

THE CIVILIZATION OF INDIA
ACCORDING TO ARNOLD TOYNBEE

India has furnished the work of the English historian with a relatively large number of its elements. Without a doubt there is in this domain no material comparable in density and in erudite development to the excursus on the Achaemenian Empire which fills pages 580–689 of Volume VII of *A Study of History*.¹ But there are enough passages, both long and short, to enable the reader fully to discern the author's reaction to this civilization. Where, indeed, would he have found so many motivated changes, so many external stimuli and internal absorptions, coupled with such continuity in time and in human habitation, to illustrate the general theses of his work?

It is true that it would be vain to attempt to restore a continuous history by piecing together the *membra disjecta* which the ensemble of these passages constitutes. The stable periods, the monarchy of the Mauryas, the Kushan, or that of the Guptas, particularly the irrational fragmentation of the regional dynasties of the middle age, are not directly described. What interests the author are the transitions, the points of rupture and their causes, and also the ideological foundation of the civilizations.

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

1. The references in this article are all to this same work, cited by volumes (I to X) and pages.

Toynbee's knowledge of India could hardly be first hand. It is not a question of relying upon epigraphical sources, upon annals which Orientalists themselves find it difficult to interpret. In the first volumes, at least, the author's guiding principle is Vincent Smith's classical treatise. For religious matters he supplements this with the well-known work of Charles Eliot, and, for matters which fascinate him in particular, with Tarn's *Greeks in Bactria* and a few other monographs. This documentation is to some extent quite old but nonetheless solid in its general outlines. And since this is less a matter of taking sides over controversial details than of stressing certain tendencies, there is no great harm in making an occasional error as to the date of the advent of Chandragupta or in the chronology of Kanishka, which is at best a moot point.

Moreover, nowhere does Toynbee give the impression of having reproduced generalizations to be found in textbooks. Obviously he has profoundly reconsidered the problems from the standpoint of his governing ideas, and the student of India will find it profitable to read him attentively, even if he knows more about India than does Toynbee.

One point (it represents only a detail of the whole) in which one plainly perceives the personal position through a secondary documentation is the author's treatment of the Indo-European languages in their early stages (VI, 75 and cf. V, 498, 604, IX, 78). The striking fact in Indian linguistics is the obliteration, real or apparent, of Sanskrit in favor of the middle-Indian dialects issued from it; then, in turn, the obliteration of these dialects in favor of the revival of the old sacred language: "Sanskrit, like Saturnalia, devoured its children" (IX, 79). Basing his views on those of R. O. Franke, the author estimates that spoken Sanskrit disappeared as early as before the birth of Buddha, say in the sixth century, B.C., and that it was revived again as a quasi-archaic language around the time of the death of Emperor Asaka (226 B.C.), perhaps even before (VI, 75, note). These premature deaths, these revivals in an apparently continuous historical pattern, are the familiar themes of the *Study of History*: linguistic indications, however imperfect they might be, confirm historical ones which in turn buttress them. In this way the author is led to speak of a "neo-Sanskrit," which he compares to the neo-Attic, the quasi-archaic resurgence of ancient Attic. However, we are not reduced to such extreme measures; these theses, which bring to mind a little too clearly, for some tastes, the idea of a "Brahman renaissance," cherished by Max Müller in earlier days, no longer seem to us so necessary. Yet there remains, unquestionably, a basis of truth, even if we hesitate to accept the corollary that

these theses imply, in regard to the origins of the Indian Epic poem, proof of an older Sanskrit that survived like a strange obstruction quite late in the days when tenacious middle-Indian dialects already prevailed in Northern India. The author believes that the wording of the great epic poems blends with the linguistic usages peculiar to these two ages which recent philology, based upon the examination of an *Urtext*, seems to confirm. He also thinks he can suggest (V, 606) that these epic works assumed their final form at the court of the Sakas (the Indo-Scythians, as one used to call them), at Ujain, between 150 and 339 A.D.—an illusory precision, but one which explains the role of the initiators in the rebirth of Sanskrit letters which certain Indian scholars attributed to these Sakas, “the founders of the successor-states of the kingdom of Bactria,” to quote Toynbee. But what is the motive that might have impelled the Indians of that period to cause Sanskrit to rise from its ashes? The author hazards the answer that it was a matter of transmitting the sacred texts of Hinduism and those of The Great Vehicle, that is to say, of the only two religious forms which, in the territory of India or of eastern Asia, reached immense popular strata: Hinduism, he says in the somewhat stereotyped and formula-studded style that he created, as the “fruit of the religious experience of the internal proletariat of India”; the *Mahāyāna* as the “metamorphosis of the ancient Buddhist philosophy peculiar to the ruling minority” (V, 136).

