

England and India by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] THE relations between conquering nations and subject peoples form a question of the present day which may well tax the thought of the most thoughtful, as well as stir the feelings of the most sensitive. How these relations should be carried on, how both conquering nation and subject people may profit by the links that arise between them — on the answer to that problem depends much of the future progress of the world, and I have thought that, with the traditions that are associated with the name of South Place, I might well take up before you this morning the relations which exist between one of the greatest of conquering nations and the greatest of subject peoples, and see how far it is possible to lay down certain lines of thought, which may possibly be of help to you in your own thinking, which may possibly suggest to you ideas which, perchance, otherwise might not have come in your way.

Now, every two nations that come into touch the one with the other should, it is very clear, each have something to learn, each have something to teach, and this is perhaps pre-eminently the case where two [Page 2] such nations as India and England are concerned. Where England has to do with savage peoples her path is comparatively simple; where she has to do with a nation far older than her own civilisation, a nation with fixed and most ancient traditions, a nation that was enjoying a high state of civilisation long ere the seed of Western civilisation was sown — where she has to do with such a people, the relations must needs be complicated and difficult, difficult for both sides to understand, difficult for both sides to make fruitful of good rather than of evil. And I know of no greater service that can be rendered either in this land or in that, than the service of those who try to understand the question and to draw the nations closer together by wisdom instead of driving them further apart by ignorance and by prejudice.

Now it seems to me that with regard to India, the subject may fall quite naturally under three heads: first, the head of religion; then, of education; and then, of political relations, under which latter I include the social conditions of the people. Let me try, then, under these three headings to suggest to you certain ideas as to English relations with India, which may possibly hereafter bear fruit in your minds, if they be worthy to do so.

I said that, when two nations come together, each has something to teach and something to learn, and that is true. So far as religion is concerned, I think India has more to teach than she has to learn. So [Page 3] far as education is concerned, much has to be done on both sides, but on the whole, in most respects, England has more to teach there than to learn. With regard to political conditions, there both nations have much to learn in mutual understanding and in adaptation to this old civilisation of India of methods of thought, of rule, of social conditions utterly alien from her own conditions, so that changes, if it be wise to introduce them, must be brought about with the greatest care, the greatest delicacy, after the longest and most careful consideration.

1) Let us take, then, first, *the question of religion*, on which I submit to you that India has more to teach than she has to learn; and I say that for this reason, that almost everything which can be learned from

Christianity exists also in the eastern faiths, and you have with regard to this to remember in India that you are dealing with a people of various faiths and many schools of thought, some of them exceedingly ancient, deeply philosophic, as well as highly spiritual. Now, seventy per cent of the population of India are Hindûs, belong to one great religion, which includes under that name an immense variety of philosophic schools and sects. For when we speak of Hindûism, we are not speaking of what you might call a simple religion, such as is modern Christianity, though even there you have divisions enough, but of a religion which has always encouraged to the fullest extent the freedom of the intellect, and which [Page 4] recognizes nothing as heresy which the intellect of man can grasp, which the thought of man can formulate. You have under that general name the greatest diversity of thought, and always Hindûism has encouraged that diversity, has not endeavoured to check it. Hindûism is very, very strict in its social polity; it is marvellously wide in its theological, its ethical, its philosophical thought. It includes even on one side the Chãrvaka system, the most complete atheism, as it would here be called; while it includes on the other, forms of the most popular religious thinking that it is possible to conceive. The intellect, then, has ever been free under the scepter of the religion which embraces seventy per cent of the great Indian population.

The majority of the remaining thirty per cent are followers of the great Prophet of Arabia, Muhammad, and amongst them today there are great signs of awakening of thought, there are great signs of revival of deeper philosophical belief. While the majority of them still are, I was almost going to say, plunged in religious bigotry, from western and from eastern standpoints, rather repeating a creed than understanding a philosophy, there is none the less at the present day a very considerable awakening, and a hope that the great faith of Islãm may stand higher in the eyes of the world by knowledge and by power than it has done for many a hundred years in the past. Then, in addition to this — the Hindû with its [Page 5] seventy per cent, the faith of Islãm, which counts some fifty millions of the population — you have Christianity, imported, of course, from the West, not touching the higher classes of the Hindûs at all, but having a considerable following, especially in the South, among the most ignorant, among the most superstitious people; you have the Pãrsi community, a thoughtful, learned and wealthy community, though a very small one, only numbering, I think, some 80,000 people; you have the Jain community, also very wealthy, and having among it a certain number of very learned men, a community whose rites go back to the very early days of Hindû thought and Hindû civilisation; and you have in addition to this the warrior nation of the Sikhs, bound together by their devotion to their great Prophet, and forming today a most important part of the fighting strength of the English Empire in India. Buddhism has scarcely any power in India proper. It rules in Burma, and it rules in Ceylon, both, of course, forming part of the Indian Empire, but in India proper it is practically non-existent.

