

‘THE ABODE OF PEACE’¹

A VISIT AT TAGORE’S ACADEMY

BY J. A. SPENDER

THE Bengal plain spreads about me like the sea; and the sun beats on it from a cloudless sky. There are no hedges or boundaries, and the predominant earth-color is a pale brown. But there is life and cultivation everywhere. Trees abound, and a vivid-green banana-grove stands out in the distance against a dark screen of mangoes. There are large tanks in the hollows, and brown-legged peasants lift the water from level to level in iron scoops attached to bamboo hoists. Bullock carts are crossing the flat in all directions, with little parties of men, women, and children trotting in attendance. The women are swathed in white, with a rose-colored or orange scarf about their shoulders; the little children are generally as nature made them, their brown skins burnished in the sunlight. There is a perpetual chatter of birds, and the trill of the big kites breaks in on the chorus of the crows.

Sixty years ago this country was infested with dacoits, and it is related that the famous Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, father of the poet, halting to meditate in a grove of chatini trees, was set upon by a gang of them, who were about to rob and kill him, when their hearts were so touched by the beauty and sanctity of his face that they not only spared him but be-

came his devoted disciples. Under the trees is a simple marble monument commemorating the occasion and recording the mystic’s thought:—

He is the repose of my life;
He is the joy of my heart;
He is the peace of my soul.

Within a hundred yards of this spot Devendranath Tagore built a large house and settled down in it with his family; and twenty-five years ago his famous son, Rabindranath, the poet and writer, founded the colony known as Shantiniketan — ‘the Abode of Peace’—on the adjoining estate. Here my wife and I had the great pleasure of spending three days with him and his fellow workers.

The colony is first of all a school for boys and girls, who are educated together. This deliberately cuts across Indian tradition and sentiment, and might be disastrous if it were not in expert hands. Here it is perfectly successful. There are separate hostels for boys and girls, the girls living in a three-storied house, the boys in the long low bungalows that are scattered about between the trees. The classrooms are mainly the open air; the children sit cross-legged in circles under the trees, the teacher at one end, with his maps or diagrams hanging from a bough. They make delightful groups, in their white tunics and colored scarves; all the faces seem eager and intelligent, and many of them are strik-

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ingly handsome. For half an hour I sat listening to an English lesson, and was struck with the ease with which they read and their quickness in catching the accent and intonation. They seemed to be quite unembarrassed by my presence, and completely at ease with their teacher, who spoke and read English perfectly. From that I passed to a geography lesson, which, for my benefit, the teacher changed from Bengali to English, and, to all appearances, without in the least disturbing the flow of his instruction.

There is a power house close by, which serves the double purpose of lighting the colony and instructing the boys in the handling of the plant; and adjoining it is a carpenter's shop, where they make most of the furniture and do the necessary repairs, under the instruction of their teachers. Across the road is the art school and library, a building of two stories, with a large open verandah above the porch. All who have the slightest aptitude are encouraged to draw, and taught to paint in water colors. There is no hard-and-fast curriculum; boys and girls follow their own bent, draw any figure or object that strikes their fancy, and bring the results to be criticized by the master. They provided me with paper, paints, and brushes and sat me down to sketch, with a group of watchful critics looking over my shoulder. It was terrifying to me, but perfectly natural to them, and presently they began running back to their rooms and bringing little bundles of their own drawings for me to criticize. Some of these seemed to be extraordinarily interesting and original. One or two were copies of European models, but most followed the Indian style, figures and simple objects being drawn in sharp outline, and almost invariably fitted into a design that had been imposed on the model.

Within the school the art lesson was

going on to an accompaniment of music. The pupils sat cross-legged with their drawing-boards on the floor in front of them; while a lad of about eighteen, with a charming tenor voice, sang Bengali songs and accompanied himself on a richly carved zither. The music is at first a little strange to the Western ear, but that quickly wears off, and then one gets the sense of rare and fascinating rhythms that seem to be an extension of speech rather than an art apart from it. Rabindranath Tagore is as much musician as poet; he has provided the music for more than a hundred of his own songs; he sings them beautifully himself, and they are known and sung all over Bengal. Unfortunately this music is passed on without being written down, and, like the poetry, most of which is untranslated, it is unknown outside India. But one hears it everywhere at Shantiniketan, for in this place everyone sings, and music is literally one of the foundations of education. The day opens with song and ends with song. Morning and evening little parties of boys and girls take it in turn to walk up and down the beautiful avenue of sal trees singing the morning and evening hymns.