These definitions tend to remind us that Toynbee fully realized the exceptional importance of the religious factor in the development of India (III, 384 ff.). Although he does not go so far as to believe that the saints and the philosophers caused the ruin of civilizations (VII, 99), he admits that they were the involuntary artisans of that disintegration which occurs periodically and strikes at the forms of culture. In one passage (VII, 724), where he tries to distinguish the spiritual faculties at play in each of the great religions (a hazardous undertaking, incidentally), he sees in Hinduism the flowering of the “thinking” faculty. This would constitute the legacy of “the Indian school of philosophy,” that is to say of speculative Vedism and of proto-Buddhism. But “thinking” does not signify “rationalizing”; in fact, the aim of Hinduism is to allow the conscious “to perceive its psychic antithesis, the subconscious,” or again, to “understand the subconscious, not as impersonal, but as suprapersonal.” These formulas, in any case, emphasize the undeniable fact that Indian speculation discovered the notion of the subconscious and exploited this discovery to a degree which no other philosophy, even today, seems to have surpassed (VII, 467).

Coming back to the faculties of the *homo religiosus*, the author observes the existence of two auxiliary faculties: sensation, which expressed itself in the Shivan or Vishnuian rituals, and intuition, from which *Yoga* sprang. "Sensation's" link with an introverted religiosity would explain the discord that exists between ethereal theology (that of Sankara for example, who is rashly called the "father of Indian philosophy": I, 85) and the practice of vulgar rites, as much among the esoterics as among the popular masses. Thus the author explains (VIII, 603) the orgiastic cult of the Goddess Kali as a kind of "zealotism" which is akin to certain tendencies of Islam, just as the "zealotism" of the Brahmans, anxious to avoid any pollution of caste, recalls a similar concern of the Phariseans. Hinduism is therefore made up of antinomies: antinomy between the mystical attitude (it remains to be seen whether the *Yoga* is really a mystical way) and the ritual attitude, between the diverse levels of practice and the diverse types of spiritual adhesion. Such is the syncretic, "upstart" character of a system in which the old and the new are combined (IV, 231). But truth does not merely consist in observing these antinomies and this syncretism: it resides in the fact that for the Hindu the external rite has a hidden meaning that escapes the non-Hindu critics of this religion.

In any case, the introverted tendency of its origins was not so strongly countenanced that it could not evolve into "extraversion" with Mahayanian Buddhism and Vishnuism (VIII, 724). The religious elite resigned itself to this evolution by putting itself under the protection of the *Māyā*, of generalized illusionism, which serves as a kind of alibi. The worshipful devoutness or *bhakti* that was established in Indian religions is also a mode of activist extraversion entirely foreign to the old preoccupations of Brahmanism as well as to those of Buddhism. Toynbee is bent on uncovering the causes of this. He also makes useful comments on *Mahāyāna*, not so much for the rather external analogies which lead him to seek in it the Indian counterpart of Christianity and of Mithraism (V, 136), nor when he proposes to see its first spark in "the Syriac flame which had already embraced Zoroastrianism and Judaism" (*ibid.*); but rather when he describes from within that "alchemy of love" (VII, 733) which is the essence of the Mahayanian mutation, or when he states that, inversely to the Christian evolution, The Great Vehicle offers us the transformation of a philosophy into a "proletarian religion" (VII, 426). The author is less prudent but nevertheless plausible when he defines the tantrism of *Mahāyāna* as an attempt to provide the "zealots" of India, in whose eyes the "Catholic" form of the *Mahāyāna* was vitiated by the Hellenic impregnation (VII, 426), with a de-Hellenized version.

