the field of social reform, we have never cared to understand the inwardness of our traditional social structure and to examine how far the sociological principles of the West are universal in their application. We have contented ourselves either with an unthinking conservatism or with an imaginary progressiveness merely imitative of the West.

Then again in the field of learning, how many of us have had distinctively Indian estimates of Western literature and thought? It is possible for a foreigner to appreciate the literature of a country, but it is only to be expected that his mind would react to it differently from the mind of a native of the country. A Frenchman, for example, would not, I imagine, appreciate Shakespeare just as an Englishman would do. Our education has largely been imparted to us through English literature. The Indian mind is much further removed by tradition and history than the French or the German mind from the spirit of English literature, and yet no Indian, so far as I am aware, has passed judgments on English literature that reflect his Indian mentality.

His judgments do not differ materially from the judgment of an English critic and that raises the suspicion whether it is

his judgment at all, whether it is not merely the mechanical thinking of the galvanic mind induced in us through our Western education.

In philosophy hardly anything that has been written by a modern educated Indian shows that he has achieved a synthesis of Indian thought with Western thought. There is nothing like a judgment on Western systems from the standpoint of Indian philosophy, and although some appraisal of Indian philosophy has been attempted from the Western standpoint, there appears to be no recognition yet that a criticism of the fundamental notions of either philosophy is necessary before there can be any useful comparative estimate. And yet it is in philosophy that one could look for an effective contact between Eastern and Western ideas. The most prominent contribution of ancient India to the culture of the world is in the field of philosophy and if the modern Indian mind is to philosophise at all to any purpose, it has to confront Eastern thought and Western thought with one another and attempt a synthesis or a reasoned rejection of either, if that were possible. It is in philosophy, if anywhere, that the task of discovering the soul of India is imperative for the modern Indian; the task of achieving, if possible, the continuity of his old self with his present-day self, of realizing what is nowadays called the Mission of India, if it has any. Genius can unveil the soul of India in art, but it is through philosophy that we can methodically attempt to discover it.

Our education has not so far helped us to understand ourselves, to understand the significance of our past, the realities of our present and our mission of the future. It has tended to drive our real mind into the unconscious and to replace it by a shadow mind that has no roots in our past and in our real present. Our old mind cannot be wholly driven underground and its imposed substitute cannot function effectively and productively. The result is that here is a confusion between the two minds and a hopeless Babel in the world of ideas. Our thought is hybrid through and through and inevitably sterile. Slavery has entered into our very soul.

The hybridisation of our ideas is evidenced by the strange medley of vernacular and English in which our educated people speak to one another. For the expression of cultural ideas

specially we find it very difficult to use the pure vernacular medium. If I were asked, for example, to conduct today's discourse* here in Bengali, I would have to make a particularly strenuous effort. One notices a laudable tendency at the present day to make such an effort. It is not that it is always successful. Perhaps that is only to be expected in a period of transition. If the language difficulty could be surmounted, it would mean a big step towards the achievement of what I have called Swaraj in Ideas.

The hybridisation of ideas brought about by our education and the impact of Western political, social and economic institutions on our daily life is one of the most distressing features of our present situation. It is unnatural and may be regarded with the same sentiment with which an old-world Hindu looks upon varna-sankara. It does not simply mean a confusion in the intellectual region. All vital ideas involve ideals. They embody an entire theory and an insight into life. Thought or reason may be universal, but ideas are carved out of it differently by different cultures according to their respective genius. No idea of one cultural language can exactly be translated in another cultural language. Every culture has its distinctive 'physiognomy' which is reflected in each vital idea and ideal presented by the culture.

A patchwork of ideas of different cultures offends against scholarly sense just as much as patchwork of ideals offends against the spiritual sense. There is room indeed for an adjustment and synthesis, within limits of different cultures and cultural ideals. Life means adaptation to varying times and to varying ideals. But we are not always clear about the method of this adaptation. As we have to live, we have to accept facts and adapt our secular life and secular ideas to the times. We have to alter ourselves here to suit the situation. In spiritual life, however, there is no demand for compromising our ideals in order to have a smooth sailing with the times. Here, if possible and so far as lies in our power, the times have to be adapted to our life and not our life to the times.

* This discourse was given at a meeting of the students of the Hooghly College of which the writer was Principal, during 1928-30. The present paper was recovered from Dr. Bhattacharya's unpublished writings.

