


Chapter 9

PANEGYRICS OF THE PAST

he Memorandum of which I have spoken purports to be an explanation of “the storm that had been gathering in the heart of India for the best part of a decade, and would demand immediate attention at the close of the War”. A desire for release from foreign tutelage is postulated, and the writer begins by tracing a history of the methods by which educated Indians have endeavoured to bring about, in the government of their country, “the principle of national liberty, which has for its outer embodiment in England the British Parliament”.

First came the Indian National Congress, whose leaders made speeches, passed resolutions, and thought that by much importunity they might obtain their desire. “But the doom of this easy political doctrine was drawing near”, and the partition of Bengal is cited as “a conclusive object-lesson in the impotence of that method of mendicancy (begging) by which Indian people had been dreaming of securing self-government”. The attitude of Government is depicted as a complete answer to those who sought to attain their ends by constitutional means. “The united voice of the whole nation rose and fell like the voice of one crying in the wilderness. None heeded it. The Viceroy persevered in his scheme of administrative division; and the English Parliament pronounced its benediction upon it. The political method of the Congress had been tried and failed—and the people fell upon bitterness.”

Into these black depths of despair, we are next told, there suddenly fell a spark of light. Japan, an Eastern nation, had flung aside the tyranny of the West and had gloriously vindicated her right to unfettered independence by her victory over Russia. Henceforth,

a new hope—the hope of liberty and independence—burned with a bright flame in the soul of Bengal. A prophet of this new creed arose in the person of Bepin Chandra Pal,⁵¹ “who threw the whole strength and passion of his being into the work of proselytising his countrymen to the creed of his adoption”. And hard upon the footsteps of Bepin Chandra Pal came Arabinda Ghose, who “aspired to work out for the whole continent that liberation of the human spirit which Bepin Chandra Pal was accomplishing in Bengal”.

So far, then, the explanation of the ferment in Bengal is a sufficiently simple one. It discloses the not unfamiliar spectacle of a subject people girding against their impotence to influence the decisions, still less to control the actions of their alien rulers.

But we now come to a contributory cause of a far more subtle and illusive character. Speaking of Arabinda Ghose, the writer declares in a fine passage that “the aspirations of Young India were in his writings, a divining intention of the spirit of liberty, the beating of whose wings was being heard over Asia; an exaltation, an urgency, a heartening call on his countrymen to serve and save the Motherland, an impassioned appeal to their manhood to reinstate her in the greatness that was hers. Had she not once been the High Priestess of the Orient? Had not her civilisation left its ripple-mark on the furthestmost limits of Asia? India still had a soul to save, which the parching drought of modern vulgarity threatened daily with death; she alone in a pharisaical world, where everyone acclaimed God in speech and denied Him in fact, offered Him the worship of her heart; she alone yet gave birth to the choice spirits who cast aside the highest of earth’s gifts in their enraptured pursuit of the life of life. Show us the country but India that could produce in the nineteenth century the Saint of Dakshineswar.⁵² The saving wisdom was still in the land which taught man how to know and realise his God—the wisdom which had been gathered and garnered in their forest homes by her priest-philosophers, the builders of the Vedas, the thinkers of the Upanishads, the greatest aristocrats of humanity that had ever been. But how should the

culture of the soul survive in the land where a shifting materialism was asserting itself under the aegis of foreign rule? Had not the fools and the Philistines, whose name was legion—the monstrous products of a soulless education nourished on the rind of European thought — already begun to laugh at their country’s past? And dared to condemn the wisdom of their ancestors? Was India to deform herself from a temple of God into one vast inglorious suburb of English civilisation? Even beauty, the vernal Goddess enshrined in her hymns and her poetry, was feeling the country chased by a hungry commercialism pouring out its flood of ugly and worthless wares owing naught to art or religion.

