

Chapter I

The Cycle of Society

MODERN Science, obsessed with the greatness of its physical discoveries and the idea of the sole existence of Matter, has long attempted to base upon physical data even its study of Soul and Mind and of those workings of Nature in man and animal in which a knowledge of psychology is as important as any of the physical sciences. Its very psychology founded itself upon physiology and the scrutiny of the brain and nervous system. It is not surprising therefore that in history and sociology attention should have been concentrated on the external data, laws, institutions, rites, customs, economic factors and developments, while the deeper psychological elements so important in the activities of a mental, emotional, ideative being like man have been very much neglected. This kind of science would explain history and social development as much as possible by economic necessity or motive, — by economy understood in its widest sense. There are even historians who deny or put aside as of a very subsidiary importance the working of the idea and the influence of the thinker in the development of human institutions. The French Revolution, it is thought, would have happened just as it did and when it did, by economic necessity, even if Rousseau and Voltaire had never written and the eighteenth-century philosophic movement in the world of thought had never worked out its bold and radical speculations.

Recently, however, the all-sufficiency of Matter to explain Mind and Soul has begun to be doubted and a movement of emancipation from the obsession of physical science has set in, although as yet it has not gone beyond a few awkward and rudimentary stumblings. Still there is the beginning of a perception that behind the economic motives and causes of social and historical development there are profound psychological, even perhaps soul factors; and in pre-war Germany, the metropolis of

rationalism and materialism but the home also, for a century and a half, of new thought and original tendencies good and bad, beneficent and disastrous, a first psychological theory of history was conceived and presented by an original intelligence. The earliest attempts in a new field are seldom entirely successful, and the German historian, originator of this theory, seized on a luminous idea, but was not able to carry it very far or probe very deep. He was still haunted by a sense of the greater importance of the economic factor, and like most European science his theory related, classified and organised phenomena much more successfully than it explained them. Nevertheless, its basic idea formulated a suggestive and illuminating truth, and it is worth while following up some of the suggestions it opens out in the light especially of Eastern thought and experience.

The theorist, Lamprecht, basing himself on European and particularly on German history, supposed that human society progresses through certain distinct psychological stages which he terms respectively symbolic, typical and conventional, individualist and subjective. This development forms, then, a sort of psychological cycle through which a nation or a civilisation is bound to proceed. Obviously, such classifications are likely to err by rigidity and to substitute a mental straight line for the coils and zigzags of Nature. The psychology of man and his societies is too complex, too synthetical of many-sided and intermixed tendencies to satisfy any such rigorous and formal analysis. Nor does this theory of a psychological cycle tell us what is the inner meaning of its successive phases or the necessity of their succession or the term and end towards which they are driving. But still to understand natural laws whether of Mind or Matter it is necessary to analyse their working into its discoverable elements, main constituents, dominant forces, though these may not actually be found anywhere in isolation. I will leave aside the Western thinker's own dealings with his idea. The suggestive names he has offered us, if we examine their intrinsic sense and value, may yet throw some light on the thickly veiled secret of our historic evolution, and this is the line on which it would be most useful to investigate.

Undoubtedly, wherever we can seize human society in what to us seems its primitive beginnings or early stages, — no matter whether the race is comparatively cultured or savage or economically advanced or backward, — we do find a strongly symbolic mentality that governs or at least pervades its thought, customs and institutions. Symbolic, but of what? We find that this social stage is always religious and actively imaginative in its religion; for symbolism and a widespread imaginative or intuitive religious feeling have a natural kinship and especially in earlier or primitive formations they have gone always together. When man begins to be predominantly intellectual, sceptical, ratiocinative he is already preparing for an individualist society and the age of symbols and the age of conventions have passed or are losing their virtue. The symbol then is of something which man feels to be present behind himself and his life and his activities, — the Divine, the Gods, the vast and deep unnameable, a hidden, living and mysterious nature of things. All his religious and social institutions, all the moments and phases of his life are to him symbols in which he seeks to express what he knows or guesses of the mystic influences that are behind his life and shape and govern or at the least intervene in its movements.

