

## Journeys Through Hell.

The modern writer in any of the Indian languages does not occupy an ivory tower. Since most of modern Indian literature is a reaction to acquaintance with English and the European civilisation the writer is more usually than not preoccupied with social reform. He fulfills a major function of the writer in a democratic society, that is of ~~increasing~~ <sup>leading</sup> social consciousness to areas beyond social practice. Custom and the writer's ~~conscience~~ are, therefore, in conflict. This non-acceptance of the customary is generally on the superficial level and intense drama is missing from most of contemporary Indian writing. ~~Really~~ Much of the fiction in any Indian language ~~is~~ does not satisfy modern sensibility, and often appears a catalogue of woes. It patently is intended for those who accept the customary and frequently fails to appeal even to Indians ~~who have~~ <sup>with</sup> made a wide reading of European literature. Only occasionally does one come across a work of fiction which comes up to modern standards.

### ~~These general observations~~

The Indian literary tradition, however, stretches far back ~~to~~ and the alienation of the modern Indian writer from that tradition is an aspect of writing that has not been critically examined. This essay is not intended to go into the details of that cultural phenomenon. The outstanding aspects of that estrangement are important for the present study.

In the two epics and much of classical Sanskrit literature ~~there~~ the general tone was spiritualist in the sense that William James described spiritualism as the "affirmation of an eternal moral order and letting loose of hope." This moral order was subject to modification by the laws of cause and effect and the chain <sup>realms</sup> of cause and effect were set in operation by a curse. Quite frequently this curse was pronounced by a sage who had been ~~disturbed~~ <sup>annoyed</sup> or persons who had been thoughtlessly oppressed or aggrieved; ~~This~~ <sup>in</sup> classical Indian literature it takes the place of destiny ~~in~~ of the Greek tragedy. Gods are powerless against it, and usually it runs to course and ~~that~~ <sup>through it</sup> is the plot unfolded. ~~But~~ But there is the hope, ~~that~~ <sup>in</sup> the eternal moral order will assert itself with adequate retributions. Hence the absence of tragedy. Man has not

to prove his superiority to his circumstances in his defeat. There is no defeat and no eventual triumph of the man superior ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~env~~ to though powerless against the environment. Heroism is reduced to physical strength and achievements of prowess or being a paragon of virtue.

Throughout classical Indian literature there is no challenge to the environment from man revelling in his manness. When he does overcome the environment he is an avatar, god born in a mortal frame. This conditioned human attitude towards ~~the~~ the environment and through the several millenia of Indian civilisation there is little human assertion. There is more of acceptance, of allowing the curse to run its course, of dragging oneself to death ~~is~~ resigned to the fact that life on earth ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> a reparation for ~~sin~~ ~~in~~ ~~a~~ ~~past~~ ~~birth~~. 'Actions' is the more suitable expression of the Indian attitude than 'sins' for the concept of sin is ~~foreign~~ <sup>recent</sup> ~~to~~ Indian thought. There is therefore a refreshing absence of a sense of guilt, but there is a corresponding acceptance of all inequity as a logical development of what had happened before. When primitive rationality is pushed to this extreme, no scope is left for morality as an act of volition. The moral will is lacking. Morality becomes ritualised to an extreme <sup>degree</sup> which reduces it to a hygienic function. In the absence of a moral will, immorality is a lapse from the ~~real~~ ritualised moral order. The Sanskrit word for injustice, 'anaya', is a derivative of the synonym for logic, and it would not be extravagant to assume that to the ancient Indian mind injustice was a deviation from the rational and logical ~~the~~ (as represented by 'dharma'). A very healthy attitude indeed, but as it was arrived very early in human evolution its conception of the irrational was inadequate for <sup>the</sup> subsequent complexities of life. It led to ethical stagnation, and 'dharma' through the ages became codified into a mere set of rituals.

