



The Bugbear of Democracy, Freedom and Equality (I)

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Of all the forces that stand in the way of a cultural synthesis, or as I would rather say, in the way of a mutual understanding indispensable for co-operation, the greatest are those of ignorance and prejudice. Ignorance and prejudice underlie the naive presumption of a "civilizing mission," which to the "backward" peoples against whom it is directed and whose cultures it proposes to destroy, appears a simple impertinence and a proof of the provincialism of the modern West, which regards all imitation as sincerest flattery, even when it amounts to caricature, at the same time that it is ready to take up arms in self-defense if the imitation becomes so real as to involve a rivalry in the economic sphere.

Actually, if there is to be any growth of good will on earth, the white man will have to realize that he must live in a world predominantly coloured (and "coloured" for him usually means "backward," i.e. unlike himself); and the Christian will have to realize that he is living in a world predominantly non-Christian. These things will have to be realized and accepted, without indignation or regret.

Before a world government can even be dreamed of, we must have citizens of the world, who can meet their fellow citizens without embarrassment, as gentlemen meet gentlemen, and not as would-be school masters meeting pupils who are to be "compulsorily," even if also "freely" educated. There is no more place in the world for the frog in a well who can judge others only by his own experience and mores. We have got to realize, for example, that as El Glaoui, the Pasha of Marrakesh lately said, "the Moslem world does not want the wondrous American world or the incredible American way of life. We (Moslems) want the world of the Koran," and that, *mutatis mutandis*, the like holds good for the majority of Orientals, a majority that includes not only all those who are still "cultured and illiterate," but also a far larger number of those who have spent years of life and study in the West than might be supposed, for it is among these that many of the most convinced "reactionaries" are to be found.¹

¹ Cf. Demetra Vaka, *Haremlik* (1909), p. 139, where the speaker is a young Turkish woman of high birth, well acquainted with the masters of Western literature. She says: "From what I read in your (American) papers, I do not like your world, and I am glad that I am a Mahometan girl." On another page the author asks a Turkish friend, "Don't you really sometimes wish you were a free European woman," and receives the baffling answer, "I have never seen a European man to whom I should like to belong." Again, p. 259, she is told "When, as a girl, I had read about European life it had seemed to me so attractive, so wonderful. But when I came to taste it, it was empty and bitter." Speaking for herself, Demetra Vaka (p. 221) says: "Among the Orientals I am always overwhelmed by a curious feeling of resigned happiness, such as the

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Sometimes, “the more we see of democracy, the more we value monarchy”; the more we see of “equality,” the less we admire “that monster of modern growth, the financial-commercial state” in which the majority lives by its “jobs,” and the dignity of a vocation or profession is reserved for the very few, and where, in the words of Eric Gill, “on the one hand we have the artist concerned solely to express himself; on the other is the workman deprived of any self to express.”

I have long had in mind to write a series of essays on “bugbears.” “Am I My Brother's Keeper?” (which appeared in *Asia and the Americas*, March, 1943) may be regarded as the Preface). “The Bugbear of Literacy” appears in the February 1944 issue of the same journal. Others projected include “The Bugbear of Scholarship,” “The Bugbear of Woman's Emancipation” (by my wife), “The Bugbear of World Trade,” and “The Bugbear of Spiritual Pride,” the last with special reference to the improper use of such pejorative terms as “natural religion” and “idolatry.” Perhaps these will never be written, for I, too, have a vocation, which is much rather one of research in the field of the significance of the universal symbols of the *Philosophia Perennis* than one of apology for or polemic on behalf of doctrines that must be believed if they are to be understood, and must be understood if they are to be believed.

