

27. APPROXIMATION OF MANKIND

Amongst the most remarkable processes of physical and cultural approximation known to man has been that of which the Indian people was the carrier. Our great ancestors and presumably sometimes, ancestors travelled far and wide and made of the climes where they wanted their home and were not bothered with dead conventions and rituals. They exist no more, for they have left no distinct progeny. But in the process of disappearing, they have re-appeared in a million-fold ways in those among whom they lived and loved. They have turned themselves into what Sanskrit has so graphically described as seed-blood. Over all East Asia from north to south can be seen numerous populations on whose visage is spread the stamp of India. In the Lumbini Park of Bangkok, as elsewhere, an Indian traveller of today frequently stumbles into a girl or a boy who is definitely a progeny of some Indian ancestor of over 1,500 years ago, who talks a language unintelligible to him but full of immigrant words from his own language, and who revives in him memories of an old tale as difficult to forget as to recall in detail. What Indian boy has not been told by his grandmother of bewitching beauties in the east, in the hills of Assam, in Burma and beyond who ensnare a man and turn him into a buffalo and hold him tied up in their homes. Some race memories of an old jealousy are obviously transmitted in this tale. A philosopher of history may fondly wonder if ever such pleasant jealousies would become universal and alive and a portion of the male and the female fate all over the earth. I am proud of these ancestors who were carriers of human approximation but not imperialists. But pride is itself an antidote to approximation. It leads not to an approximation of the human race but to an artificial

assimilation of portions of mankind with the people who have the means to be proud. We may, therefore, hasten to recall that practically every major race on earth has sometime or the other had the means to be proud and has been a carrier of physical and cultural approximation. All mankind has reason to be proud of this process and, in equal pride, to will what has hitherto taken place without design.

It is as well to think of the golden hoop of the Sanskrit language with its various sisters and daughters, Prakrit and Pali, which unites all South Asia, to a lesser extent, other parts of Asia as well. Whether in Jakarta or Bangkok, one stumbles into words such as 'Pradhan Mantri' or 'Panch Shila' or 'Rathmanu' and the wife and children of a socialist near Sourabaya, with whom I broke bread, were named Rukmavati, Padmavati, Dharmavan, Yuddhaninsa, and they were a Muslim family. Rathmanu is incidentally the name of a most significant memorial, which the Thai people have erected in memory of their revolution of 1932. It is a stone pillar, a short one, in the centre of the main street of Bangkok, and on it rests a book in stone, which is their Constitution, and Rathmanu is quite obviously the result of a long distance migration of Rashtramanu, the nation's law-giver. Such altered emigrants into South Asian languages are far more numerous than those which have retained their original sound. This causes one to speculate whether cultural approximation, by itself and without designed aids, is not at once a centrifugal and centripetal process. Over in Tokyo it may not be possible to see such traces in face or language but the gigantic images of Gautam Buddha in Kamakura and Nara remind us of those glorious times when India presided over the commingling of races and cultures not in a militaristic way but in other ways. It was a spread all right. This process of physical and cultural approximation among different parts of mankind has gone on whether through conquest or out of very close relationships, particularly where two states meet. Frontiers are naturally very exciting even to this day because it is there that races meet.

They meet in war and in love and even war ultimately leads to love, at least it did so in the past.

This account of how the Indian portion of mankind and its culture spread eastwards right up to the north in Japan and brought about a certain approximation between itself and the people inhabiting those regions, physically as well as culturally, should recall that a similar process has been going on in all parts of the world and practically every race has been its carrier. The Arabic language for instance is a basic ingredient of almost all the Negro languages of Africa and Alexandria had been a meeting place of races for twenty centuries and more. In those regions, whether Alexandria or Cairo or Nicosia, one is struck by the multitudinous treasure of faces and is tenderly reminded of numerous strands and races that must have mixed up. Where two rivers meet there, according to Indian tradition, stands a pilgrimage. Where two or more races meet, there should stand a pilgrimage, for the process of physical and cultural approximation of mankind has taken place on that site.

Other languages too had their spread. The Aramic language in which Christ spoke may not have had its spread as a language but as a script it went far and wide. Aside from Greek and Latin which exist to this day in their direct progenies and have entered like seed-blood into many modern languages, the spread of the English languages has indeed been phenomenal. But the error of singling out this latest spread should not be made, for what appears to loom so large as a contemporary happening may after all be the repetition of similar events that look smaller because of distance. In addition to the realms of blood and language, approximation has taken place in other spheres of man's existence, in ideas and religion, in techniques of production as well as of living. The spread of the three great proselytising religions, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, has almost girdled the world. A warning must here be sounded as in the case of migrating birds which change their shape and sound. If the human race has ever tended to draw together in numberless

ways, it has also dispersed and taken on increasing distinctions with the passage of time.

Much speculation still attends the original homes of the major races and their dispersal far and wide and their encounters with one another. Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that these dispersals have made many of them, that they have transformed a single group of basic unity into many groups of dissimilar character. There are several Mongolian or Aryan or Negroid groups today, while, at one time, there was only one of each. Is it then not wishful thinking to blur these processes of division while concentrating attention on those of reunion? A tested theory must indeed bide its time until historical evidence has been collected. A legitimate speculation may, however, be made. The human race appears to have lived in its early dawn in a few big prisons without communications with one another. These prisons may have been spread over vast areas but they were bounded at that time by unscalable walls of granite. In each of these prisons lived a portion of human race in splendid isolation. They must have smelled raw, though some would like to romanticise them as pure and unadulterated.