In this way, then, you have a country, including Burma and Ceylon, in which you have clearly marked out some seven different faiths, and you have a ruling nation, Christian in its theory, and entirely unsectarian so far as its rule over the people is concerned; but inevitably under the shadow of that conquering nation there grows up an immense missionary propaganda in India, which is strong, not by [Page 6] its learning, not by the spirituality of its missionaries, but simply from the fact that they belong to the conquering, to the ruling, people, and so have behind them, in the mind of the great mass of the Indians, the weight which comes by the authority of the English Empire, as you may say, backing that particular form of faith. Now it is this condition that you want to understand, if you would deal fairly with the religions question in India. The most utter impartiality is the rule of the Government, but it is that simple impartiality which may be said to take up the position that all religions are equally indifferent. This is not the kind of spirit that is wanted in a country where religion is the strongest force in life. You need a sympathetic impartiality, not an impartiality of indifference; and it is that in which so far the government has naturally very largely

failed. You want in India at the present time a definite recognition of the fact that the religions that are there, and that rule the hearts of the great mass of the people and the minds of the most thoughtful and learned of the nation — that these religions are worthy of the highest respect, and not of mere toleration. You have to realise that the missionary efforts there do an infinity of harm and very little good; that they set religion against religion and faith against faith; whereas what you want in India is the brotherhood of religions, and the respect of men of every faith for the faiths which are [Page 7] not theirs. You need there the teaching and the spirit of Theosophy, which sees every religion as the partial expression of one great truth. The more aggressive one faith shows itself to be, the more it is stirring up religious antagonisms and religious hatreds. Danger to the Empire lies in the aggressive policy of Christianity, whereby large numbers of men, ignorant of the religions that they attack, treat them with contempt, with scorn, with insult — that is one of the dangers that you have to consider in India, when you remember that in the minds of the people England stands behind the missionary. The Christian missionary converts very, very rarely, in the most exceptional of cases, any man who is educated, any man who is trained in his own faith, any man of what are called the higher and thoughtful castes. He makes his converts among the great mass of the most ignorant of the population; he makes them chiefly in times of famine and of distress; he makes them more largely for social reasons than for reasons which are religious in their nature. By the folly of the Hindûs themselves vast masses of the Indians have been left without religious teachings altogether, have been regarded with contempt, have been looked upon with arrogance. It is among these classes that the Christian missionaries find their converts. Once such a man is converted to Christianity, he, who before was not allowed to cross the threshold of a Hindû, is admissible as a Christian into the house, because Christianity [Page 8] is the religion of the conquering nation; and you can very well recognize how strong a converting power that has on the ignorant, on the degraded, on the socially oppressed. It is not necessary for me to say much on that here, since here nothing much can be done in this matter. It is rather in India, that one tries to meet that question, pointing out to the educated and the religious how great a danger to their own faith, as well as how great a wrong to humanity, it is to neglect vast portions of the population, and so to drive them, as it were, to find refuge in an alien creed, which at least treats them with decency, if it cannot do much for them in ethical training.

