

The Influence of Theosophy on the Life and Teachings of Modern India by Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti

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It is evident, even to a superficial observer, that Theosophy has been a powerful factor in directing the current of thought in India ever since its arrival on the land which more than any other place in the world might be called its home, and it may therefore be interesting to discuss the various ways in which it has influenced thought and life for weal or for woe. The impressions of one who has been connected more or less intimately with the movement for nearly a quarter of a century may be found pregnant with hope and encouragement for those who are beginning to get interested, as also indicative of the dangers to which it is particularly exposed.

As no human institution is perfect, it may be at once confessed without hesitation that, like all other altruistic movements, the T.S. has also given birth to some errors and abuses as the result of erroneous or imperfect understanding of its fundamental ideas. It is therefore eminently desirable that a powerful search-light should be directed on the shoals and rocks that beset its path; and the purpose of this paper will be served if it renders its steering any easier for those whose hands are to be upon its helm. The simplest plan seems to be to consider separately its influence in the regions of the politics, the religion and the spirituality of India, although it must be remembered that all these different departments of life are mutually interrelated and are constantly acting and reacting upon one another.

The political influence of Theosophy will be taken first and disposed of, as according to the constantly repeated manifesto of the movement it keeps itself clear of politics which are regarded as outside its sphere of influence. Politics, however, form one of the manifold ways in which the inner life and thought of a nation find outer expression; and it therefore follows that any powerful influence on the life of thought must be a determinant factor in the shape which politics will assume. Theosophy therefore finds itself unconsciously drawn into the vortex of political issues, although its professedly indifferent attitude towards politics keeps it elevated far above the din and bustle of strife so peculiar to political life. For with the olive branch of "universal brotherhood" always held out and its all-embracing arms, it makes for peace and not conflict, for union and not dissension. The critical idea of the whole body of its teachings being Unity, it evokes harmony; and deriving all its motive power from the inspiration of Love it successfully combats hatred.

Curiously enough, soon after its arrival in India it encountered the suspicion of the very people whose hands it was destined to strengthen, and the English people in India saw in it through the mist of that general distrust which unfortunately hangs about the political horizon of this country, a fresh phantom of unrest and trouble called into being by a person suspected to be a Russian spy assisted by one who was looked upon as a deluded, if well-meaning American enthusiast. Years of steady and devoted labour succeeded in dispelling this delusion but not before the leaders had the opportunity of proving their mettle by calmly putting up with persecution and promoting their mission of peace regardless of misconceptions, patiently confident of the ultimate triumph of truth. At this distant day one recalls with a

smile of amusement and relief the obstacles put in the way of the movement by this unreasoning attitude of suspicion, and one still remembers with a feeling of admiration the moral courage of those who came forward publicly to help, in days when such a course involved material risk to their worldly prosperity and reputation. No sooner had this suspicion of the Government time to die out than it was re-born with a tougher life in the minds of the Indians themselves, due to the appearance on the scene of a number of earnest and devoted Englishmen who had sacrificed everything to toil for the well-being of the very people who looked upon them with suspicion. The very magnitude and selflessness of the sacrifice served only to breed distrust and set people to the task of ferreting out some dark and sinister motive that could in their minds account for a life of labour bereft of comfort, wealth, name, position and all that the world holds dear. And this discreditable distrust was not confined to the illiterate or the so-called half-educated, but claimed the ingenuity of some of the most brilliant intellects of the country in putting forward plausible theories to explain away such altruistic conduct. The writer of this article was solemnly warned by a distinguished literary friend of his against the wisdom of rendering any support to the deep, mischievous designs of the scheming Englishmen, who, not content with holding in bondage our persons, were making through the Theosophical movement a determined attempt to reduce us into a condition of intellectual and moral slavery also. But once more the Light of Truth shone out clearly above the clouds of harrowing fancies born out of a diseased imagination, and the forces of Love and Charity triumphed over those of Hatred and Distrust. Lord Bacon compares suspicion to bats, owing to a common partiality for darkness, and it cannot be gainsaid that most of the misunderstanding and ill feeling that divide man from man can be traced to ignorance and want of fuller knowledge of the thoughts and motives that determine conduct.