The attitude however still persists. There is acceptance, little or no protest. ~~Custom is in the identified with~~ Rationality is identified with the customary in the deeper layers of consciousness. Nobody feels himself guilty or personally responsible. There is no personal involvement at all. Social custom breaks people on its wheel in <sup>its</sup> remorseless and unceasing grind. A man is called upon to judge his actions only when he deviates from the custom. Conscience is a product of estrangement from the belief in the moral order. To some extent this ~~is~~ Protestant Christianity brought into Indian life in the nineteenth

the idea of personal responsibility to god. That contributed a great deal to the growth of conscience, but as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the first important ~~Indian~~ modern Indian novelist, was oppressed with social backwardness of his people as compared with the Europeans his numerous novels were given to social reform. Unfortunately Bankim Chandra Chatterjee has not yet been translated into English and no serious study of him can be attempted here. This essay has to confine itself to those ~~novels~~ Indian language novels which have been translated into English so that the reader can have access to them and come to his own conclusions.

The concern with social reform has been the predominant character of modern Indian literature. That has not succeeded in creating a social conscience but has merely substituted a new set of rituals for the older and more customary ones. Previously a widow could not normally expect to be remarried; today many people cry themselves <sup>some that widows</sup> should be remarried. Three decades back girls who had not yet entered the teens were married; today there are fewer such instances and modern Indian fiction had a notable role in creating public opinion against child marriage. In neither case does any Indian writer claim the freedom not to marry or to marry whom one chooses.

When a literary concerns itself with such broad issues its treatment of the problems of the individual characters are to say the least rudimentary. ~~It~~ The criticism of customs is ~~not~~ neither autonomous; throughout one is aware that comparison is being made with customs elsewhere and modernity is being raised into a value. The catalogue of woes is merely incidental, ~~an instrument for~~ a means to winning the reader's sympathy. From this sort of writing to the realism of Kola or the Marxist novel was an easy development. Much of contemporary Indian writing is, therefore, Marxist, not through ideological sympathy as much as through inability to write better. The descriptive Marxist novel is the easiest thing to write and calls for little imagination. A flair for language easily lifts such a novel into <sup>the</sup> seemingly great. In the Marxist novel modernity has not been raised into an ethical value, but obviously between the lines there is the statement that in a Communist society this suffering would not exist.

Few people who know Indian conditions would disagree with the Marxist novel. There is much unnecessary and avoidable suffering in India, and social organisation and custom are to blame. The main problem of living, however, remains untouched. To replace one set of social usage with another does not lift man from his subordination to and dependance on an all-powerful society. Replacement



Tagore's portraiture of Sandip was prophetic indeed. Sandip believed in feeling being more important than reason, and was essentially a character from Lawrence though when Tagore wrote his book the Laurentian man has not been stated boldly. Sandip was a Fascist foreshadowed and his means <sup>were</sup> pandering to the lower instincts of man — power, coercion, religion and vivid and stark portrayal of these in Durga.

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in his Srikanta was asserting that all pre-conceived notions about our way of life were monstrous assumptions. He was striking at the very root of pragmatism that efficacy was an index of rightness. ~~Group survival~~ He disowned group survival as ~~is~~ any ~~way~~ justification for injustice. "It may be," he says "that the caste system has helped Hindu society to survive almost unchanged through the centuries... Is mere survival — the preserving intact of a system from generation to generation regardless of the cost — the noblest ideal of life?" He also says ~~that~~ "social problems do not appear in the mass; they become apparent in individual lives".

Jainendra Kumar in his Resignation is concerned with non-resistance to evil as a positive spiritual force for it is the desire to resist evil that leads to acts of persecution and inhumanity. Arinal the heroine refuses all aid saying "the help I want is strength — to enable me to remain whole beneath the lash of the oppressor and to take upon myself the burden of his sin in addition to mine own, praying forgiveness for all."

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was not given to much thinking. He wrote as he felt, emphasising the need for courage and stating that the marginal people, who have cut themselves adrift from ~~the~~ organised society or have been cast away by it, alone attain full manhood. Tagore was <sup>much</sup> more sophisticated and to him the ~~reflective~~ man represented the reflection and objective thought aided ~~with~~ <sup>by</sup> cultivated feelings was the essence of being a man. To Jainendra Kumar a person was human if ~~he~~ ~~had~~ ~~not~~ ~~found~~ he or she had risen above hating. To him all principles were for following by those who subscribed to them and not for enforcing. He denied the existence of a collective moral will or the existence of the mystique of ~~goodness and~~ goodness and evil.

