EPILOGUE: THE HERITAGE OF INDIA

THE IMPACT OF THE WEST

India's ancient culture did not perish before the onslaughts of the Muslims, as did that of Persia. Under the rule of some of the Delhi sultans of the Middle Ages there was persecution, and we read of temples being razed to the ground and brahmans put to death for practising their devotions in public; but in general the Muslims were reasonably tolerant, and at all times Hindu chiefs continued to rule in outlying parts of India, paying tribute to their Muslim overlords. Conversions to Islam were numerous, though only in a few regions were the majority of Indians persuaded to embrace the alien faith. Hindu and Muslim lived side by side and, after a few centuries, the Hindus in those parts of India dominated by Muslims often accepted the situation as normal. In such conditions mutual influence was inevitable. Hindus began to learn Persian, the official language of their Muslim rulers, and Persian words found their way into the vernaculars. Well-to-do Hindu families often adopted the system of "strict parda" from the Muslims, and made their womenfolk veil their faces in public. The surviving Hindu kings borrowed new military techniques from the Muslims, learnt to employ cavalry with greater effect, and to use heavier armour and new types of weapon. One great religious teacher of medieval India, Kabir (1440–1518), a poor weaver of Varanasi, taught the brotherhood of Hindu and Muslim alike in the fatherhood of God, and opposed idolatry and caste practices, declaring that God was equally to be found in temple and mosque. Later, Nānak (1469–1538), a teacher of the Panjab, taught the same doctrine with even greater force, and founded a new faith, that of the Sikhs, designed to incorporate all that was best of both Hinduism and Islam.

Nevertheless the Muslim invasions, and the enforced contact with new ideas, did not have the fertilizing effect upon Hindu culture which might have been expected. Hinduism was already very conservative when the lieutenants of Muhammad of Ghur conquered the Ganges Valley. In the Middle Ages for every tolerant and progressive teacher there must have been hundreds of orthodox brahmans, who looked upon themselves as the preservers of the immemorial Āryan Dharma against the barbarians who overran the holy.
land of Bhāratavarṣa. Under their influence the complex rules of the Hindu way of life became if anything stricter and more rigidly applied.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the Mughal emperors unified practically the whole of North India and much of the Deccan, and built up an empire such as had not been seen since the days of the Guptas. The Mughal period was one of great splendour, and has left its mark on India in the form of many lovely buildings, wherein Islāmic and Hindu motifs often blended in a perfect unity. The Tāj Mahal at Āgrā, one of the Mughal capitals, is of course the most famous memorial of the times. Akbar (1555–1606), the contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I and the first of the four great Mughal emperors, fully realized that the Empire could only stand on a basis of complete toleration. All religious tests and disabilities were abolished, including the hated poll-tax on unbelievers. Rājput princes and other Hindus were given high offices of state, without conversion to Islām, and inter-communal marriages were encouraged by the example of the Emperor himself. If the policy of the greatest of India’s Muslim rulers had been continued by his successors, her history might have been very different.

The great-grandson of Akbar, Aurangzeb (1659–1707), reversed the policy of toleration. Restrictions were placed on the free practice of Hindu rites and preferment at court was confined to orthodox Muslims; later the tax on non-Muslims was reimposed. After nearly a century of equality this was bitterly resented by the Hindus, especially by the chiefs, many of whom had loyally served the earlier Mughals. The main resistance came from the Western Deccan where, around Poona, the Marāthā chief Śivājī (1627–1680) laid the foundations of a new Hindu empire. At about the same time the Sikhs of the Panjāb, incensed at the new policy and the persecution of their leaders, reformed their faith, and were welded into a closely-knit martial brotherhood. When the aged Aurangzeb died the Mughal empire was virtually at an end.

Politically the 18th century was one of Hindu revival. Though the Marāthā successors of Śivājī could not build up a large, unified empire their horsemen ranged far and wide over India, levying tribute from local chiefs, Hindu and Muslim alike. In the Panjāb towards the end of the century the Sikhs built an important kingdom, and almost everywhere Islām was on the defensive. But there was still no real cultural revival in Hinduism. Śivājī, a brilliant leader, a just ruler, and a statesman of consummate craft, was conservative in his outlook, and appeared to his contemporaries rather as a restorer of the old than as a builder of the new. Unlike Akbar, he had no fresh vision of a state transcending religious differences, though he learnt
much from the Mughals in statecraft and military science and re-
spected the faith of his adversaries. The Marāṭhās did not encourage
reforms in Hindu society, and the India of the 18th century was if
anything more conservative than it had been in the days of the first
Muslim invasions.