Let us go back to Hinduism. Not without reason, Toynbee believes that, despite fluctuations, its dominant note was metaphysical indifference (VI, 146). An indication of this is that famous lesson Krishna gave to the hero Arjuna in the beginning of the *Bhagavadgita*. In this lesson the god effects “an intellectual liquidation of the moral scruples of Arjuna,” who is hesitant to wage war (VII, 727). It is true, Toynbee adds, that this indifference could have served as a shock, like certain paradoxes in the Gospel, or, we might say, certain whims of the Zen masters. The same dominant idea reappears in the theme of the cosmic dance of the god Shiva.

In short, despite the deficiencies or the excesses that any unilateral examination of Hinduism reveals, the author does not hesitate to place it in the first rank of all religions (VII, 735), because the spontaneous inclination of the Hindus toward all revelations—past, present, and future—seems to him to answer a primordial need of our age when humanity constitutes, so to speak, a single vast society. This is a homage whose value will be appreciated by the Orientalists. It will make them forget other formulas—born of a unilateral vision—in which Hinduism is presented as a “quasi-archaic resurrection of the primitive paganism of the Aryas,” or as “a mimesis of Buddhist philosophy” (V, 138). Establishing a parallelism between religion and society, the author sees Hinduism as having sprung from what he calls the agony of a civilization on the road to disintegration, “because of the poignant spiritual experience of its internal proletariat” (*ibid.*). These formulas must naturally be understood in terms of historical verdicts which we will take up again later.

We must also note the passages (II, 75) in which Toynbee affirms, not without reason, the importance of the south of the peninsula in the development of certain constitutive elements of religiosity—worship in the temple, the *bhakti*, the Sankarian theology, the manufacture of images and the adoration of them. Elsewhere, however (I, 87), he presupposes some borrowing from the Greeks through the intermediary of the *Mahāyāna*. The reason for the importance of the south seems to lie in the relative “newness” of the Dravidian lands, which were integrated into the common Indian civilization only quite recently.

Caste is an element that cannot be disassociated from religion in India. Toynbee refers more than once to the caste problem. In his opinion castes were created by the eruption of nomad Aryas into the domain of the ancient civilization of the Indus. If this, as a matter of fact, should not account for castes in the classical sense of the term, it at least explains the great social cleavages within which the castes were distributed. Racial segregation prevailed in the beginning. Very early it evolved into a

religious and corporative compartmentalization, juridically justified by the fiction of mixed marriages. As for the obliteration of "color" (which the old Sanskrit for caste, *varna*, implies) it would be due to that persistent Hindu policy which consists in admitting as Brahmans and as "nobles" the high-ranking families of assimilated peoples (I, 243; 228, notes). The system did not function, however, without encountering opposition. It emanated not, as one might expect, from the depressed classes, but from religious reformers, from Buddha to Kabir to Ram Mohan Ray (IV, 231). As for the external correlations of the Indian caste system, facts abound and Toynbee has not failed to point them out; there is scarcely any organized society where the caste system is totally absent.

It is time to consider the history itself, following fairly closely the great chronological stages which the presentation of the work has placed in a disconnected order.

The fratricidal wars that preceded the Maurya era (I, 87) represent, for India, the first of those "times of trouble" (V, 274) which permeate history so grievously. We are speaking of local rivalries which we suspect existed in the sixth and seventh centuries B.C., the conquest of Kosada and of Vaisali by Ajatasatru, the destruction of the city of Kapilavastu. What leads the author (VI, 75) to fix the ruin of the ancient civilization at such an early date is not so much the historical data, which after all are somewhat vague, but rather the imprint they left upon speculative movements; an attitude of withdrawal into oneself—followed by a return to society under entirely new circumstances, after an "illumination"—as displayed by Buddha, by Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, and by other Hindus of that period who were dedicated to asceticism. The author, who does not find it difficult to discover analogies outside of India—other "times of trouble"—describes from this point of view, in a few brilliant pages (III, 270), Buddha's career, or, rather, his "motive." Upon the remains of the old (Indic) society the new "Hindu" culture was constructed. It was affiliated with the preceding one—the theme of "affiliation"—and, in accordance with the normal rhythms, was at first co-extensive with the first and then spread in such a way as to spill over the Indian continent in the direction of eastern Asia. The author compares this expansion to that of the Arabs who were affiliated with the ancient Syriac society (I, 88).