If we look at the beginnings of Indian society, the far-off Vedic age which we no longer understand, for we have lost that mentality, we see that everything is symbolic. The religious institution of sacrifice governs the whole society and all its hours and moments, and the ritual of the sacrifice is at every turn and in every detail, as even a cursory study of the Brahmanas and Upanishads ought to show us, mystically symbolic. The theory that there was nothing in the sacrifice except a propitiation of Nature-gods for the gaining of worldly prosperity and of Paradise, is a misunderstanding by a later humanity which had already become profoundly affected by an intellectual and practical bent of mind, practical even in its religion and even in its own mysticism and symbolism, and therefore could no longer enter into the ancient spirit. Not only the actual religious worship but also the social institutions of the time were penetrated through and through with the symbolic spirit. Take

the hymn of the Rig Veda which is supposed to be a marriage hymn for the union of a human couple and was certainly used as such in the later Vedic ages. Yet the whole sense of the hymn turns about the successive marriages of Suryā, daughter of the Sun, with different gods and the human marriage is quite a subordinate matter overshadowed and governed entirely by the divine and mystic figure and is spoken of in the terms of that figure. Mark, however, that the divine marriage here is not, as it would be in later ancient poetry, a decorative image or poetical ornamentation used to set off and embellish the human union; on the contrary, the human is an inferior figure and image of the divine. The distinction marks off the entire contrast between that more ancient mentality and our modern regard upon things. This symbolism influenced for a long time Indian ideas of marriage and is even now conventionally remembered though no longer understood or effective.

We may note also in passing that the Indian ideal of the relation between man and woman has always been governed by the symbolism of the relation between the Purusha and Prakriti (in the Veda Nri and Gna), the male and female divine Principles in the universe. Even, there is to some degree a practical correlation between the position of the female sex and this idea. In the earlier Vedic times when the female principle stood on a sort of equality with the male in the symbolic cult, though with a certain predominance for the latter, woman was as much the mate as the adjunct of man; in later times when the Prakriti has become subject in idea to the Purusha, the woman also depends entirely on the man, exists only for him and has hardly even a separate spiritual existence. In the Tantrik Shakta religion which puts the female principle highest, there is an attempt which could not get itself translated into social practice, — even as this Tantrik cult could never entirely shake off the subjugation of the Vedantic idea, — to elevate woman and make her an object of profound respect and even of worship.

Or let us take, for this example will serve us best, the Vedic institution of the fourfold order, *caturvarṇa*, miscalled the system of the four castes, — for caste is a conventional, *varṇa* a

symbolic and typical institution. We are told that the institution of the four orders of society was the result of an economic evolution complicated by political causes. Very possibly;¹ but the important point is that it was not so regarded and could not be so regarded by the men of that age. For while we are satisfied when we have found the practical and material causes of a social phenomenon and do not care to look farther, they cared little or only subordinately for its material factors and looked always first and foremost for its symbolic, religious or psychological significance. This appears in the Purushasukta of the Veda, where the four orders are described as having sprung from the body of the creative Deity, from his head, arms, thighs and feet. To us this is merely a poetical image and its sense is that the Brahmins were the men of knowledge, the Kshatriyas the men of power, the Vaishyas the producers and support of society, the Shudras its servants. As if that were all, as if the men of those days would have so profound a reverence for mere poetical figures like this of the body of Brahma or that other of the marriages of Suryā, would have built upon them elaborate systems of ritual and sacred ceremony, enduring institutions, great demarcations of social type and ethical discipline. We read always our own mentality into that of these ancient forefathers and it is therefore that we can find in them nothing but imaginative barbarians. To us poetry is a revel of intellect and fancy, imagination a plaything and caterer for our amusement, our entertainer, the nautch-girl of the mind. But to the men of old the poet was a seer, a revealer of hidden truths, imagination no dancing courtesan but a priestess in God's house commissioned not to spin fictions but to image difficult and hidden truths; even the metaphor or simile in the Vedic style is used with a serious purpose and expected to convey a reality, not to suggest a pleasing artifice of thought. The image was to these seers a revelative symbol of the unrevealed and it was used because it could hint luminously to the mind what the precise intellectual

¹ It is at least doubtful. The Brahmin class at first seem to have exercised all sorts of economic functions and not to have confined themselves to those of the priesthood.

word, apt only for logical or practical thought or to express the physical and the superficial, could not at all hope to manifest. To them this symbol of the Creator's body was more than an image, it expressed a divine reality. Human society was for them an attempt to express in life the cosmic Purusha who has expressed himself otherwise in the material and the supraphysical universe. Man and the cosmos are both of them symbols and expressions of the same hidden Reality.