The weakest spot in the otherwise stable foundation of British rule and the consequent peace in India is this want of confidence, which must be regarded by every thoughtful observer as the most serious aspect of the present political situation. While both the rulers and the ruled are working steadfastly for the peace and good government of the country, they understand amazingly little of the inner life, thoughts and aspirations of each other. The complete isolation of the English people in India, who live in a world of their own creation into which an Indian seldom or never finds admittance, is, in the opinion of the most sagacious minds of both these communities, a standing menace to the stability of the Empire. The real life of each community, in which all the finer feelings and the delicacies of sentiment find full play, ever remains a sealed book to the other; and it is no wonder that out of such mutual exclusiveness should be born estrangement and distrust between such close neighbours. The blindest bigot is bound to recognize that it is the hand of Providence that has driven two great and highly cultured nations into the arms of each other, and any organization which makes it possible for the heart of the one to respond to the heart of the other when they meet in loving embrace, is making itself the instrument of that Divine Beneficence which has brought them together. It seems that the accomplishment of this glorious end is one of the many missions which the T.S. is destined to subserve. No doubt it will take long years of devoted and selfless labour on the right lines but it is a "consummation devoutly to be wished," and if attained the Society will not have lived in vain, apart from the more spiritual aspects of its work. That the movement is particularly fitted to achieve the end in view hardly admits of any doubt on a consideration alike of the spirit that animates it and of the results already accomplished.

A European Theosophist in this country is singularly free from the trammels of the enforced reserve which handicaps official life in India, as also from the overwhelming sense of moral and religious superiority which only too often characterizes the non-official European. He goes into an Indian home with his heart full of love for the people who are the lineal descendants of the Great Sages, whose wisdom has brightened his life and whose teachings are his dearest possession. There is no magic more

miraculous than the *mantra* of true sympathy, and it is to be wondered that it proves an “open sesame” to the heart of the Indian, which opens out to its gentle touch exposing its richest treasures, while it remains securely fastened against the rude knocks of people who seek entrance in order to accuse. Once the bond of sympathy is established, all racial antipathy, misconception born of ignorance, distrust arising out of exclusiveness, vanish into thin air, giving place to unbounded confidence and unalloyed love. And as a practical illustration of what is stated above it is enough to mention that within the personal knowledge of the writer of this paper there are orthodox and conservative Hindûs who delight in counting some Europeans as their nearest and dearest friends on earth, dearer in many cases than near relations. Surely this is a result of which any organization might justly be proud and yet it is so insignificant when compared with the object in view. The end may not be within view yet, the road may yet seem very uphill and rough, but if we all resolve to live in our lives the Law of Love to which we are pledged, success cannot be uncertain and, although devoid of politics, the Society cannot fail to attain the greatest political triumph of the age.

Coming to the domain of religion, on which Theosophy has naturally a more direct bearing, it is no exaggeration to say that the change effected in the opinion of the educated people of India and their attitude towards their own religion is not far short of revolutionary. It is unfortunately necessary to confine the remarks about religion to the Hindû religion, for although sporadic attempts have been made to tackle the religion of the Prophet, it may at once be conceded that the inspiration which is to breathe into Islam the life which has vitalized Hindûism has yet to come. But with regard to the latter it may rightly be claimed that the advent of Theosophy has given it a fresh lease of life which was fast ebbing away under the pressure of Western ideas and scientific materialism. One remembers quite vividly the time when Hindûism was associated in the minds of the “educated” classes with all that is debasing and grossly superstitious and no reference to it was possible without carrying vague horrors of meaningless practices and enthralling priestcraft. However difficult it may be for young men of the present generation to realize, it is nevertheless a fact that the very sight of a religious book in Samskrt never failed to evoke a contemptuous smile and a stinging sneer at the absurdities and superstitions it was supposed to hold within its covers; and anyone has the “crankiness” to dive into their contents was made the object of much raillery and sometimes of sincere pity for the wrong-headedness of attempting to draw wisdom from ignorance and religion from superstition. It is hardly necessary to mention the fact that this is now changed and the picture drawn above of the state of feeling of the educated classes in this country is faithful in all its details derived from personal experience. The stupendousness and rapidity of the change brings home to one’s mind the wisdom behind the movement that chose the psychological moment at which to set to work, for it is scarcely open to doubt that the T.S. is the fountain-head from which flowed the first and main stream of reverence for Hindû religion and Shâstras; although it is equally certain that other tributary streams have largely contributed to swell the volume of admiration for their religion which now surges through the heart of the majority of Hindûs. The T.S. may justly claim to be the dominant factor in the working out of the transformation which causes one ignorant of the main principles of Hindû religion and philosophy to be regarded as behind the times and not “up to date,” just in the same way as interest in them was tabooed before the Society began its operations.