It was through the influence of Europe that revival came. Early in
the 16th century the Portuguese founded the first European trading
stations and settlements. They were followed by Dutch, British,
Danes and French, and throughout the 17th century the number of
European "factories" increased. In the 18th century, with the break-
up of the Mughal empire, the Europeans began to take greater in-
terest in local politics, and by the early 19th century the British East
India Company had virtually pushed out its rivals and dominated
most of the sub-continent. The comparative ease with which the
British established their supremacy is a measure of the political
decadence of India at the time. By the middle of the 19th century
the whole of India was either directly ruled by Britain or governed
indirectly through petty princes with local autonomy. A new
conqueror had come, a conqueror far more alien to the Hindu than the
Muslims had been, with an aggressive culture and immense technical
superiority.

Hindu society reacted at first to the British rulers as it had done to
the Muslims, tending to withdraw itself even more into the closed
circle of its ancient traditions, and there was no realization of a funda-
mental break with the past. From the orthodox point of view the
British rulers of India constituted a caste, low in the social scale, which
had succeeded in gaining political power. This caste had its own rules
and customs which were not those of the Āryan, and should therefore
not be imitated. The British readily accepted this position, and after
the 18th century made few attempts at close social contact. Any real
friendship between Englishman and Indian became more and more dif-
ficult as the century progressed—in fact the Englishman in India uncon-
sciously tended to adopt the ideas of social stratification of the Indians
whom he ruled, and to look upon his own people as members of a class
so exalted above the Indians that friendly association with them was
taboo. This attitude was strengthened by the Sepoy Revolt of 1857.

Nevertheless the presence of Europeans could not but have its
effect. Except in certain parts of South India missionary activity in
the 18th century was insignificant; but early in the 19th century the
British evangelical conscience awakened to India, and missions and
mission schools sprang up in all the larger towns. Meanwhile the
Company felt a growing need of subordinate officers and clerks
trained in English. Just as in Muslim times the Hindu desirous of
government employment was compelled to learn Persian, so now he had to learn English. Middle class Hindu fathers began to send their sons to European schools, despite the dangers of ritual impurity, and Western ideas began to affect the well-to-do educated Indian.

The Portuguese had succeeded in “westernizing” many of their Indian and Sinhalese subjects, and to this day Indian blood flows in the veins of some old Portuguese families; a few Indians in the service of France came to understand and admire the culture of their conquerors; but perhaps the first Indian to learn enough from the West to be able to hold his own with the best minds of Europe, and yet still to love and respect his own culture, was the Bengali Rām Mohan Roy, the friend of Jeremy Bentham. Rām Mohan Roy, who was born in 1772 and died in England in 1833, advocated the frank acceptance of all of value that Europe had to teach, and the sect which looked to him for inspiration, the Brāhma Samāj, was in many ways closer to Christianity than to Hinduism. Never large in numbers, its influence was widespread.

From the days of Rām Mohan Roy young Indians, at first very few but soon in greater numbers, began to come to England for education. The little band of Hindus educated on western lines, first in Bengal and then in other parts of India, tended to go further in the rejection of their own culture than did their descendants; they were fully conscious of the degeneracy which beset their land, and many seem to have been rather ashamed of their Hindu background. The Sepoy Revolt, which was fundamentally reactionary, found no support among this tiny Westernized intelligentsia. The Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, founded in 1857, the year of the Revolt, at first paid scant attention to the ancient culture of India, but taught a predominantly Western curriculum through Western staff.

By the end of the 19th century, however, the situation had changed. A new generation began to realize that Hindu culture had much of permanent value, and that the slavish imitation of the West could not solve India’s problems. New organizations gave expression to this outlook. The Ārya Samāj claimed to reform Hinduism by purging it of all later degenerate features and by a return to the Vedas, very liberally interpreted, and had considerable success. The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, became the mouthpiece of Indian public opinion. Newspapers in English and the vernaculars multiplied.

Not only was Hindu culture largely rehabilitated in the eyes of intelligent Hindus, but it even began to make counter-propaganda. A few learned Europeans and Americans had long recognized the
nobility of much ancient Indian religious thought. Now, through the Theosophical Society (which, despite its claim to represent the quintessence of all religions, propagates a modernized Hinduism) and the Rāmakrishna Mission, the voice of Hinduism was heard in the West. Swāmī Vivekānanda (1862–1902), a splendid speaker of great spiritual power and personal magnetism, preached Hinduism to large audiences in Europe and America and found willing hearers. Here and there Indians abjured the West root and branch, and fanatically defended even those aspects of Hinduism which had completely outlived their usefulness; but, despite these reactionaries, the new Hinduism was very different from the old.

Rām Mohan Roy had sounded the theme with his passionate advocacy of social reform; Vivekānanda repeated it with a more nationalist timbre, when he declared that the highest form of service of the Great Mother was social service. Other great Indians, chief of whom was Mahātmā Gāndhī, developed the theme of social service as a religious duty, and the development continues under Gāndhī's successors.