This religious question in India is one that you need to understand, for eastern teaching is everywhere more and more spreading in the West. I could not help being amused the other day by a remark of a disconsolate missionary coming back to America, and declaring that while he was striving to convert people from Hindûism, he found on his return that large numbers of the educated were tainted with the philosophy that in India he was trying to destroy. That is perfectly true. Hindû thought is making its way here in general very much more rapidly than Christianity is making its way in India; and it is touching the flower of the population here, whereas Christianity is only touching the poorest and most ignorant in India. [Page 9]

That is why I said that India had much more to teach than to learn in matters of religion; she has plenty in her own faith which can train and cultivate the masses of her people, but that must be done by Hindû missionaries and not by Christian missionaries. It would be the wisdom of England to look upon all these religions as methods of training, of guiding, of helping the people, and to recognize that the work of the Christian in India is among his own population, is among his own countrymen, is among the Christian communities, and that he should look on his faith as a sister faith among many, and not as unique, to which people of other religions are to be converted. The greatest, perhaps the only serious, danger to English rule in India lies in the religious question, in the bad feelings stirred up by the missionaries, in the difficulties that are caused by their lack of understanding of the people. Theosophy has done much to counteract this danger, and has been striving in India to stimulate the peoples of the various faiths to take

up these religious questions for themselves, and by their energy in the teaching of their own religion to cause the spread of religious knowledge which may make each faith strong within its own borders,

2) Pass from the religious question to *the educational*, and here a great danger lies immediately in front, a danger which arises largely out of [Page 10] that want of sympathy and that want of understanding which is the chief fault of the English people as a conquering nation, as a ruler in their relations with subject peoples. They try to be just, they try to do their duty, they are industrious, they are hard-working, endeavouring to do the work which is put into their hands. Their weak point lies in the fact that they are very unsympathetic, that they cannot put themselves into the place of others, and that they have a tendency to think they are so immensely superior to others that whatever is good for them is good for everybody else; they fail to understand the traditions and the customs which must exist in an ancient people, a people of high and complicated civilisation, and this lack of sympathy has a very great bearing on the question of education. Practically, Indian education, on the higher line, was started by the wisdom of Lord Macaulay. He began the work of Indian education, and he began it wisely and well. It has been carried on year after year by a long succession of Viceroys, who for the most part have done well with regard to the educational question; but while they have done well, it is perfectly true that there are great and serious faults in the Indian system, faults which need to be corrected and which neutralise much of the value of the education that is given. I have not time to go very fully into these faults; it must suffice to say that memory has been cultivated to the exclusion of the reasoning [Page 11] faculty, and that even when science has been taught, it has been taught by the text-book, and not in the laboratory, it has been taught by memory, and not by experiment. In addition to that there has been a crushing number of examinations, forcing the whole life of the boy as well as of the man, and keeping up a continual strain which has exhausted the pupil ere he has left the University. It has been forgotten that the Indian student is naturally studious and not playful enough, that his inclination is to work a great deal too hard, that what was wanted was the stimulation to play more than the stimulation to study, that the physical training of the boys was more necessary to be seen to than the intellectual training. The physical training was left out of sight, and though carefully looked after in ancient India it was now neglected. As these differences were overlooked, everything was done to force the intellectual side in an unwise way, by cramming rather than by organic development of study, and as the University degrees were made the only passport to Government employment and to the professions at large, it became a wild desire on the part of the Indian parent to force his boys on as rapidly as possible, with little regard to the kind of education that was given. These faults have been seen by the present Viceroy, and, eager to mend the faults, he sent out a University Commission, which has just made its report. Now the first fault of that Commission was that it had only [Page 12] two representatives of India on it, and the rest Englishmen, and the English members of that Commission were not all acquainted with the nature of the problems of Indian education. They have issued their Report. The Indian judge, who was the Hindû member of that Commission, has issued a minority report, against many of the recommendations made by the majority, consisting of the English members and one Musulmân. The very fact that you get a report divided in that racial way ought at once to make our rulers pause, and when you find that many of the recommendations of the majority-report are disapproved by the representative of seventy percent of the population that you are going to teach, it seems as though it might be wise if the Government here would look into the matter a little carefully before it gives its decision. For it is the view of the Indian people, now being expressed in every way possible, that the report of the Commission strikes a heavy blow at Indian education, that much of the great work of the past will be destroyed, and that the education of the future will be placed beyond the reach of large numbers of the people who hereditarily claim it.