From this symbolic attitude came the tendency to make everything in society a sacrament, religious and sacrosanct, but as yet with a large and vigorous freedom in all its forms, — a freedom which we do not find in the rigidity of “savage” communities because these have already passed out of the symbolic into the conventional stage though on a curve of degeneration instead of a curve of growth. The spiritual idea governs all; the symbolic religious forms which support it are fixed in principle; the social forms are lax, free and capable of infinite development. One thing, however, begins to progress towards a firm fixity and this is the psychological type. Thus we have first the symbolic idea of the four orders, expressing — to employ an abstractly figurative language which the Vedic thinkers would not have used nor perhaps understood, but which helps best our modern understanding — the Divine as knowledge in man, the Divine as power, the Divine as production, enjoyment and mutuality, the Divine as service, obedience and work. These divisions answer to four cosmic principles, the Wisdom that conceives the order and principle of things, the Power that sanctions, upholds and enforces it, the Harmony that creates the arrangement of its parts, the Work that carries out what the rest direct. Next, out of this idea there developed a firm but not yet rigid social order based primarily upon temperament and psychic type² with a corresponding ethical discipline and secondarily upon the social and economic function.³ But the function was determined by its suitability to the type and its helpfulness to the discipline; it was not the

² *guna*.

³ *karma*.

primary or sole factor. The first, the symbolic stage of this evolution is predominantly religious and spiritual; the other elements, psychological, ethical, economic, physical are there but subordinated to the spiritual and religious idea. The second stage, which we may call the *typal*, is predominantly psychological and ethical; all else, even the spiritual and religious, is subordinate to the psychological idea and to the ethical ideal which expresses it. Religion becomes then a mystic sanction for the ethical motive and discipline, *Dharma*; that becomes its chief social utility, and for the rest it takes a more and more other-worldly turn. The idea of the direct expression of the divine Being or cosmic Principle in man ceases to dominate or to be the leader and in the forefront; it recedes, stands in the background and finally disappears from the practice and in the end even from the theory of life.

This *typal* stage creates the great social ideals which remain impressed upon the human mind even when the stage itself is passed. The principal active contribution it leaves behind when it is dead is the idea of social honour; the honour of the Brahmin which resides in purity, in piety, in a high reverence for the things of the mind and spirit and a disinterested possession and exclusive pursuit of learning and knowledge; the honour of the Kshatriya which lives in courage, chivalry, strength, a certain proud self-restraint and self-mastery, nobility of character and the obligations of that nobility; the honour of the Vaishya which maintains itself by rectitude of dealing, mercantile fidelity, sound production, order, liberality and philanthropy; the honour of the Shudra which gives itself in obedience, subordination, faithful service, a disinterested attachment. But these more and more cease to have a living root in the clear psychological idea or to spring naturally out of the inner life of the man; they become a convention, though the most noble of conventions. In the end they remain more as a tradition in the thought and on the lips than a reality of the life.

For the *typal* passes naturally into the conventional stage. The conventional stage of human society is born when the external supports, the outward expressions of the spirit or the ideal become more important than the ideal, the body or even the

clothes more important than the person. Thus in the evolution of caste, the outward supports of the ethical fourfold order, — birth, economic function, religious ritual and sacrament, family custom, — each began to exaggerate enormously its proportions and its importance in the scheme. At first, birth does not seem to have been of the first importance in the social order, for faculty and capacity prevailed; but afterwards, as the type fixed itself, its maintenance by education and tradition became necessary and education and tradition naturally fixed themselves in a hereditary groove. Thus the son of a Brahmin came always to be looked upon conventionally as a Brahmin; birth and profession were together the double bond of the hereditary convention at the time when it was most firm and faithful to its own character. This rigidity once established, the maintenance of the ethical type passed from the first place to a secondary or even a quite tertiary importance. Once the very basis of the system, it came now to be a not indispensable crown or pendent tassel, insisted upon indeed by the thinker and the ideal code-maker but not by the actual rule of society or its practice. Once ceasing to be indispensable, it came inevitably to be dispensed with except as an ornamental fiction. Finally, even the economic basis began to disintegrate; birth, family custom and remnants, deformations, new accretions of meaningless or fanciful religious sign and ritual, the very scarecrow and caricature of the old profound symbolism, became the riveting links of the system of caste in the iron age of the old society. In the full economic period of caste the priest and the Pundit masquerade under the name of the Brahmin, the aristocrat and feudal baron under the name of the Kshatriya, the trader and money-getter under the name of the Vaishya, the half-fed labourer and economic serf under the name of the Shudra. When the economic basis also breaks down, then the unclean and diseased decrepitude of the old system has begun; it has become a name, a shell, a sham and must either be dissolved in the crucible of an individualist period of society or else fatally affect with weakness and falsehood the system of life that clings to it. That in visible fact is the last and present state of the caste system in India.