These three Indian books are a repudiation of mysticism. Tagore shudders from the mysticism of nationalism, Jaiendra Kumar from that of morality; Sarat Chandra Chatterjee flouts the mysticism of respectability and its expression, the caste system.

There is a deeper and ~~a~~ fundamental mysticism against which these authors struggle. That is the mysticism of sex - the root of all other obfuscations of reason. In India there is only one morality, that is of sex, and it was the emphasis on sexual morality that buried the primitive rationality of the classical period under a debris of ceremonial purity. Ethics have been ritualised and one had to keep oneself as clean and pure as the washed, anointed and vermilion phallus. It was ~~an~~ essentially a male discipline and purity was ~~more~~ a masculine obligation. Women of course bore the brunt of the sexual morality for reasons of physiology but they were not considered worth the trouble of mystic attention. They did periodically become unclean and their mature life was a series of ~~was~~ uncleanlinesses which had to be fenced out of male living. In the male sexual ~~off~~ lapses were accepted ~~as~~ ~~natural~~ the result of the ceaseless assaults by women and so punishment was accorded to the women - the ~~constant~~ perpetual enemies. Men were therefore condoned as weak, but men with character were those whose sexual life was disciplined whatever else they did.

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee championed women who had transgressed the areas marked out for their sexual life and men who disobeyed the various taboos. Tagore discussed Binola's illicit love with Sandip as proceeding from her inability to live up to Nikhil's principles in affairs than that of sex. The other ties shrivelled first and then did. ~~marital~~ disloyalty come as an expression of the estrangement. Jaiendra Kumar described promiscuity as acceptance of an inevitable development by a castaway woman because a woman is some male's daughter, wife, sister, paramour, aunt or mother but nobody by herself. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee turned the wheel round and portrayed the irony of an abandoned woman who had taken to prostitution, saving up and trying to lead a virtuous life.

~~Together~~ Together the three books proclaimed that sex ~~was~~ <sup>in itself</sup> was irrelevant to morality. ~~That was the boldest~~ The mystique of the sex had been denied, the mystique that leads to feminine degradation and dependence.

The slaying of the phallic dragon, however, does not make life easy. Each of the three books is a journey through hell. A hell of the hero's own choice. Nikhil suffers not because Bimala is disloyal to him but because he himself had not given up all claims based on conventional rights as the price for finding ~~Bimala~~ his wife revealed in truth. Bimala had no patience with his patience and could not respect him because he inspired no fear. His faith in the human potentialities was being challenged and that caused him greater pain than any personal injury. Srikanta in his life as a tramp finds much of interest but nothing absorbing. When he does come across Pyari and finds her absorbing he must part of the very absorbingness of Pyari would be destroyed. Nriyal suffers for ~~she will not take a short-cut to comfort and ease~~ she would not be herself if she ~~did~~ did not deny herself all ~~escape~~ ways of retreat.

These three books illustrate yet another aspect. Since modern Indian literature and the desire for social reform is as a reaction to acquaintance with west European life, most novels in India tend to be written <sup>taking</sup> ~~on~~ the model of some famous foreign writer. These three books are not that, nor do they exhibit any desire that Indian society should be like the English, French, American, German, Japanese or Communist. They are neither revivalist. ~~They~~ As these books were written before independence there is no awareness in them of the position India has today in the world. That position is of coming into maturity when west European civilisation seems to have spent itself out, in 300 years of effort since the Renaissance. As to two diversifications the Capitalist American and the Communist Russian have reached dead ends too, without either having attained the ~~status~~ level of a civilisation. ~~They~~

~~Between the writers is English (Indian or foreign)~~  
~~the Indian writer, whatever the language he uses,~~  
 How is it that the Indian writers mentioned above, all except Premchand and ~~the~~ Hamayan Kabir, are anti-mystical while most foreign writers found mysticism as the main fact of Indian life.  
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