But the world confronts us not only with aggressive interests but also with aggressive ideals. What response should our traditional ideals make to these imposed ideals? We may respect the new ideals without accepting them, we may attempt a synthesis without compromise or we may accept them as the fulfilment of our ideals. Different responses may be demanded with respect to different ideals, but in any case a patchwork without adjustment or with a mechanical adjustment, if complacently accepted as a solution, is an evil, as no ideal here gets the entire devotion of the soul. Where different ideals are accepted in the prayerful hope that a synthesis will come, the patchwork is not accepted as a solution and need not be an evil.

We talk—a little too glibly perhaps—of a conflict of the ideas and ideals of the West with our traditional ideas and ideals. In many cases it is a confusion rather than a conflict and the real problem is to clear up the confusion and to make it develop in the first instance into a definite conflict. The danger is in the complacent acquiescence in the confusion. The realization of a conflict of ideals implies a deepening of the soul. There is conflict proper only when one is really serious about ideals, feels each ideal to be a matter of life and death. We sometimes sentimentally indulge in the thought of a conflict before we are really serious with either ideal.

We speak also a little too readily of the demand for a synthesis of the ideals of the East and the West. It is not necessary in every case that a synthesis should be attempted. The ideals of a community spring from its past history and from the soil: they have not necessarily a universal application, and they are not always self-luminous to other communities. There are ideals of the West which we may respect from a distance without recognizing any specific appeal to ourselves. Then again there are ideals that have a partial appeal to us, because they have an affinity with our own ideals, though still with a foreign complexion. What they prescribe to us is to be worshipped in our own fashion with the ceremonials of our own religion. The form of practical life in which an ideal has to be translated, has to be decided by ourselves according to the genius of our own community. A synthesis of our ideals with western ideals is not demanded in every case. Where it is demanded, the foreign ideal is to be assimilated to our ideal and not the other way.

There is no demand for the surrender of our individuality in any case: *Sodharne nidhanam sreyaḥ paradharṇo bhayavahā*. There are those who take this emphasis on the individuality of a historical community to be overstrained. It appears to them to be the expression of national, communal or racial conceit and the excuse for a perverse obscurantism. They believe in abstract self-luminous ideals for all humanity, in a single universal religion and a single universal reason.

There is, however, a case for universalism. The progress of a community and of humanity implies a gradual simplification and unification of ideals. This is just the rationalising movement, the emergence of a common reason. We have to distinguish, however, between two forms of rationalism, two directions of this simplifying movement. In the one, reason is born after the travail of the spirit: rationalism is here the efflux of reverence, reverence for the traditional institutions through which customary sentiments are deepened into transparent ideals. In the other form of rationalism—what is commonly meant by the name, the simplification and generalization of ideals is effected by unregenerate understanding with its mechanical separation of the essential from the inessential. The essential is judged as such here not through reverence, not through deepened spiritual insight, but through the accidental likes and dislikes of the person judging. Customs and institutions bound up with age-long sentiments are brushed aside (in the name of reason) as meaningless and dead without any imaginative effort to realize them in an attitude of humility. Decisions as to what is essential or inessential have indeed to be taken, for time carries not and mere historical sentimentalism will not avail. In practical life, one may have to move before ideals have clarified; but it is well to recognize the need of humility and patience in the adjustment of the world of ideas. Order is involved in the world of our ideas through infinite patience and humility. That is the right kind of rationalism: it is only in the wrong and graceless form of rationalism that brusque decisions in the practical manner are taken in the name of reason, in the world of our ideals.

There is then a legitimate and obligatory form of rationalism. It is wrong not to accept an ideal that is felt to be a simpler and deeper expression of our own ideals simply because it halts

from a foreign country. To reject it would be to insist on individuality for the sake of individuality and would be a form of national conceit and obscurantism. The acceptance of such an ideal is really no surrender of individuality: to serve this foreign god is to serve our own god: the foreign ideal is here in our own ideal. The guru or teacher has to be accepted when he is found to be a real guru, whatever the community from which he comes. But it is not every foreign ideal that is felt to be the soul of our own ideal. Some foreign ideals have affinity with our own, and are really alternative expressions of them in a foreign idiom that has no sacredness for us and there are others which have no real application to our conditions.

It is sometimes forgotten by the advocates of universalism that the so-called universalism of reason or of religion is only in the making and cannot be appealed to as an actually established code of universal principles. What is universal is only the spirit, the loyalty to our own ideals and the openness to other ideals, the determination not to reject them if they are found within our ideals and not to accept them till they are so found. The only way to appraise a new ideal is to view it through our actual ideal; the only way to find a new reverence is to deepen our old reverence. Progress in the spiritual world is not achieved by a detached reason judging between an old god and a new god. The way to know facts is not the way to know values.