The decisive element in the constitution of the new Indian culture seems, in Toynbee's opinion, to have been Greece. It is possible that he does not take the Iranian factor, which was not a simple one, sufficiently

into account. The contact of India with Greece is one of the author's favorite domains. Supported by W. Tarn, he becomes involved, on occasion, in erudite disquisitions, as, for example, when he deals with certain place names in Herodotus (VII, 650). He says, with reason, that Hellenization began in India not with the conquest of Alexandria, a brilliant episode but one with no aftermath (the Indian annals do not even recount it), but with Demetrius of Bactria, around 190 B.C. He fixes the times as long after the extinction of the last Greek principality beyond the Hindu Kush. The reason he gives is that the Eurasian nomads, the Sakas and the Parthians at the end of the second century B.C. as well as the Kushans who "abolished the Hindu Kush" (V, 140) in the first century A.D., were all philo-Hellenic barbarians. Thus the last Hellenizing wave coincided with the period of the first Guptas. As for the Kushans, whose historical function he evokes on several occasions in favorable terms, he demonstrates, naturally, the exceptional importance of the central Asian routes as avenues for armed invasions as well as lines of penetration for Buddhist missionaries going toward China (II, 408, note; III, 131; VII, 102). It was during the Kushan regime that the basin of the Oxus and of the Jaxartes ceased to be a "step between civilization and barbarism" and became a corridor that served as a line of communication for cultures (II, 373), the converging point of routes that emanated from the Indian, Syriac, Greek, and Chinese worlds (V, 140).

It is precisely this modified Hellenic art, developed in Gandhara at about the time of the beginning of our era, that has been the beneficiary of that admixture. Toynbee considers this Greco-Buddhist art to be one of the great triumphs of human art. But the fertilizing element, in his opinion, was not so much directly Greek as Indian, enriched by the Hellenistic technique and refashioned in an autonomous manner. Besides, the Greece that knew India at this time was itself in a state of "disintegration": an indication either of its coming downfall or of its transformation into a component of universal empire. On the Indian side, the attempts made to convert the Greek world (Toynbee fixes the first attempt as early as the embassies of Asoka [V, 131], which is a rather vague indication) were no more successful. Here again the "response" to the "challenge" that came from Greece was not a religious or philosophical counteroffensive in the direction of the West, but, in accordance with well-known tendencies, a thrust toward eastern Asia, that of Buddhism transformed.

The Gupta age, that golden age before the storm ("Indian summer") (IV, 66), is loosely fixed between 350 and 480. It is a new empire, one

supported by the Universal Church (I, 85) but possessing little stability after all, perhaps because emerging feudality undermined the central power. Nevertheless it was once again from the outside that the danger came. A migration of peoples fills the following years, from 475 to 775: that of the White Huns (Ephthalites) and of the Gurjaras with their series of precarious "successor-states." Here Toynbee returns to his thesis of "rupture": the religious and linguistic situation indicates, he believes, that the prior regime was dissolved. A new nobility is created, that of the Rajputs, which he, like Vincent Smith, regards as the descendants of barbaric invaders (I, 85, note).

