

On Original Thinking

The attitude of mankind towards originality of opinion is marked by a natural hesitation and inconsistency. Admired for its rarity, brilliancy and potency, yet in practice and for the same qualities it is more generally dreaded, ridiculed or feared. There is no doubt that it tends to disturb what is established. Therefore tamasic men and tamasic states of society take especial pains to discourage independence of opinion. Their watchword is authority. Few societies have been so tamasic, so full of inertia and contentment in increasing narrowness as Indian society in later times; few have been so eager to preserve themselves in inertia. Few therefore have attached so great an importance to authority. Every detail of our life has been fixed for us by Shastra and custom, every detail of our thought by Scripture and its commentators, — but much oftener by the commentators than by Scripture. Only in one field, that of individual spiritual experience, have we cherished the ancient freedom and originality out of which our past greatness sprang; it is from some new movement in this inexhaustible source that every fresh impulse and rejuvenated strength has arisen. Otherwise we should long ago have been in the grave where dead nations lie, with Greece and Rome of the Caesars, with Esarhaddon and the Chosroes. You will often hear it said that it was the forms of Hinduism which have given us so much national vitality. I think rather it was its spirit. I am inclined to give more credit for the secular miracle of our national survival to Shankara, Ramanuja, Nanak & Kabir, Guru Govind, Chaitanya, Ramdas & Tukaram than to Raghunandan and the Pandits of Nadiya & Bhatpara.

The result of this well-meaning bondage has been an increasing impoverishment of the Indian intellect, once the most gigantic and original in the world. Hence a certain incapacity, atrophy, impotence have marked our later activities even

at their best. The most striking instance is our continued helplessness in the face of the new conditions and new knowledge imposed on us by recent European contact. We have tried to assimilate, we have tried to reject, we have tried to select; but we have not been able to do any of these things successfully. Successful assimilation depends on mastery; but we have not mastered European conditions and knowledge, rather we have been seized, subjected and enslaved by them. Successful rejection is possible only if we have intelligent possession of that which we wish to keep. Our rejection too must be an intelligent rejection; we must reject because we have understood, not because we have failed to understand. But our Hinduism, our old culture are precisely the possessions we have cherished with the least intelligence; throughout the whole range of our life we do things without knowing why we do them, we believe things without knowing why we believe them, we assert things without knowing what right we have to assert them, — or, at most, it is because some book or some Brahmin enjoins it, because Shankara thinks it, or because someone has so interpreted something that he asserts to be a fundamental Scripture of our religion. Nothing is our own, nothing native to our intelligence, all is derived. As little have we understood the new knowledge; we have only understood what the Europeans want us to think about themselves and their modern civilisation. Our English culture — if culture it can be called — has increased tenfold the evil of our dependence instead of remedying it.

More even than the other two processes successful selection requires the independent play of intellect. If we merely receive new ideas and institutions in the light in which they are presented to us, we shall, instead of selecting, imitate — blindly, foolishly and inappropriately. If we receive them in the light given by our previous knowledge, which was on so many points nil, we shall as blindly and foolishly reject. Selection demands that we should see things not as the foreigner sees them or as the orthodox Pandit sees them, but as they are in themselves. But we have selected at random, we have rejected at random, we

have not known how to assimilate or choose. In the upshot we have merely suffered the European impact, overborne at points, crassly resisting at others, and, altogether, miserable, enslaved by our environments, able neither to perish nor to survive. We preserve indeed a certain ingenuity and subtlety; we can imitate with an appearance of brightness; we can play plausibly, even brilliantly with the minutiae of a subject; but we fail to think usefully, we fail to master the life and heart of things. Yet it is only by mastering the life and heart of things that we can hope, as a nation, to survive.

How shall we recover our lost intellectual freedom and elasticity? By reversing, for a time at least, the process by which we lost it, by liberating our minds in all subjects from the thralldom to authority. That is not what reformers and the Anglicised require of us. They ask us, indeed, to abandon authority, to revolt against custom and superstition, to have free and enlightened minds. But they mean by these sounding recommendations that we should renounce the authority of Sayana for the authority of Max Muller, the Monism of Shankara for the Monism of Haeckel, the written Shastra for the unwritten law of European social opinion, the dogmatism of Brahmin Pandits for the dogmatism of European scientists, thinkers and scholars. Such a foolish exchange of servitude can receive the assent of no self-respecting mind. Let us break our chains, venerable as they are, but let it be in order to be free, — in the name of truth, not in the name of Europe. It would be a poor bargain to exchange our old Indian illuminations, however dark they may have grown to us, for a derivative European enlightenment or replace the superstitions of popular Hinduism by the superstitions of materialistic Science.

