

Comment

“ASIA”: DOES IT EXIST?

IN THE course of a recent journey through Southern and Eastern Asia, one fact insistently pressed itself upon my attention: that part of the world which goes by the name of Asia has no real coherent existence—it is a geographical but not a cultural unit. The villages of Japan have far more in common with those of Denmark than with those of India. The Mohammedan of Karachi is much closer to his co-worshipper in Egypt than to his Hindu neighbour in Bombay. The concept “Asia” is a figment of the Western mind, which has little connection with reality—even when used by Asian statesmen.

This statement may perhaps be challenged on the ground that “Europe” is also no more than a geographical concept. But there is a fundamental difference. Europe retains its essential unity in spite of national divisions and local contrasts. It does so by virtue of the cultural heritage which is shared by all European peoples: the longing for European union has deep-rooted origins in the realm of ideas, as well as in that of practical problems. An educated European is a man whose cultural background embraces the whole European tradition, and who feels himself a part of a European community of ideas which commands his loyalty and affection. And this is so, irrespective of whether he belongs to the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, to the period of Voltaire, or to that of Goethe, Croce, Toynbee, or Ortega.

In contrast, it can fairly be said that not one of the leading personalities of the Asian world can claim to possess a viewpoint which would embrace all the Asian civilisations. One evening in Bombay, I met the outstanding Japanese writer, Kyo Komatsu, in the company of a group of Indian writers. With the exception of Gandhi's autobiography, Komatsu had not read a single book by an Indian author. And even his appreciation of Gandhi—

a fellow “activist”—was not exactly intimate. He talked first about recent developments in Japanese literature and then about Malraux, Camus, Orwell, and Hemingway. It was soon evident that the only common topic of conversation between Japanese and Indian was the work of Western writers. I spent most of the evening acting as interpreter between the Japanese (who spoke French) and the Indians (who spoke English).

On another occasion, I spent an afternoon at Madras in the company of the leading writers in the Telugu and Tamil languages. I later discovered that these writers, who were of outstanding calibre, were almost unknown among Maharati, Bengali, Hindu, Urdu, or Gujarati literary circles. In fact, the educated Indian only knows of the work of writers outside his own community in so far as it has been translated into English—the common language of independent India. For the most part, he is far better versed in English than in Indian literature.

In Siam and Burma there is even clearer evidence of these two parallel tendencies in the outlook of educated Asians; on the one hand, the return to the narrow—if deep—cultural traditions of their own community, and on the other, the urge towards the acceptance of Western literature. Sometimes these two movements combine in a strange fashion. In Siam there is a literary cult of the writing of legends, fables, and epic poems, based on the national folklore; one of the leading exponents of this school, Prince Prem Burachatra, prefers to write his country's folklore in the English or French language, because he feels more at home in the Western tongue. Again, it is a remarkable fact that the centre of literary life in Burma is the “Translation Society” where works by foreign authors, and in particular those from the Western countries, are translated into the Burmese language; it is the activity of these translators which has played a

major part in transforming the Burmese language into a modern literary medium.

In Ceylon, I was present at an animated discussion in the seminary at Colombo on the subject of the re-establishment of the Singhalese and Tamil languages in place of English. The return to the mother tongue as the language of literature offers enormous advantages, particularly because it gives scope for the creation of new forms of expression, which are not likely to take root in a foreign language, even if it is perfectly known. But in Ceylon this return has the grave disadvantage that it brings to the fore the profound differences which exist between the indigenous languages: it creates a risk of mutual isolation, and consequently of the collapse of cultural life among the Singhalese and Tamil populations.

The tendency of each of the Asian peoples to return to its native heritage of religion, customs, and literature, together with a general readiness to accept the standards of literary accomplishment embodied in the work of the great Western authors, seems to leave no room for the development of a genuine cultural community in Asia. Interest in world literature, which is extremely strong in Asia, is almost exclusively limited to the literature of the European countries. In this respect, literature occupies a unique position, for European music arouses no interest, except in Japan, and European painting only interests the Asian artists living in Paris.

CONTEMPORARY Western authors provide the cultural background of the educated classes in Asia. In Japan, more than fifty thousand copies of Camus's novel, *The Plague*, were sold in a few months. In Tokyo, the students cried in the streets when they heard that André Gide had died. In Pakistan, T. S. Eliot is just as famous as in England. In Calcutta, the director of a theatre asked me whether it would be possible to obtain the rights for a performance of the latest play by Sartre. Russian literature is accepted as part of the common fund of Western culture. The great Russian story-tellers, from Gogol to Gorki, are read everywhere, and their influence is as strong as it is widespread. Even contemporary Russian literature, which is, on the whole, not in the first rank of contemporary writing, is regarded by educated Asians as part of Western literature. The only breach in this

universal preference for Western culture has been made by the impact of contemporary Chinese writing on Japan; but the Eastern part of Asia has in any case a degree of cultural unity absent from the rest of this vast continent.

Even the revolt against the West and against the hegemony of Western countries is itself linked to the assimilation of Western ideas. Their modernity is valued as an instrument of progress. A local judge at Lahore told me, with a wealth of detail, of his studies of the writings of Russell, Dewey, and Sartre. His view was: "I concentrate on studying Western authors because they are useful in our work of social progress. As for our own writers, I read them for pleasure, but with no sense of purpose."