One of the evening hymns has, fortunately, been translated by Mr. Edward Thompson, and if the reader will think of it as sung to an Indian melody in the twilight under the trees he will catch a little of the atmosphere that the poet has woven about this place:—

In my evenings Thou hast come, in beautiful
raiment;
I salute Thee.
In the heart of the darkness Thou hast laughed;
I salute Thee.
In this downcast, still, deep, placid sky,
I salute Thee.
In this gentle, peaceful, drowsy wind,
I salute Thee.
On the grassy couch of this tired earth,
I salute Thee.

In this silent incantation of the steadfast stars,
 I salute Thee.
 In the lonely resthouse at work's end,
 I salute Thee.
 In the flowery garland of the fragrant evening sky,
 I salute Thee.

Every season has its songs, — songs of the spring, songs of the summer, songs of the rains, — and these too are sung by the children at the appointed times. And finally there are the poet's plays interspersed with dance and song, which are carefully rehearsed and acted two or three times a year. It is certainly not the fault of their teachers if the children who pass through this school do not come out of it with their imaginations kindled and their tastes refined.

After staying in this place for three days, I see it as the nearest embodiment in existence to-day of the Platonic idea of the education of youth. Tagore has not consciously borrowed from Plato; he has followed his own road to a conclusion that is above all things Indian and Bengali, but the same thought is in his mind — the thought of the unconscious effect of beautiful sights and sounds upon the growing intelligence, and their power to subdue it to the useful and the good. It is difficult to express this in any language that does not sound affected and sentimental, especially to those accustomed to the robust methods of the English public schools; and its virtue lies entirely in its being unselfconscious and unexpressed. That Tagore contrives by his own presence and influence — an influence which is as strongly practical on one side as it is poetical on another.

These boys and girls, in fact, are being trained in every possible way to be useful and active citizens. By an ingenious arrangement the older girls take charge of the little boys of the junior school, and thereby learn a great deal that is useful in mothering and

home-keeping. All are taught what is called domestic science, and will presently, it is hoped, help to spread this much-needed knowledge in the villages of Bengal. The boys, meanwhile, are having the Scout spirit instilled into them in a manner that would rejoice the heart of General Baden-Powell. The neighboring villages are grouped round the settlement, and the boys of the school are sent in to deal with the villagers' emergencies and to organize their sports and amusements. When cholera broke out in one of the villages last year they went in and cleaned out the place and purified its water. All this means a break with caste and custom that can with difficulty be realized by a European. Among the boys are sons of Brahmans, who bring with them from their homes all the pride and prejudice of their caste. They are left absolutely free to go their own way, and nothing ostensible is done to break down their exclusiveness. If they choose to have their meals apart, it is permitted, and some of them do for the first few months after their arrival. But the spirit of the place gradually kills the pride of the little Brahman, and after this beginning he settles down with the rest and learns to be an equal among equals. The Shantiniketan teachers do not inveigh against caste; they are content to teach a way of life in which caste prejudices seem absurd and inhuman.

But at Shantiniketan the school is not everything. Joined up with it is a research department for adult students, presided over by the learned pundit Vidhushekar Bhattacharya, who is engaged in deciphering ancient Sanskrit texts written on palm leaves, and who shares his study with another famous scholar who is at work on a Sanskrit dictionary. This department has a reputation outside India, and two Italian professors from the Uni-

versity of Rome are at this moment pursuing their studies there. I listened one evening to a learned and eloquent theme delivered by one of them to the teachers and students of the colony. Metaphysical subtleties that out-Hegel Hegel are commonly discussed in this circle, and the plain man from the West quickly finds his brain spinning in a whirl of Indian terminology which the pundits handle with a terrible familiarity. I will not try to plumb these depths; sufficient to say that the search for the ultimate reality is pursued indefatigably at all hours of the day and night by these ardent spirits.