To begin with, the education is now made more costly, and by that one word you have its condemnation

for India, The fees are everywhere to be raised, so that University education will be practically beyond the reach of those who need it most. It is [Page 13] said that many go to the University who are not fit for it; but the remedy for that is to improve the teaching in your Universities and not to increase the cost of the education; for by high fees you will not exclude the idle and the unworthy rich, but you will exclude great masses of the worthy and industrious poor; and when you remember that it is the Indian tradition that learning and poverty go together, that the man who is learned has no need of wealth, that you find the highest caste the poorest caste, although the most learned — if you could realize that and put yourself in their place, you would understand the agitation which at present is convulsing the most thoughtful people in India, when they see that the Government is going to exclude their sons, the flower of the intellectual population, from all share in education by the high fees which it is going to impose. It is said by the Commission, that scholarships may serve for the poorer classes, but you cannot give scholarships to thousands of that vast population. You can give scholarships to a boy here and there, but you cannot give them to the great mass; the greatest danger is the discontent of the thoughtful, and that is the discontent which is being stirred up at the present time. The truth is, that Lord Curzon, able as he is, has only five years in which to rule, and he is eager to mark his Viceroyalty by some great scheme of change. But if England be not careful, it will be marked by the saddest [Page 14] monument that ever Viceroy has left behind him, the destruction of the education of a great people, and the shutting out of vast masses of the intellectual from education whereby they might rise to be your helpers in the ruling of their country, but shut out from which they become an element of danger. That is not a thing which it is well to have said by a subject nation of the type of the Indian nation. It is said among the thoughtful people now that this is intended to destroy education, in order that Indians may not have their fair share in the government of their own land. That is the thought which is spreading, that is the motive which they believe lies behind the policy of Lord Curzon. They think he desires to stop education, in order that the Indians may not rise to the higher posts in their own country, and that is a most dangerous idea to spread through the most intellectual, through the most thoughtful classes. I have had letter after letter pleading with me to do something here to prevent this Report from receiving the sanction of the Government; but how difficult is it to do that where the people who give the decision are ignorant themselves, and where they naturally rely on their own agents rather than on what any casual speaker may say.

In the attempt started by the Theosophical Society in India, and carried on by large numbers of the Hindûs themselves, to build up a large Hindû College, we are trying to do the very opposite of some of the [Page 15] things that are being suggested to the Government, and are already doing some of the things they want done. We have put down the fees to the lowest possible point; we are training the lads in the laboratory; we give them less and less instruction in which memory only is cultivated, and in which the reasoning faculties are thrown entirely on one side. We are teaching them to play games; we are training strong and healthy bodies, and are endeavouring to prevent the great nervous strain involved in study. But if this Commission Report be adopted, much of our work will be destroyed, and the results which we are trying to bring about, and have brought about to some extent, will be utterly wasted, will be impossible to carry on; for the boys that we want to reach, the intelligent, the eager, those who are longing to learn but whose parents are poor, they will be shut utterly out of education, for unless we adopt the Government rate of fees, the Government may close the College and not permit it to carry on its work. That is the kind of difficulty that has to be dealt with in these educational measures. If you would let Indians guide their own education, if you would give them all that is best in the West, when it is suitable, but not insist that all that is good in England is necessarily good there; if you would try to see things from their own standpoint, if you did not insist on highly paid Englishmen as instructors, instead of educated Indians, you would work at less expense and with more efficiency.[Page 16]

But what is there to be done, when the Government here has the last word, and knows nothing about the

conditions; and when the data on which the decisions are made are sent from India by those who are apart from Indian sympathy, data on which the Indians are not consulted, although it is their children whose future is in jeopardy. What is really needed is to make education cheap, widespread, scientific, literary and technical; to change the policy which draws the intelligent Indians only into Government service, and to get them to take up the other lines of work which affect the economic future of their country; to educate them in arts and manufactures; not to leave the direction of industry to people who are of the ruling nation, but to draft into industrial undertakings large numbers of the educated classes — that is the kind of education that is wanted, and the kind of education that England does not give to India, and will not. let India give to herself.