The tendency of the conventional age of society is to fix, to arrange firmly, to formalise, to erect a system of rigid grades and hierarchies, to stereotype religion, to bind education and training to a traditional and unchangeable form, to subject thought to infallible authorities, to cast a stamp of finality on what seems to it the finished life of man. The conventional period of society has its golden age when the spirit and thought that inspired its forms are confined but yet living, not yet altogether walled in, not yet stifled to death and petrified by the growing hardness of the structure in which they are cased. That golden age is often very beautiful and attractive to the distant view of posterity by its precise order, symmetry, fine social architecture, the admirable subordination of its parts to a general and noble plan. Thus at one time the modern litterateur, artist or thinker looked back often with admiration and with something like longing to the mediaeval age of Europe; he forgot in its distant appearance of poetry, nobility, spirituality the much folly, ignorance, iniquity, cruelty and oppression of those harsh ages, the suffering and revolt that simmered below these fine surfaces, the misery and squalor that was hidden behind that splendid façade. So too the Hindu orthodox idealist looks back to a perfectly regulated society devoutly obedient to the wise yoke of the Shastra, and that is his golden age, — a nobler one than the European in which the apparent gold was mostly hard burnished copper with a thin gold-leaf covering it, but still of an alloyed metal, not the true Satya Yuga. In these conventional periods of society there is much indeed that is really fine and sound and helpful to human progress, but still they are its copper age and not the true golden; they are the age when the Truth we strive to arrive at is not realised, not accomplished,⁴ but the exiguity of it eked out or its full appearance imitated by an artistic form, and what we have of the reality has begun to fossilise and is doomed to be lost in a hard mass of rule and order and convention.

For always the form prevails and the spirit recedes and

⁴ The Indian names of the golden age are Satya, the Age of the Truth, and Krita, the Age when the law of the Truth is accomplished.

diminishes. It attempts indeed to return, to revive the form, to modify it, anyhow to survive and even to make the form survive; but the time-tendency is too strong. This is visible in the history of religion; the efforts of the saints and religious reformers become progressively more scattered, brief and superficial in their actual effects, however strong and vital the impulse. We see this recession in the growing darkness and weakness of India in her last millennium; the constant effort of the most powerful spiritual personalities kept the soul of the people alive but failed to resuscitate the ancient free force and truth and vigour or permanently revivify a conventionalised and stagnating society; in a generation or two the iron grip of that conventionalism has always fallen on the new movement and annexed the names of its founders. We see it in Europe in the repeated moral tragedy of ecclesiasticism and Catholic monasticism. Then there arrives a period when the gulf between the convention and the truth becomes intolerable and the men of intellectual power arise, the great “swallowers of formulas”, who, rejecting robustly or fiercely or with the calm light of reason symbol and type and convention, strike at the walls of the prison-house and seek by the individual reason, moral sense or emotional desire the Truth that society has lost or buried in its whited sepulchres. It is then that the individualistic age of religion and thought and society is created; the Age of Protestantism has begun, the Age of Reason, the Age of Revolt, Progress, Freedom. A partial and external freedom, still betrayed by the conventional age that preceded it into the idea that the Truth can be found in outsides, dreaming vainly that perfection can be determined by machinery, but still a necessary passage to the subjective period of humanity through which man has to circle back towards the recovery of his deeper self and a new upward line or a new revolving cycle of civilisation.