In the present article I propose to discuss the prejudices that are aroused in every hundred per cent progressive and democratic-egalitarian mind by the (Portuguese) word “caste.” Dr. Niebuhr, for example, calls the Indian caste system “the most rigid form of class snobbishness in history”; he means of course, “class *arrogance*,” since he must have intended to criticize the supposed attitude of the higher castes (comparable to that of Englishmen in India, and to that of those who maintain the Mason-Dixon line in America), while it is, by dictionary definition, only an inferior that can be a “snob.” But how can there be either arrogance or snobbishness where there is no social ambition? It is in a society whose members aspire to “white collar” jobs, and must “keep up with the Joneses” that these vices prevail. If you ask a man in India *what* he is, he will not say either that “I am a Brahman” or that “I am a Sudra” but that “I am a devotee of Krishna,” or “I am a Saiva”; and that is not because he is either “proud” or “ashamed” of his caste, whatever it may be, but because he mentions first what seems to him more important than any social distinction.

For H. N. Brailsford (whose sincerity and courage I respect), author of *Subject India*, caste is indeed a “bugbear.” It offends him that men's lives should be “hedged round from infancy by a network of prohibitions and commandments” and that “an Indian can become a Protestant or a rebel only by an effort of which none but the strongest natures are capable.” He scarcely reflects that it may take a stronger nature to obey than to rebel; or that a strict pattern of “good form” is no more necessarily deplorable than is the fact that no one can compose a sonnet in free verse. Caste, he says, “makes of the individual a unit

West can hardly conceive of.”

Because you cannot conceive of it, it angers you to think that men and women can be happy under conditions that would be irksome to you, as you now are, you whose ambition is to be “somebody.” You do not understand that there can be a higher ambition, to become a “nobody.” Resignation to the will of God, that is the very meaning of Islam; contentment, *cultiver son jardin*; these are *our* ambitions. It is not against *our* pattern of life that we Orientals “protest and rebel,” but against your interference. It is *your* way of life that we repudiate, wherever it has not already corrupted us.

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submissive in mind and body to a degree which startles and shocks the European observer," who is himself, of course, an "untouchable," and possibly a little "startled" by the implied disparagement. And yet, what admissions Mr. Brailsford makes when he comes to speak of caste in practice! One of the religious "prohibitions" or taboos ("save among the more degraded castes") is of drink. (The late Sister Nivedita once observed that Christianity "carries drunkenness in its wake"). But Mr. Brailsford tells us that "the Congress had Indian morality behind it when it organized a boycott of the government's toddy-shops . . . no Indian dare brave the condemnation of his fellows by entering them. In some places the all-powerful caste organization re-enforced the prohibition of Congress." You see that when it suits his argument, "prohibitions and commandments" become a "morality." There are other prohibitions and commandments that also pertain to *our* morality, and against which we do not feel called upon to "rebel or protest" against; and if there are some that he does not understand, has Mr. Brailsford ever thought of investigating their significance for us? Similarly in the case of the boycott of English manufactured goods he states, "its general success was an amazing proof of the solidarity of Indian society." How does he make that square with his statement that in India "by far the most serious obstacle to social unity comes from caste and its rule of endogamy?"²

Let us remember that in India men of different castes are divided neither by religion, culture, or language, but only by rules against intermarriage and interdining;³ for example, no king could aspire to marry his own Brahman cook's daughter. That different castes have never found it difficult to work together for common ends is amply demonstrated by the almost universal institution of the *Pancayat*, or village council, a committee of men of different castes. Again, it may be observed that caste is not, in Hindu law, a legal disability; men of any caste may act as witnesses in suits, the only qualifications having to do with character and impartiality and being the same for all (*Manu* VIII, 61-63).