This migration recalls that of the prehistoric nomads, but, contrary to what happened to them, it did not result in the foundation of an "affiliated" civilization because the conditions were not favorable at that time. Apropos of this the author delves into historical geography; he calls attention to the role of the Jumna before the junction of the Ganges, which seems to him to have been a permanent obstacle to invasion. He observes that the capitals of that era were all either on the Doab or close to it: Sthanesvara of Emperor Harsha (606-647), covering the approaches of Panjab, Kanauj of the Rajputs Pratihara on the western banks of the Ganges, and finally, for a long time, Delhi, at the edge of territory that was purely Hindu and of regions inhabited by peoples of mixed origins as a consequence of external thrusts (II, 130). Toynbee stresses (II, 128; V, 305) the eminent role of Panjab as a border-state offering resistance to threats from the Northwest; he has no difficulty retracing what this threat has meant for India since prehistoric times (V, 306): many countries have a vulnerable frontier which also serves as a means of access and as a source of profitable markets. Going on to more modern eras, Toynbee evaluates the reasons for the superiority of Calcutta, which succeeded Delhi just as Nanking succeeded Peking. This superiority could not be consolidated, he says, because Bengal had responded feebly to the "stimulus" of contact with western culture (one might say a good deal about this point). In the souls of the Bengalese, the ferment of westernization degenerated into a "leaven of scribes" (II, 133). It is therefore Delhi, in the last analysis, which triumphed after 1912 (as did Peking) at least on the administrative and centralizing levels, while on the economic level Bombay and its hinterland largely succeeded, despite certain handicaps, in supplanting Calcutta. This transfer was also due to external pressures, those emanating from the sea (since the time of the Arabs and the Persis), as well as those springing from the land (since the time of the Gurjaras and the Arabs). This illustrates the

point that the “stimulus” is all the stronger when the pressure is greater.

Be that as it may, the invasions at the end of the first millennium resulted in the rallying of Huns and Gurjaras to Hinduistic obedience, to the social order of the Sastras. It has not been the same for subsequent pressures, which have perpetuated an irreducible schism. This was again a “time of troubles” (V, 304), the most recent being that which threatens us today and whose evils India shares with the rest of the world. The initial invasion was that of people who had themselves been invaded by a neighboring society—the eruption of the Turks of Mahmud, related to the Saljūqs who were conquered in Anatolia in 1037. These Turks were followed by other barbarians who came from closer by, from the Iranian plateau. Crossing the crucial barrier of the Jumna (II, 130; IV, 99) in the twelfth century, they brought with them the Islamic faith. The great breakthrough occurred with the Ghuri, a people from the outskirts of Herat. Then came the King-Slaves and the Taghlaqs of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Eurasians again, and finally the Afghan Lodi, neighbors of the ancient Ghuri (VII, 301). Toynbee discerns in the breakthrough of 1191 the decisive development, achieved only at the price of fratricidal wars waged by the Rajputs in the provinces that correspond to what today we call the United Provinces. The destruction of a society is, at least in part, a suicide: were not the first invasions easily repelled, although the Arabs were stronger than the Turks were later to become? They were repelled because Hindu society around 800, “still in its infancy,” possessed internal cohesion and the will to defend itself. Toynbee describes the career of Tamerlane, the folly that seized the conqueror when, during the last years of the fourteenth century, he attacked his own compatriots and coreligionists (IV, 495). On the subject of Baber, he further observes the extent to which these invaders were nostalgic for their native Ferghana, just as the Anglo-Indian functionaries of the nineteenth century must have been nostalgic for their faraway land. Evidence of this is to be found in the part of Baber’s memoirs that pertain to India. On the contrary, the Mogul law of Akbar the Timurid, grandson of Baber, was that of a man who had accepted the two cultures, who was an example of “co-existence.” At the same time, thanks to the benefactions of his universal empire (1556–1602), the Eurasian invasions came to an end. The first two beats of the Hindu rhythm (“defeat and rally”) had been sounded (VI, 301).

In regard to recent epochs, Toynbee was naturally interested in the British period and in the psychology of the occupant. He judges this reign with remarkable serenity, taking note of the obvious service rendered

India during the brief century of the *pax britannica* (IV, 70). But he remarks, on the other hand, that the British Rāj is an example of a foreign policy imposed by means of conquest, with all the consequences that this entails (IV, 96). To be sure, this Rāj (to use the author's own expression) was heir to the Mogul law on the administrative and financial levels, but on the political level it inherited the succession not of the *pax mogulica* but of the post-Mogul anarchy, which made the eighteenth century as somber a period for India as the third century must have been for the Roman Empire. The British were foreigners, of course, but this is true of the Moguls themselves and of so many other invaders since the prehistoric ages. The truth is that the India of the nineteenth century knew a stability and enjoyed an efficiency which it had never previously attained, even during intervals of external domination. It was thanks to the British Rāj, the author says, that India's entry into the concert of western nations took place under favorable circumstances, being spared the suffering that the Greeks, Turks, and Chinese experienced when they were split up in the wake of westernization.