“This doom that impended over the land must be averted. India must save herself by ending the alien dominion which had not only impoverished her body, but was also strangulating her soul. It was only in an independent India, with the reins of self-determination in her own hands, that the ideal could be re-enthroned in its integrity of high thinking and holy living, which cast on every man the obligation to cultivate throughout life the knowledge of Atman (Self and God), and of striving to realise in conduct the code of humanity that Gautama Buddha had enjoined. It was from the height of this vision of India to be that he called upon his countrymen to prepare themselves to be free, and not for the mere secularity of autonomy and wealth, the pseudo-divinities upon whose altars Europe has sacrificed her soul, and would some day end by immolating her very physical existence.”

Here we have clear intimation of something other than mere political unrest. The passage gives a vivid idea of the clash of two distinct cultures—those of the East and of the West. The idealism of the one is contrasted with what is pictured as the materialism of the other. The whole passage portrays a violent reaction against the tendencies of the nineteenth century, which have been described in the earlier chapters of this volume; and an appeal is made to instincts deep-rooted in the Hindu mind. The effect, according to the writer, was profound. “The nation felt a quickening

in the beating of its heart, a stirring in its blood, the vibration of chords long silent in its race consciousness.”

The apostles of the new movement were not slow to grasp the advantage of playing upon the religious side of the people's mind. Following in the wake of Bepin Chandra Pal and Arabinda Ghose there appeared a fiery prophet of the new nationalism in the person of Barindra Kumar Ghose, who breathed forth contempt and ridicule against the constitutionalists. What he demanded of India was men—“hundreds of thousands of them who are ready to wipe out with their blood the stain of her age-long subjection”. And the burden of Barindra Kumar Ghose's song also (if the writer's interpretation of his propaganda is correct) was that the soul of India was being strangled by the materialism of the West. Unless they bestirred themselves they would become a race of slaves. “And then? Goodbye forever to the India of Válmiki and Vyasa, of the Vedas and Vedanta, from whose sacred soil had sprung Lord Krishna and Gautama Buddha. Farewell Priestess of Asia, mistress of the eastern seas, temple of Nirvana to which pilgrims journeyed from Palestine and Cathay . . . Come, then, with the vow of death that you may renew life. Remember the soil that your blood will manure shall bear the florescence of a new faith that shall redeem mankind, the fruitage of a new manhood that shall readjust the rights and wrongs of the world.”

By temperament the people of Bengal are imaginative and highly emotional. Appeals to their pride of race were well calculated to sweep them off their feet. The fiery oratory of Barindra Kumar Ghose and his fellow-workers and the writings of an unrestrained press, which sprang into existence as the new movement spread, “smote on the heart of the people as on a giant's harp, awakening out of it a storm and a tumult such as Bengal had never known through the long centuries of her political serfdom”.

From this brief précis it will be seen that one of the factors which go to make up a complex whole is nationalism expressing itself in terms of religion. And in India, indeed, religion enters into politics

as it does into most of the activities of man which in the West are usually described as secular. Not long ago at a large gathering of politicians in Bengal convened for the discussion of non-cooperation, the outstanding political controversy of the day, the speech of the principal speaker, babu Sarat Chandra Ghose, was described by one who heard it as "a discourse on the abstract truth of Hindu philosophy rather than a political address". Similarly, at an earlier date before the birth of the non-cooperation movement, Mr. C. R. Das, soon to become the leader of the extremists of Bengal, delivered an address from the presidential chair at the annual meeting of the Bengal provincial congress in 1917, which reflected views similar to these which have been set forth above.

Mr. Das spoke, indeed, with all the ardour of a missionary. He smote in pieces the golden calf which he set up as symbolical of the ideals of Europe, and with the fervour of a seer, he pointed the way to a promised land. His dominating note was hatred—and dread—of everything that savoured of the West. The industrialism, the commerce, the education, the very mode of life itself of Europe—all these were held up to opprobrium and denounced with indiscriminating bitterness. It was the pursuit of these false gods that had converted Bengal from a smiling land of happiness and plenty into a salt waste over which brooded stagnation and death. With a fine disregard of historical accuracy, the India of pre-British days was pictured in glowing colours as a land of happiness and prosperity. "We had corn in our granaries; our tanks supplied us with fish; and the eye was soothed and refreshed by the limpid blue of the sky and the green foliage of the trees. All day long the peasant toiled in the fields; and at eve, returning to his lamp-lit home, he sang the song of his heart." But these things were no more. "The granaries are empty of their golden wealth; the kine are dry and give no milk; and the fields once so green are dry and parched with thirst. What remains is the dream of former happiness and the languor and misery of insistent pain." How, he asked, had this fearful nakedness and desolation come about? The whole significance of the speech