The Imperial Gazetteer remarks that the inhabitants of the typical Indian village "are welded together in a little community with its own organization and government . . . , its customary rules, and its little staff of functionaries, artisans and trades." Mr. Brailsford objects that "the only obstacles to the growth of internal trade on a gigantic scale is the poverty of the villages and the self-sufficiency that belongs to its oldest traditions . . . there is still many a village in which the hereditary craftsmen, who serve it for an allowance of grain, or some acres of free land, will weave all the cloth it needs, hammer its hoes for it and turn its pots." Unfortunately, "the growth of internal trade on a gigantic scale" is by no means one of our primary ambitions; we still hold (with Philo, *De Decalogo* 69) that it is an obvious truth that the craftsman is of higher value than the product of his craft, and perceive that it is chiefly in industrial societies that this truth is ignored; nor from what we know of factory conditions already existing in Bombay and elsewhere do we see the slightest prospect that the condition of even the lowest outcastes will ever be improved by

² The cultural unity of India is emphasized even by Mr. Brailsford (p. 122). I should say that a much higher degree of "social unity" is realized in India than in the United States of America.

³ It may be observed (1) that a Hindu does not "inter-dine" even with his own wife, or his own caste, and that this has nothing whatever to do with "social prejudice" of any kind, but reflects a functional differentiation; and (2) that the "prohibitions and commandments" of the caste system are not always so inconvenient as the superficial student supposes—for example, "From one's own ploughman, an old friend of the family, one's own cowherd, one's own servant, one's own barber, and from whomsoever else may come for refuge and offer service—from the hands of all such Sudras food may be taken" (*Manu* VI. 253).

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a gigantic development of internal trade. Again, "we do not want the incredible American way of life."

What we do see very clearly is that, in the words of A. M. Hocart, perhaps the only unprejudiced European sociologist who has written on caste, "hereditary service has been painted in such dark colours only because it is incompatible with the existing industrial system" (*Les castes*, p. 238)."⁴ Incompatible, because caste involves human relationships and mutual responsibilities for which there is no room in a world of capital and labour and manufacture for profit on the one hand or in the Soviet types of collective organization on the other.

No type of civilization can be accepted that does not provide for the worker's happiness: and no man can be happy who is forced to earn a living otherwise than by the labours for which he is naturally fitted and to which therefore he can literally devote himself with enthusiasm. I say that no man *can* be happy but in "that station of life to which it has pleased God to call him"; that man is literally *unfortunate* (deprived of his due inheritance) if either the state or his own ambition bring it about that his fortune and his nature are incongruous—"d'un vrai travail on ne peut pas se débarrasser, c'est la vie même."

What we said above on village organization ought to have made it clear that the traditional government of India is far less centralized and far less bureaucratic than any form of government known to the modern democracies. One might, indeed, say that the castes are the stronghold of a self-government far more real than could be achieved by any counting of the noses of all the millions of a proletariat. To a very large extent the caste group coincides with the trade guild; and before the impact of industrialism and *laissez faire*, and especially in the great cities, these trade guilds exercised very many of the functions that the bureaucracies now undertake with far less efficiency, and some that the bureaucracies scarcely attempt to fulfill.

Thus, apart from their function of maintaining standards of quality both as to materials and workmanship, and providing for education through apprenticeship (or, rather, the master-and-disciple relationship), they covered the whole field of charity and what is now known as that of "social security." One might say that if India was not in the Chinese or Islamic sense a democratic country, it was nevertheless a land of many democracies, i.e. self-governing groups in full control of all matters really falling within their competence; and that perhaps no other country in the world has been better trained in self-government. But, as Sir George Birdwood said, "under British rule in India, the authority of the trade guilds has necessarily been relaxed"; the nature of such a "necessity" will hardly bear analysis.

⁴ Similarly Mr. Brailsford (p. 160): "The caste line will have to be broken, *if* industrial work is to be provided for the superfluous cultivators" (*italics mine*).

On the other hand, in his excellent book *Dharma and Society* (London, 1935), G. H. Mees remarks that "no serious student of caste will propagate the abolishment of the caste system" (p. 192). It will not be overlooked that Mahatma Gandhi himself, so well known as a champion of the "untouchables," does not wish to do away with caste.

See also Bhavan Das, *The Science of Social Organization* (Madras, 1910), pp. 226 and 335. "Manu's scheme is the nearest and only approach to a workable socialism that has been tried in our race, and that succeeded for thousands of years."