Our first necessity, if India is to survive and do her appointed work in the world, is that the youth of India should learn to think, — to think on all subjects, to think independently, fruitfully, going to the heart of things, not stopped by their surface, free of prejudgments, shearing sophism and prejudice asunder as with a sharp sword, smiting down obscurantism of all kinds as with the mace of Bhima. Let our brains no longer, like European

infants, be swathed with swaddling clothes; let them recover the free and unbound motion of the gods; let them have not only the minuteness but the wide mastery and sovereignty natural to the intellect of Bharata and easily recoverable by it if it once accustoms itself to feel its own power and be convinced of its own worth. If it cannot entirely shake off past shackles, let it at least arise like the infant Krishna bound to the wain, and move forward dragging with it wain and all and shattering in its progress the twin trees, the twin obstacles to self-fulfilment, blind mediaeval prejudice and arrogant modern dogmatism. The old fixed foundations have been broken up, we are tossing in the waters of a great upheaval and change. It is no use clinging to the old ice-floes of the past, they will soon melt and leave their refugees struggling in perilous waters. It is no use landing ourselves in the infirm bog, neither sea nor good dry land, of a secondhand Europeanism. We shall only die there a miserable and unclean death. No, we must learn to swim and use that power to reach the good vessel of unchanging truth; we must land again on the eternal rock of ages.

Let us not, either, select at random, make a nameless hotch-potch and then triumphantly call it the assimilation of East and West. We must begin by accepting nothing on trust from any source whatsoever, by questioning everything and forming our own conclusions. We need not fear that we shall by that process cease to be Indians or fall into the danger of abandoning Hinduism. India can never cease to be India or Hinduism to be Hinduism, if we really think for ourselves. It is only if we allow Europe to think for us that India is in danger of becoming an ill-executed and foolish copy of Europe. We must not begin by becoming partisans but know before we take our line. Our first business as original thinkers will be to accept nothing, to question everything. That means to get rid of all unexamined opinions old or new, all mere habitual sanskaras in the mind, to have no preconceived judgments. Anityah sarvasanskarah, said the Buddha. I do not know that I quite agree. There are certain sanskaras that seem to me as eternal as things can be. What is the Atman itself but an eternal and fundamental way of

looking at things, the essentiality of all being in itself unknowable, *neti, neti*. Therefore the later Buddhists declared that the Atman itself did not exist and arrived at ultimate nothingness, a barren and foolish conclusion, since Nothingness itself is only a *sanskara*. Nevertheless it is certain that the great mass of our habitual conceptions are not only temporary, but imperfect and misleading. We must escape from these imperfections and take our stand on that which is true and lasting. But in order to find out what in our conceptions is true and lasting, we must question all alike rigorously and impartially. The necessity of such a process not for India, but for all humanity has been recognised by leading European thinkers. It was what Carlyle meant when he spoke of swallowing all formulas. It was the process by which Goethe helped to reinvigorate European thinking. But in Europe the stream is running dry before it has reached its sea. Europe has for some time ceased to produce original thinkers, though it still produces original mechanicians. Science preserves her freedom of inquiry in details, in the mint and anise and cummin of the world's processes, but, bound hand & foot in the formulas of the past, she is growing helpless for great ideas and sound generalisations. She sits contented with her treasuries; she has combed all the pebbles on the seashore and examined the shoreward gulfs and bays; of the oceans beyond and their undiscovered continents she cries scornfully "They are a dream; there is nothing there but mists mistaken for land or a waste of the same waters that we have already here examined." Europe is becoming stereotyped and unprogressive; she is fruitful only of new & ever multiplying luxuries and of feverish, fiery & ineffective changes in her political and social machinery. China, Japan and the Mussulman States are sliding into a blind European imitateness. In India alone there is self-contained, dormant, the energy and the invincible spiritual individuality which can yet arise and break her own and the world's fetters.