lay in the answer which he gave to this question. It was repeated over and over again in varying form throughout the discourse. "We had made aliens of our own people; we had forgotten the ideals of our heart. As I look back on the dim darkness of this distant century, the past seems peopled with vague and phantom shapes of terror; and I repeat again that the fault was ours. We had lost our manhood; and losing manhood we had lost all claim save the claim of life. Miserable as we were—our commerce, our manufacture, our industry—we sacrificed it all on the altar of the alien tradesman. The wheel and distaff broke in our household; we cut off our own hands and feet; we strangled fortune in her own cradle."

Word pictures of a golden age of peace and plenty before the advent of the British have become so common a property in the nationalist orator's rhetorical stock in trade, that some comment seems called for. Perhaps the best corrective for these strange historical aberrations is provided by the literature current amongst the peasantry itself. For centuries past, there have been sung and handed down from father to son amongst the peasant population of Eastern Bengal a whole collection of ballads, the faithful record by village poets of episodes in the daily lives of the people. A number of these illuminating songs has recently been collected, edited and translated by Rai Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen, who has done so much to make better known to the world the literary treasures of Bengal. Amongst these ballads is the story of Kenaram, a famous robber chief. This interesting work, composed by the poetess Chandravati, is described by the editor of the collection as a historical account by one who knew them first hand, of events in Bengal during the closing quarter of the sixteenth century. There is every reason to suppose, therefore, that it contains an accurate account of events in Mr. Das's golden age before the advent of the British.

The tale which it unfolds is that of a land racked and riven by anarchy, of deserted homesteads, and of a people harried and panic-stricken under a chaotic administration. "The people buried their wealth under the earth for fear of plunder", sings the poetess.

“The robbers strangled the wayfarers with nooses of rope. Many villages presented a scene of total desertion under the rule of the kajis.” And with particular reference to the activities of Kenaram—“the very leaves of the trees shivered as if in fright: none dared to light a lamp in the evening lest it should attract notice to the house, nor dared to come outside after dark”. An interesting commentary, surely, upon Mr. Das’s glowing picture of the peasant toiling in the fields all day and “at eve returning to his lamp-lit home” to sing the song of his heart.

Nor does this historical ballad bear out the contention of Mr. Das and his fellow-thinkers that famine is a product of British rule. “At this time”, declares Chandravati, the village poetess, “the district of Mymensingh was visited by one of the most cruel famines that had ever come upon Bengal.” And she describes its horrors in graphic detail. “The homes of many families became scenes of terrible suffering, and men and women died by hundreds . . . Husbands sold their wives and wives their children. All convention, all affection and feeling were gone, and men became like lower animals seeking the whole day long for something to live upon.” It would seem, therefore, that even before the advent of the British there were sombre interludes amid the golden days of brimming granaries and sweet content. Mr. Das’s history would profit by a perusal of the whole collection of these interesting ballads, even if in the process it lost something of its bold and picturesque originality.

Let me now return to Mr. Das’s speech. From contemplation of the prostration of the countryside he turned his gaze upon the cities, and poured the vials of his wrath upon the commercialism of the age.

The industrialism of Europe was anathema—a thing accursed. “Christian Europe within the last two hundred years has forsaken Christ and set up the mammon of industrialism”, and had trodden in pain the path of sorrow. Could they not heed the writing upon the wall? Must they too grope blindly after this grisly monster? “In our heart of hearts, this one thing we must remember for ever, that

this industrialism never was and never will be art and part of our nature . . . If we seek to establish industrialism in our land, we shall be laying down with our own hands the road to our destruction. Mills and factories—like some gigantic monster—will crush out the little of life that still feebly pulsates in our veins, and we shall whirl round with their huge wheels and be like some dead and soulless machine ourselves; and the *rich capitalist operating at a distance* will lick us dry of what little blood we still may have.”