3) Pass from that to the third point I spoke of — the *questions touching on politics*, including the social and economic conditions of India. It must have struck you, those who have studied the past, that it is very strange that this country — which, when the East India Company went there in the eighteenth century, was one of the richest countries of the world — has now become a country to go a-begging to the world for the mere food to keep its vast population from dying of starvation by millions. The mere fact [Page 17] that there has been such a change in the wealth of the country should surely make those who are responsible for its rule look more closely into the economic conditions, should surely suggest that there is something fundamentally wrong when you have these recurring famines. Six years of famine, practically, India has lately passed through. It is not due to changes of climate; these have always been there — seasons of drought, seasons of too much rain, seasons of good weather. These are not surely the direct result of English rule! They existed long before England came; they are likely to exist long after we have all passed away. Why is it that these famines recur time after time? Why is it that such myriads of people are thus doomed to starvation? Now I have not a word to say as to the efforts that are made by the English when the famine is there, save words of praise. The English officials worked themselves half to death, when the people were dying. But that is not the time when the work is most needed. It is prevention that we want, rather than cure; and the nation that can only deal with famine by relief-works and by charity is not a nation that in the eyes of the world can justify its authority in India. There must be causes that underlie these famines. It is the duty of the ruling nation to understand these causes, or else to allow the wisest among the Indian population to take these questions into their own hands and act as the Council of the English rulers. Sometimes it is [Page 18] said that the famine is owing to the increase in the population. That is not true. What is called the peace of Britain is not a blessing, if it be the cause of famine. It is easier to the great mass of the people to have wars that kill off some of them quickly, than to have recurring famines that starve them to death after months of agony. The British peace is not a blessing, if it be punctuated by famines in which millions die by starvation. Peace is not a blessing if it kills more people than war, and that is what the peace of England is doing in India, and it is killing them after terrible sufferings, instead of by sword and by fire. It is *the cause* of these famines that we need to understand. It is a remarkable fact that, where the Indian princes have been left uninterfered with, the famines have not been so serious. Everywhere, where a nation lives by agriculture and has to prepare itself for a bad season, it is usual to find out a way of dealing with the natural difficulties suitable to its own spirit. Now that was done in India, and done in a very simple way, although a way that is dead against the modern *Political economy*. The way was a simple way as in the days of ancient Egypt. We have all read of how when Joseph was the wise minister there, he provided for the years of famine in the years of plenty. That one sentence expresses the Indian way of dealing with famines. When there was plenty, large quantities of the food were stored, and rent and taxes were taken in food [Page 19] these varied with the food raised by the people and therefore they never pressed heavily on the people. When there was much raised the rent and taxes were higher; when the harvest was bad, the King went without his share. But in the years when he got a very large share, he stored it in granaries. In addition to that, after the people were fed (and the feeding of the people was the first charge), the people themselves

stored the year's corn, so that if they had a bad year they could fall back on their own corn. In this way the peasant could make head against one bad season and if there were more than one bad season the prince came to his aid, by throwing his corn on the market at a price which the people could afford to pay. Now that method of dealing with the famine problem still goes on in some States, such as Kāshmir, because they will not permit their grain to be exported. But the greatest pressure is continually being put on the Mahārāja of Kāshmir to force him to export his rice, He has been able to hold his own so far, but the resistance to English pressure is a terribly difficult thing for an Indian prince, and to resist it continually is not possible. Now I know how alien to English thought is that method of dealing with the products of a country; but it is far better to carry that on and save the people from famine, than to insist that the people shall sell their corn in years of plenty and starve in years of scarcity; The people want to store their corn when they have it, to [Page 20] keep it against the bad seasons, instead of having to import it from abroad in time of famine. And yet, in this very year when famine was threatened, I saw not long ago in a newspaper a telegram advising the recurrence of famine in one part of India, and, in the same paper that contained that telegram, I saw a statement that the first shiploads of Indian wheat had left Bombay. That may be modern political economy, but it is pure idiocy. India if wisely governed may be a paradise, but we have just read that with five fools you can turn a paradise into a hell; and to impose English political economy on India is folly, well-intentioned folly, but folly none the less.

Another great cause of these famines is the way in which the land is now held. In the old days there was a common interest in the land between princes and people. Now the nobles, the old class of zemindars, have been turned into landlords, and that is a very different thing from the old way of holding land. Then you have insisted on giving to the peasant the right to sell his land, the very last thing that he wants to do, the thing which takes away from him the certainty of food for himself and his children. No peasant in the old days had the right to sell his land, but only to cultivate it. If he needed to borrow at any time, he borrowed on the crop. Now, in order to free the people from debt, they are given the right to sell their mortgaged holdings, and this [Page 21] means the throwing out of an agricultural people on the roads, making them landless, and the holding of the land by money-lenders. That revolution in the land system of India is one of the causes of the recurring famines, the second perhaps of the great causes. The natural result of it is that you put now power into the hands of the money-lender, and you take away from the peasant the shield that always protected him.