So much for the objection, which is often raised in the name of universalism, to the stress I have laid on the individuality of Indian thought and spirit, on the conservatism of the distinctive values evolved through ages of continuous historical life of Indian society. I have thought it necessary to examine universalism in some detail at the risk of tiring the reader with abstract arguments because this appears to me to be our greatest danger. It is the inevitable result of our 'rootless' education and it stands more than anything else in the way of what I call Swaraj in Ideas.

The other danger of national conceit and the unthinking glorification of everything in our culture and depreciation of everything in other cultures appears to me, in our circumstances, to require less stressing. Not that it is less serious abstractly considered, but as a matter of fact our educated men suffer more from over-diffidence than from over-confidence, more from a

'rootless' universalism than from clinging particularism. We are more ready to accept others' judgments about us than to resent them. There is the old immemorial habit of regarding what we are taught as sacred learning, and the habit is not easily altered even though the learning imparted is the opinion of others—opinion about us, for example, of men who might be presumed to be ignorant of us and unsympathetic to us. There is so much, kind or unkind, written about us and preached to us by others that raises the legitimate question if they have a sufficient perception of the inwardness of our life. *Prima facie* it is very difficult for a foreigner to understand the mind of a people from whom he is widely removed by tradition and history unless he has intimately participated in their life for a long time. It is only natural that the people in question should receive his judgment about them with a certain amount of mental reserve. It might lead them to self-examination if the foreigner is not obviously ignorant and abusive; but docile acceptance is not certainly demanded in the first instance.

Now there is a good deal in the name of learning—history, philosophy or moral sermon—imparted to us through our education which is unconsciously or consciously of a tendentious or propagandist character. They imply a valuation of ourselves, an appraisalment of our past history and present position from a foreign standard. Our attitude towards them should be one of critical reserve, and not of docile acceptance. And yet the critical attitude would in many cases be condemned by our foreign teachers and by our own educated men as uncultured and almost as absurdly ignorant as a hesitation to accept the truth of geometry. That is inevitable where the education of a people is undertaken by foreign rulers. There is bound in such a case to be some imposition of foreign valuations on the learner and a discouragement of the critical attitude.

The question of imposition does not arise in the case of certain branches of learning—mathematics and the natural sciences, for example, which have no nationality and imply no valuation. Whenever there is valuation, there is the suspicion of a particular point of view—national, communal or racial, of the person who judges the value. A valuation of our culture by a foreigner from the standpoint of his own culture should be regarded by us as meant not for our immediate acceptance but

for our critical examination. It should be a filly to which we should react. I remember a remark of Sir John Woodroffe to this purpose. That our first impulse here should be one of self-defensive resentment is only natural and need not imply an uncultured self-conceit. Docile acceptance without criticism would mean slavery.

The critical attitude is demanded pre-eminently in the field of valuations of ideals. Mere acceptance here makes not only for confusion but for moral evil. But barring the concepts of the sciences—even here there may be some doubt—all concepts and ideas have the distinctive character of the particular culture to which they belong. What should be our reaction to such cultural ideas? They have to be accepted, but as metaphors and symbols to be translated into our own indigenous concepts. The ideas embodied in a foreign language are properly understood only when we can express them in our own way. I plead for a genuine translation of foreign ideas into our native ideas before we accept or reject them. Let us everywhere resolutely think in our own concepts. It is only thus that we can think productively on our own account.

In politics our educated men have been compelled to realize by the logic of facts that they have absolutely no power for good, though they have much power for evil, unless they can carry the masses with them. In other fields there is not sufficient realization of this circumstance. In the social sphere, for example, they still believe that they can impose certain reforms on the masses—by mere preaching from without, by passing resolutions in social conferences and by legislation. In the sphere of ideas, there is hardly yet any realization that we can think effectively only when we think in terms of the indigenous ideas that pulsate in the life and mind of the masses. We condemn the caste system of our country, but we ignore the fact that we who have received Western education constitute a caste more exclusive and intolerant than any of the traditional castes. Let us resolutely break down the barriers of the new caste, let us come back to the cultural stratum of the real Indian people and evolve a culture along with them suited to the times and to our native genius. That would be to achieve Swaraj in Ideas.