Mahātmā Gāndhī was looked on by many, both Indian and European, as the epitome of Hindu tradition, but this is a false judgement for he was much influenced by Western ideas. Gāndhī believed in the fundamentals of his ancient culture, but his passionate love of the underdog and his antipathy to caste, though not unprecedented in ancient India, were unorthodox in the extreme, and owed more to European 19th-century liberalism than to anything Indian. His faith in non-violence was, as we have seen, by no means typical of Hinduism—his predecessor in revolt, the able Marāṭhā brāhmana B. G. Tilak, and Gāndhī's impatient lieutenant Subhās Chandra Bose were far more orthodox in this respect. For Gāndhī's pacifism we must look mainly to the Sermon on the Mount and to Tolstoy. His championing of women's rights is also the result of Western influence. In his social context he was always rather an innovator than a conservative. Though some of his colleagues thought his programme of social reform too slow, he succeeded in shifting the whole emphasis of Hindu thought towards a popular and equalitarian social order, in place of the hierarchy of class and caste. Following up the work of many less well-known 19th-century reformers Gāndhī and his followers gave a new orientation and new life to Hindu culture, after centuries of stagnation.

Today there are few Indians, whatever their creed, who do not look back with pride on their ancient culture, and there are few intelligent Indians who are not willing to sacrifice some of its effete elements that India may develop and progress. Politically and
economically India faces many problems of great difficulty, and no one can forecast her future with any certainty. But it is to be hoped that, whatever that future may be, the Indians of coming generations will not be unconvincing and self-conscious copies of Europeans, but will be men rooted in their own traditions, and aware of the continuity of their culture. Already the extremes of national self-denigration and fanatical cultural chauvinism are disappearing. In the past Hindu civilization has received, adapted and digested elements of many different cultures—Indo-European, Mesopotamian, Iranian, Greek, Roman, Scythian, Turkish, Persian and Arab. With each new influence it has somewhat changed. Now it is well on the way to assimilating the culture of the West.

Hindu civilization will, we believe, retain its continuity. The Bhagavad Gītā will not cease to inspire men of action, and the Upaniṣads men of thought. The charm and graciousness of the Indian way of life will continue, however much affected it may be by the labour-saving devices of the West. People will still love the tales of the heroes of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, and of the loves of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā and Purūravas and Urvāśī. The quiet and gentle happiness which has at all times pervaded Indian life where oppression, disease and poverty have not overclouded it will surely not vanish before the more hectic ways of the West.

Much that was useless in ancient Indian culture has already perished. The extravagant and barbarous hecatombs of the Vedic age have long since been forgotten, though animal sacrifice continues in some sects. Widows have long ceased to be burnt on their husbands' pyres. Girls may not by law be married in childhood. In buses and trains all over India brāhmaṇas rub shoulders with the lower castes without consciousness of grave pollution, and the temples are open to all by law. Caste is vanishing; the process began long ago, but its pace is now so rapid that the more objectionable features of caste may have disappeared within a generation or so. The old family system is adapting itself to present-day conditions. In fact the whole face of India's altering, but the cultural tradition continues, and it will never be lost.

THE WORLD'S DEBT TO INDIA

We have said much about India's debt to other cultures, but we must make it clear that she has given as much as or more than she has taken. Let us summarize the world's debt to India.
The whole of South-East Asia received most of its culture from India. Early in the 5th century B.C. colonists from Western India settled in Ceylon, which was finally converted to Buddhism in the reign of Asoka. By this time a few Indian merchants had probably found their way to Malaya, Sumatra, and other parts of South-East Asia. Gradually they established permanent settlements, often, no doubt, marrying native women. They were followed by brāhmans and Buddhist monks, and Indian influence gradually leavened the indigenous culture, until by the 4th century A.D. Sanskrit was the official language of the region, and there arose great civilizations, capable of organizing large maritime empires, and of building such wonderful memorials as the Buddhist stūpa of Borobodur in Java, or the Śaivite temples of Angkor in Cambodia. Other cultural influences, from China and the Islamic world, were felt in South-East Asia, but the primary impetus to civilization came from India.

Indian historians, proud of their country’s past, often refer to this region as “Greater India”, and speak of Indian “colonies”. In its usual modern sense the term “colony” is hardly accurate, however. Vijaya, the legendary Āryan conqueror of Ceylon, is said to have gained the island by the sword, but beyond this we have no real evidence of any permanent Indian conquest outside the bounds of India. The Indian “colonies” were peaceful ones, and the Indianized kings of the region were indigenous chieftains who had learnt what India had to teach them.

