

## Remembrance of Things Past

A small obscure pamphlet<sup>1</sup>, probably unknown to scholars, was published anonymously in London in 1683, towards the end of the reign of Charles II. Searching for Medieval and Restoration notions of madness, I discovered it while browsing through the rare book collection at the University of Cambridge. It was stuck to an old textbook of psychiatry, and there are no records of its origin.

The pamphlet is an imaginary Dialogue between a Brahmin (referred to as the heathen philosopher!) and a Frenchman who is Catholic. The Brahmin is portrayed as an urbane, wise character who expresses great astonishment at the religious strife in Europe.

Discussing the European and Turkish Wars, the Frenchman describes how certain Germans felt more comfortable living under the Muslim Turks, because they enjoyed greater religious freedom there, than under the Christian Emperor. The Brahmin does not find this strange, and asserts that though he lives under a Muslim King, he has *“free Egress and Regress through their Dominions, and unquestioned Liberty for the Exercise of our Religion and manner of Living. They do not endeavour to peep into our Breasts, and examine our Opinions, or punish us for not thinking as they do”*. He also points out that in European countries where it is insisted upon that all the people be of one mind and one religion, there are more *“rebellions, insurrections, plots and conspiracies”* than in others. Quite like the Balkans even now.

The Brahmin adds that there is no greater evil than for *“Men to Contend, Hate, Envy, Oppress, Fight and Destroy one another, because they are not in all particulars like himself: For Men naturally are as various in their Intellects, as in their Shapes, Forms and Complexions; for the Shape and Form of Everybody is according to the Nature, Equality or Inequality of the Spirit. The Lord had made all things to differ; there are not any two things in the four Worlds alike in all particulars; therefore, one who is offended by another, because he is not persuaded, or does not understand just as he does, is in truth offended with his Maker, who is the author of that Variety*. A more specific description of the values of diversity in thought and ‘persuasions’ can hardly be imagined.

On being questioned about idolatry, the Brahmin points out that the persecution of the Huguenots for refusal to pray to images of Saints was hardly any different. In any case, worshiping Nature and the Heavens is quite all right, since Everything flowed from the same Creator and *“he who condemns the Streams cannot truly honour the Fountain”*.

---

<sup>1</sup> The pamphlet, as the author discovered later, was written by the prolific Thomas Tryon, (1634–1703), who loved to make fun of what he perceived as the follies of contemporary society of England and Europe. The easy availability of the printing press, freedom of opinion, and ability to spoof and satire made these pamphlets popular and provide a window into social mores of the time. It can be accessed online through the University of Michigan’s Early English Books project: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A35867.0001.001>

There follow several more dialogues into the nature of Indian life. The virtue, temperance, and moderation in all things is contrasted unfavourably with the acquisitive and destructive behaviour of native Europeans. The Brahmin also chastises the Frenchman for paying greater obeisance to objects created by the hands of man (fashions) rather than those created by the hands of God and Nature. He ends by hoping for good future for his land, because the children of India are *'naturally Sober and Temperate, for they have not Tippling-Houses, nor spend their Patrimony in drinking Wine, Debauchery and Gluttony.'* Contemporary Bangalore would have disappointed the Brahmin greatly!

We are often trapped in contemporary stereotypes of the progressive and liberal West, in contrast to the chaotic, strife-ridden rest of us. And tend to forget that not too long ago, England and Europe looked to us for models of communal harmony and religious tolerance.

The initial discovery by the Portuguese Vasco da Gama of the sea route to India was followed by significant religious confusion. The overt reason that justified the sea voyages was the spread of Christianity, and much amazement was caused in Europe by the existence of Christians already in the Malabar. By this time, moreover, the 12<sup>th</sup> century rumour of Prester John, who presided over a Christian land beyond the 'Kingdom of Mussulmen', had been discarded as myth. These Indian Christians had never heard of the Pope in the Vatican, and owed allegiance to the Brown Pope. Much letter writing followed, and ultimately an uneasy acceptance of Christianity having existed in India before the advent of the Europeans was finally agreed upon. Nevertheless, it was vaguely suspected that Europe was not alone in Wisdom. In all this confusion, the Portuguese lost the initial impetus of establishing themselves in India.

The English sea-farers, and their merchants, did not have much of a religious preoccupation, and were more interested in the trade. Fanciful accounts of the riches of India began to be published, and it was feared that the trade in Indian goods would drive the whole of England into penury, since they were better, brighter and obviously of better quality. The Court in Delhi was palpably more magnificent than any in Europe, and several popular writings used this as a motif.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, trade and other contacts were sufficiently well established between the two countries to allow more elaborate comparisons to be made. England was ruled by Elizabeth, who was explicit in her tolerance. In what would, a century later, be paraphrased in the above pamphlet, she *'asserted that she was not inclined to open windows into men's souls'*. A recent book "Elizabeth I CEO", describes her as managing the most famous (and influential, at least to us in India) corporate turnaround, and converting England from a near bankrupt nation, divided by religious strife, to a rich and powerful nation by the end of her reign. One of the companies that enabled this turnaround was The East India Company, established by Royal Charter by Queen Elizabeth, at the turn of the century (1 Jan 1600). The fabulous wealth it acquired made it an important player in English politics.

However, the Elizabethan Restoration soon gave way to the religious fervour of James I. This period in Europe was marked by significant religious conflict. Protestants were finally given religious rights in France. The English were involved in long wars with Catholic Spain, which was finally defeated. The religious dissensions in England led to the migrations to the Americas.

The above pamphlet, set as it is in the frame of a dialogue between Catholic Frenchman and a Hindu Brahmin, would also have served as a gentle dig at the Catholic religion, in Protestant England. At the same time, it served as a reminder of the Elizabethan virtues of tolerance, that were diminishing in contemporary England.

This degree of religious strife did not feel too comfortable to men of letters. And the growing familiarity with India, which then was viewed as an affluent, tolerant and wise society and State, that was populated by a vastly more diverse peoples than Europe, could not have been more marked. The view of the East, and India, as advanced societies persisted for quite a while. As John Martin Honigsberger, the German doctor at the Court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh wrote in the frontispiece of his book as recently as 1852 *"From the East, by the power of the Merciful one; Lights of Science, Religion and Culture have shone"*.

The satire, turned around, is uncomfortably turning into a tragedy in our times. As the historically fractious Europeans merge, we are convinced into believing that divisions are best. And as we plunge headlong into dividing and fractionating ourselves along religious, caste, language and other imaginary partitions, based upon what news commentators discover or invent as 'historical enmities', it should be remembered that these are created myths.

And partitioning of men's souls and bodies, as this little book of 400 years ago reminds us, is not only politically stupid, but morally wrong.

Sanjeev Jain DPM, MD  
Additional Professor, Department of Psychiatry  
National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences  
Hosur Road, Bangalore 560029