It may, however, be doubted if the impetus so given has not swung the pendulum too far backwards, for the crazy enthusiasm of the so-called “revivalist” brings out the unpleasant fact that in some cases at least a blind and unquestioning admiration of everything Hindû coupled with a corresponding contempt for all that is Western has given place to the former prejudice against Hindû ideals. Perhaps this extreme move in the opposite direction is but the working out of the natural law of action and reaction and this thought gives one room for hope that the swinging backwards and forwards of public sentiment is only

preliminary to the attainment of true balance. It is nevertheless essential for us to bear in mind that there is no blight more potent than self-admiration, and that self-complacency spells ruin even more certainly than running blindly after Western ideals. All the encomiums that have been bestowed by European thinkers on the greatness of the Rshis and their love, ought to make us feel more keenly than ever the depths of our own degradation; and instead of affording food for self-congratulation and vanity, ought to spur us into redoubled efforts to make ourselves worthy of such a glorious heritage. In no department of life is this illogical slavery to the self-laudatory instinct more painfully visible than in holding up every detail of social life in India as worthy of imitation for all times and in all ages. This is a perfectly intelligible attitude when one remembers that all social usages in India have the sanction of religion, and that in this country religious and social duties are not kept in water-tight compartments as things apart, between which there is no necessary relation. In India religion formed the central sun around which all other institutions were made to revolve, deriving from it their life and energy. Indeed, social institutions were so far subordinated to the controlling centre as to be absorbed into it altogether, thus losing their separate identity; and this is the reason why they are dealt with under the heading of religion in this article. The far-seeing Rshis who gave India her religion and polity, never lost sight of the fact that the attainment of the true aim of religion depended less upon an intellectual assent to a body of crystallized doctrines than upon the manner in which the life is lived; and before their clear vision always shone out the fact that, provided life is well regulated so that it ministers to the growth of the Soul, the recognition of Truth cannot be far delayed. Hence although facts about the life of the Spirit are stated in the Shâstras as clearly as it is possible to do so in words, belief in any detail is never insisted upon, for the human mind, at a particular stage of evolution, may not be able to grasp that aspect of Truth which is presented, and words can at best attempt to convey only one solitary aspect at a time. It is for this reason that Hindûism stands today among all the religions of the world as the most liberal in the range and variety of its beliefs, and men of all shades of opinion from a fetish-worshiper to an atheist find shelter in its broad bosom so long as they observe the rules of conduct upon which Hindû society is based. These rules were framed by mighty Seers resplendent with Inner Illumination, with a view to helping on the spiritual evolution of the race; and it is a wise instinct that has made the Hindû so conservative. Accustomed to be guided by Sages whose eyes saw clearly the goal of the path on which the feet were set, he is naturally reluctant to follow a less certain guidance. And yet there is plenty of evidence in the Shâstras to show that the Hindû in periods of virility and vitality was not slow to adapt himself to altered conditions when a change was dictated by one who had the wisdom to command his confidence. Deprived of the freshness and vigour of youth, the present-day Hindû finds it easier to run in old grooves, however worn out, and unable to find amongst men of this age leaders of towering spirituality, he prefers to be guided by old landmarks, however out of date, unwilling to make up his mind to direct his steps by the fitful flash of reason instead of the polestar of true knowledge. While it is impossible not to sympathize with his spirit of devotion to ideals that have stood him in such good stead for centuries past, the plain fact has to be faced that no human institution, however perfect, can be made to serve forever a useful purpose; and that organizations devised thousands of years ago need adaptation to suit conditions of life so entirely different from those that prevailed when they were first brought into being. It is hard, very hard, to depart from the customs and institutions framed by the holy hands of Seers, and yet such a step has to be taken, however slowly and cautiously it may be, if utter destruction is to be prevented. For we cannot hope to escape the universal law of the organic world, in which *crystallization means death and assimilation implies life*.

The only chance of a continued existence for our body-politic lies in its being able to assimilate all that is best and most helpful in the vigorous organizations of the West, discarding everything that is lifeless and a dead weight upon every pulsation of fresh life. Indeed, the more thoughtful minds of the country are fully alive to the necessity for this adaptation and deplore deeply the blind slavery to customs that are