In the last resort it is the power of local tradition which is the determining cause of the absence of any unifying "Asian" consciousness. For seven hundred years, Indians and Mohammedans have lived together side by side. But as soon as external compulsion was removed, two new and different countries inexorably took shape. Even the existence of a common bond among the inhabitants of continental India is a remote prospect, and the possibility of a common basis of life between continental India and Ceylon is absolutely inconceivable—in spite of their membership in the Commonwealth, that sole supra-national link which is still a living force in Asia.

The strongest common cultural bond in Asia is Buddhism. A large part of Asia, which is dominated by Buddhism, could form a truly united cultural community. But in the new states that have grown up in Asia, the religious element has been hardly more significant than it was in the case of the national states which were formed in 19th century Europe. It is possible that devotion to Buddhism may succeed in limiting nationalist passions more effectively than did Christianity in Europe. In any case, one may hope that Asia will be able to assimilate Western influences and experiences without repeating all Western mistakes, and especially without taking as their model a Balkanised Europe. The break-up of the British Empire has about the same significance for contemporary Asia as did the break-up of the Hapsburg Monarchy for Europe. The disappearance of this over-riding unifying power has created a void, and communalism, Communism, and petty fanaticisms of all kinds are rushing in to fill the gap.

François Bondy

“TRIESTE A NOI!” — “TRST YE NASE!”

IT REALLY seems as if the era of the Cold War had come to an end, the shades of catastrophe had fled, and the good old days were with us once again. Looking at the illustrated papers, one has seen a spectacle that one had, with a sigh, long ago taken leave of: more or less grown-up people demonstrating with enormous enthusiasm in favour of a patriotic cause, flags waved with exemplary indignation, windows and noses copiously broken, and from all sides the deafening shouts: “*Trieste a noi!*” or “*Trst ye nase!*”

To the adolescent of Bologna or Milan, of Nish or Skolpje, life will not be worth living until Trieste “belongs” to them. But what would they do with Trieste if they got it, and what was lacking in their lives while they were deprived of it?

It is true that man does not live by bread alone. He needs higher ideals for which he can shout or—better still, apparently—brawl. And a higher ideal than this is inconceivable. “*Trst ye nase!*” “*Trieste a noi!*” “*To the gallows with Tito!*” “*Death to Pella!*” “*Avanti!*” On both sides of “Zone A” we have seen the mobilisation of Italian and Yugoslav divisions, both of them equipped with the same American tanks and guns: those expensive toys which were given to them by Uncle Sam for defence against the big bad Russian wolf, who seems, for the time being, to have been forgotten. We have seen them digging themselves in, putting up barbed wire and field telephones, building their fortifications and command posts. The battleground for this skirmish is indeed well chosen: it is one of those demarcation lines which were so fashionable in 1945, running between Trieste and the hinterland, straight across the fields and slap through the middle of the churchyard at Gorizia. On both sides of the line one feels the impatience of the contestants with those tiresome Americans and Britons. As soon as they go, the battle can begin in earnest. “All is prepared . . .” “. . . the truly Italian character of Trieste will be attested without blood. . . .” “We will not allow Yugoslavia to be degraded to the level of the Italians. . . .” “Our blood brothers. . . .” And now that matters have gone so far there is, of course, no turning back. It is a question of prestige: the prestige of one’s country and of all that one holds dear.

But what do the Italians propose to do with

this eccentric little port on the northern end of the Adriatic, which has no Italian hinterland whatever? Or what should the Yugoslavs do with it? During the twenty-five years between the wars, when Trieste, for the first time in its history, belonged to Italy, it was a dying town, and grass grew on the piers. It seems more than probable that, under Tito, the grass would grow even more profusely. Under the British-American occupation, Trieste was at least a military post and trans-shipment centre, an international meeting ground for all sorts of smuggling and foreign-exchange transactions, and a haven for refugees. It was a little Tangier; a golden opportunity for a town which had lost its true reason for existence. For Trieste is neither Italian nor Slav in origin, it is essentially a memorial to the old Hapsburg monarchy. In that conglomeration of nationalities, it was natural that there should be an Austrian port populated by Italians and situated on Slovenian soil. It was the Danube countries’ outlet to the Mediterranean, and it remained as the open door of a broken-down structure after the rest of the framework had been destroyed by a rabid nationalism.

“I am well aware that there are Italian settlements in the coastal towns of Istria and Dalmatia,” wrote Cavour in 1860 to an Italian deputy who was urging a declaration in favour of the annexation of Trieste. “But I would think it utterly pointless to embroil ourselves with the Croats, the Serbs, the Hungarians and the whole German people, merely in order to lay claim to a territory which constitutes the only access to the Mediterranean for a large part of Europe.” That was written in those backward days which are described in the history books as “the era of nationalism.” Since then there has been an irresistible advance in the march of progress, and of that “large part of Europe” which constituted the hinterland of Trieste in the time of Cavour there remains today no more than a heap of rubble. So that now it is really hard to see what use Trieste could be to anybody—except, perhaps, as a pretext for a fight.

Trieste is, admittedly, a town populated by Italians. The Italians are a fertile people, they have settled along all the eastern coast-line of the Adriatic, and apart from Trieste there are Italian settlements in Pola, Fiume, Zara, and