When the human race, held incommunicado with one another, finally broke out of its prisons, it ran wild with joy or fear, made adventures of discovery and history and seemingly divided itself further. But these divisions may well have been the only available lover's ladder for a possible reunion of the future. Each hop and halt did indeed make for a fresh division but the next hop or the one after it brought a scouting contingent face to face with its counterpart from another race that had similarly broken out from its prison. The strangers, who had probably not even dreamed of one another, met, gave a puzzled greeting and talked with their eyes and hands. The process of physical and cultural approximation began in, however, small a way. From this first start to ideological spreads beginning from Akhnaton of the ancient Egyptians or the Upanishads over Confucius or Kant to Gandhi of modern

India is indeed a long passage of time but also an equally long history of approximations. The list of approximations in techniques of production and living or in articles of use would be inexhaustible. Dacca muslin went as far in the world of its time as the American nylon does today. Cartwright's technique of mechanical spinning and weaving has undergone successive refinement and today covers the surface of the earth. If Hollywood is a laboratory where make-up approximates one face to another with many comedies of mistaken identities, the whole wide world is becoming the field of its experiments. Nevertheless, gunpowder probably still holds the records in the fastest spread of an article.

It has become a truism to speak of the annihilation of distances by the automobile, wireless and the aeroplane. Whether or not the thick blanket of clouds over which men fly in their aeroplanes and the standardised hotel annihilates and distances between peoples, there is not a country in the world which does not make use of these techniques of transport and communication. In all historical ages, men have tended to approximate to one another in styles and languages, in articles of use and processes of manufacture, in ideas and religion but always without the bounds of yesterday's frontiers and today's hinterlands whom poverty has struck. Let not the vain thought disfigure the mind that any one people was the carrier of this process. It was a part of human development, whenever any particular people grew and achieved, it seemed to take itself to other regions and get incorporated with them and simultaneously take something from them and bring it back to its own country. This has been going on since the dawn of history.

In the cultural sphere, I have come across some contemporary examples of this process. The Indonesian part of our world used to know of a dance called the Ronggen. Such Indians as have lived with the Bhils and other forest dwellers must have seen teams of men and women ever separate, probably because it would not yet be the proper thing in India for a man

to touch a woman or for a woman to touch a man, face each other and advance and withdraw and dance about. Ronggen used to be a fairly sensuous dance, so I am told, but a dance to which the family could go. It got transported anyhow to the United States of America and although it did not quite separate the dancing couple it did cause an alternating closeness and distance. This dance is called the Boogie-Woogie. It has now come back to Singapore as Joget Modern and is probably the most sensuous dance that the world knows. The man does not touch the woman and they both keep apart but there are such sensuous movements when they move towards each other and then they recede and the whole thing goes on. Two entirely separate beings but the magnetic and unashamed sensuality of that dance holds them together in a vice of a circle that is ever shifting its site. The Muslim faith might have something to do with such a development. The people would probably like to take the pleasure of the dance without having to violate their faith. But if this process of approximation continues, other developments may ensue.

Bali possesses the unique Gamelan which is a series of brass instruments and is found in every village of the island and whose orchestra may consist of fifty persons and more, musicians ranging from the age of ten to perhaps seventy, without notations or a conductor. This treasured Gamelan is now being used in Den Passen, the big town of Bali, for advertising Hollywood films. That too is a part of the process of cultural approximation, although an unfortunate one. To the sonorous tingle of Gamelan, much still takes place in Bali and the woman of the island except in the big coastal towns sways her shapely but covered hips and her rounded but uncovered breasts, rounded perhaps because they are uncovered. The towns are, however, laying down the fashion and the wife of the governor of Bali appeared shocked at my reverie that such unthinking imitations of foreign modes are not an unmixed gain. The time-lag in some cultural approximation may only have caused the native and the

foreign to change places. Perhaps by the time the American women go about sporting a well-formed breast, at least in the sunnier climes of California, the women of Bali will have covered their sagging ones beneath a quarter dozen different sheets called blouses. This may appear to some to be a rather frivolous aspect of history, but how many persons remember what foreign minister or prime minister said twenty centuries ago and in which country. Big generals are probably remembered for five or ten centuries. The great prophets of religion are of course peerless. But, as far as battles, warriors and statesmen go, when all of them have faded away, what remains is the face in Bangkok or the image in Nara or Chinatown in San Francisco or the Egyptian obelisk in Paris, because this is the basic residue of history. What remains is the meeting of races and peoples and the coming together of their cultures and also of their bodies.

This physical and cultural approximation has known limits, for none of the efforts hitherto made has been able to spread so as to cover the whole world. Greek or Sanskrit or Aramic or Arabic has each spread from time to time but never so as to encompass the earth. Various cultures have spread to their West or to their East and in other directions and brought numerous peoples under their control but never the whole world. Some may, therefore, think that this process of physical and cultural approximation is destined to be limited and never to reach world-wide application. That would have been so if the ways open to mankind were those of conquest alone or of any one culture spreading unilaterally. In former times, it was largely conquests, often militaristic conquests, sometimes, also ideological, which brought about the approximation of one people to another. But the stage is now set for a willed approximation in which no one group need be subjugated by another and by which all the peoples of the world might through intelligent design try to achieve a multi-coloured harmony of the human race. What is possible is, however, not necessary.