either mere superstitious overgrowths or are so devoid of life as to be in the nature of an incubus. Nay, some of them while being in thorough sympathy with the broad principles of Theosophy, hold it, in some measure, responsible for this state of affairs. It is conceivable that Theosophy has been the indirect and unwilling instrument of contributing towards the growth of this unreasonable frame of mind, for "every action," as truly remarked by Lord Shri Krishna, "is enveloped by faults as fire by smoke;" but nothing is further from the true scope of Theosophy than the encouragement of a blind adherence to any custom or any doctrine simply because it has the sanction of age. It is true that it has taught people to hold in reverence their religion and institutions by explaining in many cases the *rationale* of a number of customs the meanings of which they failed to grasp; but it has never encouraged the belief that every detail of Hindû religious customs and dogmas is above criticism. It is of the essence of Theosophic teaching that while all religions give expression, more or less perfect, to Truth, *none* of them is identical with Truth itself, to know which one ought to be able to discriminate between the shell and the kernel, the real life and the mere outer form, in one's own religion as much as in that of others. The form must, in view of the never-ceasing change of environments, need adaptation and even elimination. In order to give a concrete illustration, it is perhaps enough to mention the much-abused and much-misunderstood institution of the *Sati*.

To discuss the full import and real significance of this mysterious institution, or, indeed, any other Hindû institution, is beyond the scope of this paper; but in order to bring out the full force of the illustration it is necessary to state that the very possibility of *Sati*, presumed the existence of a spiritual relationship that is well-nigh beyond the conception of the matter-of-fact man whose range of vision never goes beyond what may be cognized by the physical senses. But in days when an attempt was made to base human institutions on spiritual foundations, when human relationship was intended to reflect in some measure relationship in words which mortal eyes may not penetrate, marriage was not merely a physical tie based upon social convenience but a union of souls - a bond which no outer change might snap, and the binding-force of which sank even deeper than the Soul-plane, so that the wife had a place by the side of her lord for ever and ever even as *Shakti* is eternally united to *Shiva*. The union on all planes of existence being absolute, the death of even the physical body of her lord produced so great a strain on higher and more spiritual planes as to cause an outburst of a spiritual energy which flared out in sacred flames devouring the body but rendering once more the disturbed harmony complete and blissful. In some rare instances, as in the case of *Savitri*, this spiritual fire produced the opposite effect of restoring to life the body of the husband. Hence it is that even the spot where a *Sati* is supposed to have taken place is regarded as sacred for ever afterwards - a place from which mankind in all ages may derive spiritual peace and strength.

The perfectly natural, almost involuntary, process produced a lasting impression upon the minds of succeeding generations of womanhood, and in course of time cases began to arise in which the wife not having the spiritual elevation to attain the destiny of a true *Sati*, wished to imitate that glorious consummation by following her dead husband to the funeral pyre. Impossible as we may find it to appreciate or even understand this solemn tragedy, who can help admiring the deathless devotion that arms a frail mortal with courage to face death cheerfully in order to join her lord. Still it was a distinct step downwards, and later on, when people thought it their duty to force women against their will to consign their bodies to the funeral flames in order to satisfy a sense of vanity, the bottom of depravity was reached and the institution so sacred, so natural and so beneficent, became the prolific source of inhuman cruelty and shameless superstition. It is evidently futile to hug to one's bosom institutions from which life has completely departed and which can only hamper us in our move onwards in an age where even a mention of their true significance sounds like a fairy-tale. And although it may rend our hearts in

twain, the inevitable will have to be faced and we shall have to part company with our corpses. But let that be done only in the fullness of time and then with that devout reverence which is due to the memory of a great and revered ancestor, praying silently that out of its very disintegration may flow inspiration and blessing for fresh efforts towards building up institutions suited to the spirit of the times. It is a sad, pathetic note to strike; but who knows that the country which has produced so many Spiritual Giants in the past may not give birth to another to bring Life into new frames. Let us, however, show in our efforts and our conduct that it is Life we crave for and not mere outer form, and that we are ready to welcome Life in whatever garb it is found. Theosophy has helped a number of people to realise this truth and its power for uplifting depends upon its constantly attempting to direct the gaze to the Reality instead of the passing phantoms which once shadowed it forth.