The Western system of education had been imposed like shackles upon the people. In the golden days of Âryāvarta education congenial to the people had been diffused in the household of the guru, in the institutions of domestic life, through *jatras* and *kathakathas*, in the songs from Ramayana and Chandi, in Sankîrtans, and in the *Bratas* and rituals of the women-folk. “But, like other ideals, our ideal of education also has become mean and impoverished. We have set up the huge structure of the University . . . but this abnormal system has brought many evils in its train, and it will continue to be a source of evil in the days to come. For one thing, it has imparted an element of unnecessary anglicism into our manners and modes of life, so that in outer seeming it might almost appear as if the educated Bengali had little organic touch with the heart of his countrymen.” This more than anything was destroying the genius of Bengal. It might be suited to other lands and other peoples, but for Bengal it was an empty simulacrum, a system without a soul, a lifeless image standing upon feet of clay, which must be broken and cast out of the national temple of learning. “To me it seems perfectly clear that if we want to lead our newly awakened consciousness in the paths of true knowledge, education will have to be diffused through the medium of our own vernacular and not through the unwholesome medium of English. The education which we now receive is a borrowed and imitated article; it does not cooperate with the national genius of our being, and hence it is powerless to enrich the life blood of our soul.”

Even in their politics, the speaker declared there was no life or

reality, merely mimicry of an alien system. They had borrowed the phrases and the formulae of the West, and in doing so had neglected the one thing essential. They never looked to their country, never thought of Bengal, of their past national history or their present material condition. Hence their political agitation was unreal and unsubstantial, divorced from all intimate touch with the soul of the people. Down in the depths of their soul they, the educated people, had become anglicised. They read in English and thought in English. Their borrowed anglicism repelled the masses of their countrymen, who preferred the genuine article to the shoddy imitation. Thus in every aspect of their present life — in commerce, in industry, in education, in politics, in social custom — they found the taint of anglicism. “Mimic anglicism has become an obsession with us; we find its black footprint in every walk and endeavour of our life. We substitute meeting-houses for temples; we perform stage plays and sell pleasures in order to help charities; we hold lotteries in aid of orphanages; we give up the national and healthful games of our country and introduce all sorts of foreign importations. We have become hybrid in dress, in thought, in sentiment and culture, and are making frantic attempts even to be hybrids in blood.”

Quotations might be multiplied, but enough has been said to show that the speaker had gone forth to preach a sermon and to point a moral. The state of the country today stood in sombre contrast with the Bengal of old. This calamity had been brought about because, in the dust which had been raised by the clash of ideals of East and West, the people had lost sight of their own divinities, and had cast their offerings upon the altars of strange gods. But the speaker did not stop here. He asked his audience to consider how it was that the people had been thus led astray, and having answered this question, he pointed to the signs which had been given that the scales were falling from their eyes, and while exhorting them to pay heed to these signs and portents, he himself assumed the rôle of prophet, and pointed the road to the promised land.

How was it that they had succumbed to this passion for alien culture and foreign ideals? It was because when the English came to Bengal the people of the land were decadent. They were a people whose vital spark had burned low, whose Religion of Power had become a mockery of its former self—had lost its soul of beneficence in the repetition of empty formulae and the observance of meaningless mummeries. As with religion, so with knowledge; the traditions of Navadvîpa's ancient glory and scholarship had become a mere name and memory. And so it had happened to them as it happens to all the weak. From pure inanition they had accepted the English Government, and with that the English-race — their culture, their civilisation and their luxury. But the time had come when they must cast off the spell which had lain upon them. Already prophets of the race had arisen who had kindled once again the fires on the ancient altars. Bankim had come and had set up the image of their Mother in the Motherland. He had called unto the whole people, and had said, "Behold, this is our Mother, well-watered, well-fruited, cooled with the southern breeze, green with the growing corn; worship her and establish her in your homes". Time had passed. The trumpet of *Swadeshism* had begun to sound in 1903. *The Swadeshi* movement had come like a tempest; it had rushed along impetuously like some mighty flood, submerging them, sweeping them off their feet, but revitalising their lives. Under its reviving influence they had steeped themselves once again in that stream of culture and civilisation which had been flowing perennially through the heart of Bengal. They had been enabled once more to catch glimpses of the true continuity of their national history. The main problem for their consideration, therefore, was this — how to develop fully and adequately the newly awakened national life of Bengal? And assuming the rôle of priest and prophet, he pointed the road. In this critical period of nation building they must root out and cast aside the European ideal of indulgence, and must cleave fast to their native and ancient ideal of sacrifice. Problems of education and culture, of agriculture and commerce,