The Agricultural Research Department, another branch of the colony, swings back to the practical. This bears the name of Sriniketan, — 'the Abode of Energy,' — and is situated a mile away, in and around the village of Sural. Here is an experimental farm and vegetable garden, with technical schools in spinning and tanning for the instruction of the villagers. Professor Gangulee, Tagore's son-in-law, who has done so much to prepare the way for the Agricultural Commission that has just been announced, was at work in this place for a year or more, and to look at it is to see what he and other Indian agricultural reformers have in mind. The farm has the special object of showing the villagers of this district what can be grown on their own sandy soil and how their methods may be improved. There are model growths of cotton, rice, pineapple, bananas, ginger, and various other plants that are being tested for their suitability to this part of Bengal. There is also a stock farm for improving the breed of cows and buffaloes; and a delightful Japanese gardener is showing

how vegetables and flowers should be grown.

I cannot speak as an expert, but on all hands I have heard the highest tributes paid to the practical value of this work and to the disinterested zeal of the men who are carrying it on. They have great difficulties to overcome — the apathy of the peasant, the objection of the landed class to experiments that break in upon the old ways, the eternal problem of finance, which is only to be solved when the self-supporting basis is reached. That is hoped for after another year or two years, but pioneers are sanguine, and there are unforeseen trials and aberrations of nature that defeat the best intentions of even scientific agriculturalists.

Certainly at Shantiniketan, if anywhere, the 'practical visionary' is seen at work. You pass from dreamland into reality at a turn of the road, and back again into dreamland at the next turning. The special quality of this place is the combination of the two things and the correction of the one by the other. One trembles a little to think how it could go on and this delicate balance be maintained if the presiding genius were removed. He sits in the centre of it — a gracious and picturesque personality, his flowing locks falling over his blue robe, the very personification of the poet as the painter would wish him to be. All here are his devoted servants, and hang on his lips as he discourses of loving-kindness and homely duties, or plunges deep into the mysteries of the Divine Being and His manifestations in art and nature. I shall always think of him as sitting in his great chair in the large open portico of his house at Shantiniketan, with the Indian sunlight playing on the walls behind him.

DRESS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS¹

BY MICHAEL MACDONAGH

I HAVE been associated with Parliament as a journalist for thirty-nine years, and to me the most remarkable of the changes within that period is that the House of Commons has become almost entirely bareheaded. Not more than two or three in the great throng are to be seen wearing their hats. Yet well within my time it was a breach of etiquette for a member to sit in his place 'uncovered.'

This innovation in Parliamentary customs respecting dress has been made more marked than ever by the appearance of women in the House. In the case of Lady Astor, the first woman member to be elected, the authorities of the House advised that the proper course for her was to wear a hat, not only in accordance with the old religious rule that women should come to churches with their heads covered as a sign of modesty, but also for the more relevant reason that members of Parliament were, by long tradition, expected to be covered — bringing their hats with them into the House, wearing them when they were seated, and uncovering only when they stood up. Lady Astor yielded to this opinion, and, though her example of always wearing a hat was followed by only three of the eight members of the sex who sat in the Parliament of 1924, it came to this — that in that Parliament the ancient custom of sitting covered in the House of Commons was observed more by women, small though

their numbers were, eight out of six hundred and fifteen, than by men.

The wearing of hats in the House of Commons may have been as ancient as Parliament itself, a heritage from the primitive moots, at which the leading men of the nation, endowed with the experience and wisdom of age, met in the open air with covered heads for the discussion of public affairs. Or else, an alternative suggestion, it arose in the seventeenth century, during the contests between the Parliament and the Crown, when the Commons, as a token that they were masters in their own House, put their hats on to receive a message from the King, instead of taking them off as such of them as wear hats do to-day. But however the custom of sitting covered may have originated, it was followed down to recent times as an essential part of Parliamentary procedure, ceremony, and deportment. Pictures of the House of Commons in the nineteenth century, as well as in the seventeenth and eighteenth, show the members seated with their hats on. Only the fashion of the headdress underwent a change. We see the sugar-loaf hat with wide brim of the Roundheads, and the Cavalier's broad-leafed beaver hat with rich hat-band and plume of feathers, in the seventeenth century; the three-cornered or cocked hat, surmounting wig or pig-tail, in the eighteenth; and the top hat in the nineteenth.

The first breach of the rule or habit was made by ministers and their whips. Ministers first came into the

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