It is true that original thinking makes for original acting, and therefore a caution is necessary. We must be careful that our thinking is not only original but thorough before we even initiate

action. To run away with an isolated original idea, or charmed with its newness and vigour, to ride it into the field of action is to make of ourselves cranks and eccentrics. This world, this society, these nations and their civilisations are not simple existences, but complex & intricate, the result of a great organic growth in many centuries, sometimes in many millenniums. We should not deal with them after snatching at a few hurried generalisations or in the gust and fury of a stiff fanaticism. We must first be sure that our new thought is wide and strong-winged enough, our thoughts large enough, our natures mighty enough to deal with those vastnesses. We must be careful, too, to comprehend what we destroy. And destroy we must not unless we have a greater and more perfect thing to put in the place even of a crumbling and mouldering antiquity. To tear down Hindu society in the spirit of the social reformers or European society in the spirit of the philosophical or unphilosophical Anarchists would be to destroy order and substitute a licentious confusion. If we carefully remember these cautions, there is no harm in original thinking even of the boldest and most merciless novelty. I may, for example, attack unsparingly the prevailing system of justice and punishment as extraordinarily senseless and evil, even if I have no new system ready-made to put in as its successor; but I must have no wish to destroy it, senseless & evil though it be, until our new system is ready. For it fills a place the vacancy of which the Spirit that uplifts & supports our human welfare, would greatly abhor. I may expose, too, the weaknesses and narrownesses of an existing form of religion, even if I have no new & better form to preach of my own, but I must not so rage against those weaknesses as to destroy all religious faith and I should remember before the end of my criticism that even a bad religion is better than no religion, — that it is wiser to worship energy in my surroundings with the African savage than to be dead to all faith and all spirituality like the drunkards of a little knowledge — for even in that animal and unintelligent worship there is a spark of the divine fire which keeps humanity living, while the cultured imperial Roman or the luxurious modern wealth-gatherer and body worshipper drags his kind into a straight

& well built road which is so broad only to lead more easily to a mighty perdition — *na ched ihavedin mahati vinashtih*. Otherwise there is no harm in spreading dissatisfaction with fetish worship or refusing praise to an ancient and cruel folly. We need not be troubled if our thinking is condemned as too radical or even as reckless & revolutionary, — for the success of revolutionary thought always means that Nature has need of one of her cataclysms; even otherwise, she will make of it whatever modified use is best for our present humanity. In thought as in deeds, to the thinking we have a right, the result belongs to the wise & active Power of God that stands over us & in us originating, cherishing, indefatigably dissolving & remoulding man and spirit in the progressive harmonies of His universe. Let us only strive that our light should be clear, diffused & steady, not either darkness or a narrow glare and merely violent lustre. And if we cannot compass that ideal, still it is better to think than to cease from thinking. For even out of darkness the day is born and lightning has its uses!

[Draft opening of another version]

We have had recently in India a great abundance of speculations on the real causes of that gradual decline and final arrest which Indian civilisation no less than European suffered during the Middle Ages. The arrest was neither so sudden as in Europe nor so complete; but its effect on our nation, like the undermining activity of a slow poison, was all the more profoundly destructive, pervasive, hard to remedy, difficult to expel. At a certain period we entered into a decline, splendid at first like a long and gorgeous sunset, afterwards more & more sombre, till the darkness closed in, and if our sky was strewn with stars of a great number & brilliance, it was only a vast decay, confusion and inertia that they lighted and emphasised with their rays. We have, most of us, our chosen explanation of this dolorous phenomenon. The patriot attributes our decline to the ravages

of foreign invasion and the benumbing influences of foreign rule; the disciple of European materialism finds out the enemy, the evil, the fount and origin of all our ills, in our religion and its time-honoured social self-expression. Such explanations, like most human thoughts, have their bright side of truth as well as their obscure side of error; but they are not, in any case, the result of impartial thinking. Man may be, as he has been defined, a reasoning animal, but it is necessary to add that he is, for the most part, a very badly-reasoning animal. He does not ordinarily think for the sake of finding out the truth, but much more for the satisfaction of his mental preferences and emotional tendencies; his conclusions spring from his preferences, prejudices and passions; and his reasoning & logic paraded to justify them are only a specious process or a formal mask for his covert approach to an upshot previously necessitated by his heart or by his temperament. When we are awakened from our modern illusions, as we have been awakened from our mediaeval superstitions, we shall find that the intellectual conclusions of the rationalist for all their [. . .] pomp & profuse apparatus of scrupulous enquiry were as much dogmas as those former dicta of Pope & theologian, which confessed without shame their simple basis in the negation of reason. Much more do all those current opinions demand scrutiny & modification, which express our personal view of things and rest patently on a partial and partisan view or have been justified by preferential selection of the few data that suited our foregone & desired conclusion. It is always best, therefore, to scrutinise very narrowly those bare, trenchant explanations which so easily satisfy the pugnacious animal in our intellects; when we have admitted that small part of the truth on which they seize, we should always look for the large part which they have missed. Especially is it right, when there are subjective movements & causes of a considerable extent and complexity behind the phenomena we have to observe, to distrust facile, simple and rapid solutions.