must be dealt with in the light of their treatment in the past. The connection of these things with their ancient social system must be considered. And not this alone. They must consider also the precise relation in which all their thoughts, endeavours and activities stood, and still stand, with reference to the question of religion, for they would misread and misknow all things unless they kept this point steadily in view. They must accept only what was consonant with the genius of their being, and must reject and utterly cast aside what was foreign to their soul. What they formerly possessed, the permanent and perennial source of their strength, was still theirs. The stately and majestic rivers of Bengal which rushed impetuously towards the sea and the strength and might of which it was impossible to resist—they still flowed onwards in all their ancient majesty and might of strength. The august Himalaya, ancient of days, still stood lifting up its brow towards Heaven. The great permanent features of earth upon which the life and soul of Bengal were founded—they were still there, permanent, immutable, majestic. Theirs the task to restore the life that had fled, to revivify the soul that was all but dead.

With the economic theories propounded by Mr. Das—viz. the superiority of the system of production which existed in all countries before the introduction of steam power—I am not here concerned. The real interest of the address lies in the insight which it gives into the working of the speaker's mind. That his whole outlook upon life is dominated by racial bitterness is plainly apparent: that the intention no less than the effect of his words must be to foster racial antagonism is scarcely open to doubt. Of course, Mr. Das condemned the revolutionary crime which he described as the outer manifestation of the feeling of impatience and despair which had permeated the minds of the younger generation—impatience and despair born of the thwarting by the bureaucracy of a noble and overwhelming desire to serve their Motherland. Nevertheless, it was the doctrine set forth by Mr. Das and others before him, and the preaching of it, which were largely responsible for the illegiti-

mate outlet which this pent-up energy sought. The people of Bengal are peculiarly susceptible to the influence of oratory. Appeals to their past greatness, couched in powerful and moving language, are capable of stirring their souls to their very depths. And naturally enough, perhaps, the darker shadows in the picture of Indian life as it existed when Great Britain took up her beneficent task, find no place in these glittering but fanciful panegyrics of the past. The inhuman practice of suttee, in accordance with which, year after year, hundreds of unfortunate women were burned alive on their dead husbands' funeral pyres—a custom upheld by the priesthood as having been ordained by the earliest scriptures of the race—finds no mention in them. Neither does the scourge of the Thugs, by whom murder by strangulation followed by robbery was reduced to a fine art under the religious sanction of the goddess Bhawani; nor yet the equally heinous practice of infanticide, which in some parts of the country was responsible for the wholesale slaughter of female children. Still less does the fact that it was a British Viceroy who brought suttee to an end; that it was British initiative that brought to justice in the brief space of six years two thousand Thugs, and so ridded the land of one of its most cruel afflictions; or that it was, once again, British action which purged India of the cancer of infanticide.⁵³ Forgotten are the mutilations and other forms of torture inflicted as punishments at the individual caprice of those who administered what passed for a system of criminal justice, before the British established a new and merciful reign of law; forgotten is the devouring sword of the Pindharis who swept over the land, leaving in their train the smouldering ashes of perished homesteads, the anguish of tortured and ravished humanity, side by side with the lifeless bodies of the victims of their blood lust. For these twentieth-century audiences hypnotised by the persuasive oratory of Mr. Das and his colleagues, these things might never have been. For them the India of pre-British days was a golden land of peace and plenty; the India of today a sick and stricken land, lying pale and wan under the deadening shadow of the West.