Toynbee therefore rejects the idea that England was responsible for the destruction of Hindu society. (If there had been no Englishmen, he remarks, India would have accused "the unspeakable Turk," just as the modern Greek accuses him: IV, 98.) He notes that the protesters across the channel make no effort to draw closer to the "natives" (I, 212 offers some clever remarks on the connotations of the word "native" in the West; I, 153); that they accepted caste as an invention devised for the convenience of the occupier. He gives several reasons for the isolation of the Civil Service: the integrity of the administration, the innate pride of the English, the growing development of communications with the metropolis. To these reasons he is inclined to add one more: a mild attack of caste prejudice. He demonstrates excellently how the Englishman of long ago, the Joe Sedley of Thackeray or Clive the ruffian, was transformed into an evangelistic soldier, into a heroic administrator of the kind typified by John Lawrence or John Nicholson (II, 249). This modern society in which the universal state was imposed by a foreign authority reminds the author of the Orthodox Christianity of the Ottoman Empire (VIII, 198).

For the contemporary period the author cannot avoid examining the "case of Gandhi." The essence of Gandhism is repudiation of the western technique and of the spirit that it represents. This is what the symbol of *khaddar* represents, the handwoven cloth made of threads of homespun cotton, grown on Indian soil (III, 190). It is much less, or not at all, the

reject of cultural values (as one says in modern jargon) of the West. Even reduced to these terms, the lesson of Gandhi has scarcely been followed (III, 202) by the very people who pretend to speak in his name. What has been accepted is the westernized part of the message, the propaganda in favor of transforming India into a sovereign parliamentary state. This explains why the staunchest supporters of Gandhi were industrialists who adapted English methods to the conditions that prevailed in India. Gandhi could see their chimneys from his residence at Sabarmati. Furthermore, did he not seek his arguments in the holy texts of the western world rather than in those of his country?

One must also cite what Toynbee says about the religious or political movements which fashioned contemporary India: the Brahmosomaj and its "Herodian" aspect (V, 106; VIII, 605); the Arya Samaj which he compares to neo-Shintoism (VI, 94); the agrarian problem seen in the perspective of Soviet expansion (VIII, 684); the Moslem problem and the creation of Pakistan, more precisely the psychological circumstances that prevailed at the time of this creation (VII, 690). As for eras of the past, let us mention once more, among other developments, the pages on Indian colonization in Ceylon (II, 5) or on Nestorianism in India (VII, 105 ff.).

Will these views give Orientalists unmixed satisfaction? It is hardly probable. We have indicated here and there some points that lend themselves to discussion; there are many others. A prudent dosage exists—timorous if you will—in the degrees of probability to which only a long familiarity with the texts can attain, that "vision" of what lies within that nothing can replace; many people have an excessive fear of generalizations. What Toynbee contributes is a kind of external truth, by no means a commonplace or superficial one, however, and often a very penetrating one; yet nonetheless external, a comparative truth, one might say. Facts, relationships between facts, the rhythms to which the specialist does not of his own accord pay heed evoke in Toynbee those "friendly similarities" of which the poet speaks, echoes emanating from other cultures and other eras. When the author does not speak of India, what he has to say can be just as important to historians—often more so—than those passages that are inspired specifically by Indian realities. One could cite a large number of examples. Let us confine ourselves to what he says about classicism (IX, 705), about the sacred writings and their epic substitutes (VII, 749), about archaism in the religious domain (VI, 83), about the two opposing tendencies of "zealotism" and of "Herodianism," some of whose

The Civilization of India According to Arnold Toynbee

applications we have mentioned (VIII, 580). There is little reading more fruitful for the mind.

Decidedly there is much more in this work than a repertory of striking formulas, of happy images scattered throughout with a kind of genial ease. There is, indisputably, an awakening to new problems, a leaven of ingenious perspectives, an entire moving world of hypotheses and data which will bring to the reader, whether or not he seeks it, the feeling that he has before his eyes a rejuvenated, enriched representation of history and of human culture.