Northwards Indian cultural influence spread through Central Asia to China. Faint and weak contact between China and India was probably made in Mauryan times, if not before, but only when, some 2,000 years ago, the Han Empire began to drive its frontiers towards the Caspian did India and China really meet. Unlike South-East Asia, China did not assimilate Indian ideas in every aspect of her culture, but the whole of the Far East is in India’s debt for Buddhism, which helped to mould the distinctive civilizations of China, Korea, Japan and Tibet.

As well as her special gifts to Asia, India has conferred many practical blessings on the world at large; notably rice, cotton, the sugar cane, many spices, the domestic fowl, the game of chess (p. 210), and, most important of all, the decimal system of numeral notation, the invention of an unknown Indian mathematician early in the Christian era (p. 497f). The extent of the spiritual influence of India on the ancient West is much disputed. The heterodox Jewish sect of the Essenes, which probably influenced early Christianity, followed monastic practices in some respects similar to those of Buddhism. Parallels may be traced between a few passages in the New Testament
and the Pāli scriptures. Similarities between the teachings of western philosophers and mystics from Pythagoras to Plotinus and those of the Upanisads have frequently been noticed. None of these similarities, however, is close enough to give certainty, especially as we have no evidence that any classical writer had a deep knowledge of Indian religion. We can only say that there was always some contact between the Hellenic world and India, mediated first by the Achaemenid Empire, then by that of the Seleucids, and finally, under the Romans, by the traders of the Indian ocean. Christianity began to spread at the time when this contact was closest. We know that Indian ascetics occasionally visited the West, and that there was a colony of Indian merchants at Alexandria. The possibility of Indian influence on Neo-platonism and early Christianity cannot be ruled out.

Many authorities may doubt that Indian thought had any effect on that of the ancient West, but there can be no doubt of its direct and indirect influence on the thought of Europe and America in the last century and a half, though this has not received adequate recognition. This influence has not come by way of organized neo-Hindu missions. The last eighty years have seen the foundation of the Theosophical Society, of various Buddhist societies, and of societies in Europe and America looking for inspiration to the saintly 19th-century Bengali mystic, Paramahamsa Rāmakrishna, and to his equally saintly disciple, Swāmī Vivekānanda. Lesser organizations and groups have been founded in the West by other Indian mystics and their disciples, some of them noble, earnest and spiritual, others of more dubious character. Here and there Westerners themselves, sometimes armed with a working knowledge of Sanskrit and first-hand Indian experience, have tried to convert the West to a streamlined Yoga or Vedānta. We would in no way disparage these teachers or their followers, many of whom are of great intellectual and spiritual calibre; but whatever we may think of the Western propagators of Indian mysticism, we cannot claim that they have had any great effect on our civilization. More subtle, but more powerful, has been the influence of Mahātmā Gāndhī, through the many friends of India in the West who were impressed by his burning sincerity and energy, and by the ultimate success of his policy of non-violence in achieving India's independence. Greater than any of these influences, however, has been the influence of ancient Indian religious literature through philosophy.

The pioneers of the Asiatic Society of Bengal quickly gained a small but enthusiastic following in Europe, and Goethe and many other writers of the early 19th century read all they could of ancient Indian literature in translation. We know that Goethe borrowed a device
of Indian dramaturgy for the prologue to "Faust" (p. 435n), and who can say that the triumphant final chorus of the second part of that work was not in part inspired by the monism of Indian thought as he understood it? From Goethe onwards most of the great German philosophers knew something of Indian philosophy. Schopenhauer, whose influence on literature and psychology has been so considerable, indeed openly admitted his debt, and his outlook was virtually that of Buddhism. The monisms of Fichte and Hegel might never have taken the forms they did if it had not been for Anquetil-Duperron's translation of the Upaniṣads and the work of other pioneer Indologists. In the English-speaking world the strongest Indian influence was felt in America, where Emerson, Thoreau and other New England writers avidly studied much Indian religious literature in translation, and exerted immense influence on their contemporaries and successors, notably Walt Whitman. Through Carlyle and others the German philosophers in their turn made their mark on England, as did the Americans through many late 19th-century writers such as Richard Jeffries and Edward Carpenter.

Though in the contemporary philosophical schools of Europe and America the monistic and idealist philosophies of the last century carry little weight, their influence has been considerable, and all of them owe something at least to ancient India. The sages who meditated in the jungles of the Gangā Valley six hundred years or more before Christ are still forces in the world.

It is today something of an anachronism to speak of Western civilization or Indian civilization. Until very recently cultures were sharply divided, but now, when India is less than a day's journey from London, cultural divisions are beginning to disappear. If a modus vivendi is reached between liberal democracy and communism, and civilization survives, the world of the future will have a single culture with, it is to be hoped, many local differences and variations. India’s contribution to the world’s cultural stock has already been very large, and it will continue and grow as her prestige and influence increases. For this reason if for no other we must take account of her ancient heritage in its successes and its failures, for it is no longer the heritage of India alone, but of all mankind.