It is an easy transition to pass from a consideration of the aspect of Theosophy dealt with above, its aspect towards religion, to that of its influence on the spiritual aspirations of the people; for its function in both cases remains the same - that of directing attention to the substance as distinguished from the shadow. Theosophy never claimed to bring to India any spiritual message that was novel or startling in its character, or such as had not already been given to it by its Spiritual Teachers; but the task which it set before itself and accomplished with remarkable success was that of rejuvenating the old teachings and reviving interest in them by infusing new life into what had practically been reduced to the condition of dry bones. Its function was to bring to a focus all the different views of spiritual life and the means of attaining it, to effect a proper co-ordination between them, and to bring into prominence the ideal calculated to prove most helpful - a veritable lighthouse to warn and guide souls on the storm-tossed ocean of conditioned existence. In a country where attention has been directed to spiritual culture from time immemorial, it is but natural that there should be floating about in its mental atmosphere numerous theories as to the nature and means of spiritual growth - some sane and replete with inspiration, others wildly fantastic and fraught with the gravest danger, but all having the ostensible object of leading one to spiritual illumination. Amongst this perfect maze of speculations the unsophisticated seeker after Light lost his way so completely as almost to doubt the existence of the Path. Some fresh impulse was therefore necessary to revive the drooping spirits and inspire him with faith in the ultimate success of the search and the glorious nature of his mission, by affording some clue that would bring him into closer touch with real life and help him in discriminating the true from the false. And numberless are the people who would testify to the fact that Theosophy has supplied this need, both in their own lives as also in the lives of hosts of their friends and personal acquaintances. It would, however, be unfair to omit the mention here of a charge that is frequently brought by some of the most spiritually-minded Hindûs that, while Theosophy has unquestionably brought light and comfort to many a bewildered soul, it has, at the same time, disturbed the serenity of the spiritual atmosphere by diverting too much attention to what may be termed the theatrical element of spiritual culture. Belief in the divinity of the human soul and its capacity to manifest powers that would be deemed miraculous owing to the limitations under which it ordinarily labours in this age of materialism, has always been almost universal in India; but such powers have always been regarded as symptomatic of spiritual growth - as certain results incidental to the Glory of the Spirit shining through the sheaths more resplendently, but not as objects that could in themselves form an end to aspire and work for. These powers are constantly used, unknown and unseen, for the service of mankind to which the lives of saints, who have the inner illumination, are devoted; but they are never paraded or sought after by any true aspirant so as to be able "to strut, look big and talk away." Indeed, phenomenalism has always been regarded as a source of great danger to the Pilgrim of the Path, as dabbling in it often leads to the Vāma-mārga (Left-hand Path) and not to the goal that is the centre of Beneficence and Peace. It is contended that, whatever justification there might have been in the past for the production of "phenomena," so as to rivet public attention and obtain a hearing, the necessity for attempting to keep alive an interest in that aspect of spiritual life no longer exists. And when it is

remembered that, from the very nature of the obscurity in which the whole region of phenomenalism is involved, one genuine phenomenon is imitated by a thousand spurious ones, and that one true experience is parodied by myriads of questionable ones, it becomes evident that an indiscriminate encouragement of sensationalism is by no means the surest way of carrying conviction as to the reality of the spiritual life. And from the standpoint of scientific investigation nothing can be more pernicious than that the Indian mind naturally contemplative, imaginative, and untrained to the methods of accurate observation, strict scrutiny and careful generalisation, should be called upon to deal with vague details as to superphysical worlds incapable of verification and useless - even positively harmful - as factors towards the development of that side of human nature which alone makes those worlds a reality. Whatever be the value in the West of these sterile statements as to "psychic experiences" - and some of the most earnest European workers in the Theosophical field are gravely apprehensive of their consequences even there - it is hardly open to question that they go against the whole trend of truly spiritual thought in India where no method of knowing facts of the transcendental world that does not bring about personal experience as a result of inner growth is recognised as valid; and where even teachings about spiritual life beyond a certain point are considered superfluities tending to confusion and not to illumination, which can only be reached by leading the higher life. But while recognizing that there is some basis for the charge mentioned above, it is necessary to point out that true Theosophy has no more to do with the growth of "psychism" than with the revival of superstition; and that both theoretically and practically it has ever striven to show that only by earnest devotion to higher ideals and arduous work for the helping of mankind can one come nearer to the Path that leads to Glory. The whole body of its responsible teachings and the numerous centres of its work and usefulness bring out unmistakably the lines on which a seeker after the Truth has to work. Alike by example and by precept the leaders of the movement have taught that no quack nostrum or charlatanic alchemy can transmute the base metal of the passions and weaknesses of human nature into the shining gold of purity and saintliness, and that until the soul has attained a purity and peace like that of the eternal snows that crown the mighty Himavat, it may not bask in the sunshine of the Divine Presence. Tirelessly and ceaselessly have they preached that there is no short cut to the Throne of God and that it is only by a life of constant struggle, profuse bleeding of the heart, and unwavering devotion to the "dim star that burns within," that one may hope some day to be face to face with the Majesty of the Spirit.