The railway system, too, useful as it is, has done an immense amount of harm. It has cleared away the food; it has sent the man with money into the country districts to buy up the produce, which he sends abroad, giving the peasant the rupees that he cannot eat instead of the rice and corn that he can eat.

Even when I first went to India, you could hardly see a peasant woman without silver bangles on her arms and legs. Now large numbers of peasant women wear none; these have been sold during these last years of famine, and to sell these is the last sign of poverty for the Indian peasantry. It is no good giving them money in exchange for their food. They do not know how to deal with it. They are urged to buy English goods of Manchester manufacture, which wear out in a few months, instead of the Indian-made articles which last for many years. You must remember that the Indian peasant washes his clothes every day of his life, and so they need to be of great durability.[Page 22]

Another difficulty is the way in which you have destroyed the manufactures of India — destroyed them partly by flooding the market with cheap, showy, adulterated goods, which have attracted the ignorant people, inducing them to buy what is largely worthless. All the finer manufactures of India are practically

destroyed, whereas the makers used to grow rich by selling these to her wealthy men and to foreign countries. Now both the fine and coarse goods are beaten out of the country by the cheap Manchester goods, and the dear fashionable fabrics; even if this had been done fairly it would not be so bad, but the Indian merchants were forced to give up their trade secrets to the agents of English industries. You guard your trade secrets jealously from rivals, but you have forced the Indians to give up theirs, in order that English manufacturers might have the benefit of that knowledge. In this way old trades have been gradually killed out, while the arts of India are very rapidly perishing. The arts of India depended on the social condition of the country. The artist in India was not a man who lived by competition. As far as he was concerned he did not trade at all. He was always kept as part of the great household, of a noble; his board, his lodging, his clothing, were all secured to him, and he worked at his leisure, and carried out his artistic ideas without difficulty and without struggle. All that class is being killed out in the stress of western competition, and it is not [Page 23] as though something else were put in its place; the thing itself is destroyed, the whole market is destroyed. Now the pressure is falling on the artisan, and he is utterly unable to guard himself against it, and is falling back into the already well-filled agricultural ranks.

These are some of the questions that you have to consider and to understand. You have to understand the question of Indian taxation; you have to understand the question of taking away from India seventeen millions a year to meet *Home*, *i.e.*, English, charges. You have to consider the expense of your Government in India, the exorbitant salaries that are paid to English officials. You have to realize the financial side of the problem, as well as those that I have dealt with

Friends, I have only been able to touch the fringe of a great subject. I have hoped, by packing together a number of these facts, to stir you into study rather than to convince you. For if I had tried to move your feelings I would have done little. I have preferred to point out the difficulties that have to be dealt with, so that you may study them, so that you may investigate them, so that you may form your own opinions upon them. I do not believe it is possible to do everything at once, but I do think it might be possible to form a band of English experts, who should make these questions their speciality, and who should have weight with the Government over [Page 24] here which deals with India, so that they could advise with wisdom, so that they could point out the most useful path by which improvement could be made. To govern a great country like India by a Parliament over here is practically impossible. It is too clumsy an instrument for the ruling of such a people. But if you would build up in India a great Council, composed of the wisest and most thoughtful of her own people; if you would take the advice of her best administrators in Indian States, her own sons; if you would place in such a Council her greatest feudatory Chiefs; if such a Council of all that is wisest and noblest in India were gathered round the Viceroy, who should hold his post, not as the reward for political service here, but because he knows and understands India, or, still better, appoint as Viceroy a Prince of the Imperial House; if you would leave him there for a greater space of time, and not make him work in a break-neck hurry to get something done; then there would be a brighter hope on the Indian horizon. This can only be done by understanding Indian feelings and not by ignoring them, by trying to sympathize with Indian customs and not by despising them. Along these lines lies the salvation of India and of England alike, and it is this which I recommend to your most thoughtful consideration.