

4. My Intellectual And Moral Background

It is time I said something about my intellectual and moral background. Although he did not know English well enough, but possessed a smattering of it, my father was, judged by the educational standard of the time, a highly cultured man. He had been all his life a close student of both Hindu and Muslim literatures. He had made himself conversant with Hindu culture enshrined in Sanskrit, mainly through the medium of translations from Sanskrit into Hindi, Urdu, and even Persian; while he was also familiar with Islamic literature by reading original works in Persian and Urdu. He was deeply interested in the study of what is now called Comparative Religion, and had a number of books, on this subject, in his library. Of this lot of books he was particularly fond of a book in Persian called *Dabistan-e-Mazahib*, written by Mohsin Fani, an eminent Iranian scholar, who lived in India in the seventeenth century. I have studied this pioneer work in Comparative Religion in the English translation made of it (for the oriental Translation fund series) and issued, in London in 1843.⁴⁶ Considering the period when it was composed, it is a wonderful repertory of sound information on the various religions, with which the author was acquainted, either through the medium of the literature relating to them, or by personal contact with those who professed the various faiths dealt with in his work. It was a careful perusal of this book that led me later to apply myself to a close study of that subject of absorbing interest - Comparative Religion. The literature relating to the subject of comparative Religion had grown fairly extensive in English and also in some languages of western Europe - since Max Müller gave lead to its study in the early seventies of the nineteenth century, but it is to me a matter of satisfaction that the pioneer work on the subject, the *Dabistan-e-Mazahib*, was produced on the soil of India - in which are to be found almost all the great religions of the world.

There were other books more or less covering the same ground, all of which my father constantly studied, along with such classic works on Hindu religion as the world-famous poem, the *Bhagwad Gita*. This immortal work my father used to study daily - more often in the Persian translation of Faizi, the famous court poet of Akbar, and also in some other translations in Persian, Hindi, and Urdu. He never failed to impress upon me that the *Bhagwad Gita* was a work of the highest moral and spiritual worth, and as such of the greatest value and utility, and that it should not only be carefully studied, but that its teachings should be strictly followed by all who desired happiness in this world. I have carefully followed my father's injunction in this matter, and I have gone through

⁴⁶ Mohsin Fani, *The Dabistan or School of Manners* (trans. by David Shea and Anthony Troyer), Paris: Printed for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1843.

almost every translation available to me of this great classic, not only in English, but also in Persian, Urdu, and Hindi, and I am convinced that I am immensely all the better for it.

Next to books dealing with Comparative Religion my father was very fond of studying books on history, particularly the history of the Indo-Moghal period and of Islamic history and culture, in various Muslim countries. The history of the pre-Muslim period was at that time *terra incognita*, and good books on the subject were not then available even in English. My father was very fond of impressing upon me the lessons of the Indo-Moghal period of history, particularly those of the reign of Akbar, and his two immediate successors, his son, Jehangir, and his grandson, Shah Jahan. I may thus claim to have inherited from my father a love of books and devotion to study, in general, and of Islamic history - both political and cultural, in particular. Very few educated Indians possess, even now, a private Library of *belles lettres* (or literature, creative and inspirational) apart from that of law, medicine, or any other subject, which may be required for their professional work. The exceptions to this rule may be counted at one's finger's ends. These few mostly reside in the presidency towns of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. Outside these three and, may be, a few more places - private collections of general literature may be said to be practically unknown in the India of today. Eminent lawyers have large collections of legal literature text-books and Reports, the latter including English Reports as well. But you will not find in their houses even a hundred volumes of cultural literature poets, essayists, and dramatists, either English or Indian.

It is, therefore, much to the credit of my father that he possessed a private library of more than a thousand volumes in Persian, Hindi, Urdu, and Sanskrit, apart from his collection of law books and Reports of cases. Thus love of literature-apart from that dealing with one's profession - I have distinctly inherited from my father, and it had been the greatest solace of my life. I brought, with me, from London, in 1893, a collection of a thousand volumes, which had increased by 1924, to about ten thousand, which I presented to the public of Patna, in that year. Since then it had been known, in memory of my wife, as Srimati Radhika Sinha Institute and Sachchidananda Sinha Library. Apart from being a close student of books, my father was also a regular reader of newspapers. He subscribed to a number of journals in Hindi and Urdu languages which were published at that time from the capital cities of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (the present United Provinces), and the Punjab, and he was very fond of telling me - even when I was a little boy - the important items of news which appeared in them. As I grew up he used to make me read out to him, every evening before dinner, the newspapers he subscribed, and also the books he happened to be studying at the time. Thus I have inherited from my father an instinct, so to say, for journalism to which I have been attached as a hobby and pastime for now more than fifty years, as will appear in the sequel.

Yet another thing which I may claim to have inherited from my father is a love of travelling. Considering the great difficulties of travelling in the seventies and eighties of the last century, it was truly remarkable that my father should have performed the pilgrimages to most of the chief centres usually resorted to by Hindu pilgrims, as prescribed for them, to Puri, the seat of the Lord Jagannath, in Orissa (which has given the English language the word “Juggernaut,” generally used in a bad sense), to Rameshwaram at the southern end of India, to Dwarka on the western coast in Kathiawar, and to the Jawala Mukhi temple in the Kangra Valley of the Punjab, in which province he had travelled as far as Peshawar. Inspired by his great example, I too have traversed by far the greater part of the length and the breadth of India - from the Assam Valley to the Khyber Pass in the North, Ceylon in the South, and the tracts in peninsular India along the Coromandel and the Malabar coasts, with all the provinces and states in between them. I may thus justly claim that alike in my intellectual pursuits and hobbies, and also in the cultural developments of my mind, as resulting from personal contact with the people of the various parts of India, I owe not a little to the example set to me by my father, and to the training imparted by him to me, until I left my home, at Arrah, for Patna in 1887 at the age of sixteen. I thus owe my love of learning, my flair for journalism, and my fondness of books and travel to my father, to a large extent.

And now I shall say something about my mother. Though she can hardly be said to have been an educated woman, judged by modern standards, yet she was by no means uneducated. The education of women in Upper India is a recent feature of our social development. At the time I am writing of (between the fifties and the sixties of the nineteenth century not only in Upper India, but even in advanced provinces (like Bengal, Bombay, and Madras), women were not given any systematic education or training, which might qualify them even for household work. My mother had been taught by her parents Hindi, and she was well versed in that language, judged by the test that she could fluently read and easily understand the classic work in Hindi poetry, namely the *Ramayana* of the greatest Hindi poet, Tulasi Das, who died in 1624, in the reign of the Indo-Moghal Emperor, Jehangir. Ever since he composed his *Ramayana*, it has been the most popular work for mass education in the whole of Northern India-between Bengal and the Punjab. Its popularity continues even today, and more than one European scholar had testified to the great educative value and moral worth of the story of Rama and Sita, as originally enshrined in the great Sanskrit epic of *Ramayana* by Valmiki, and as popularised in the sixteenth century by Tulasi Das, in the old language of Eastern Hindustan formerly called Baiswari, and now known as Eastern Hindi.

The language used by Tulasi Das had undoubtedly changed considerably during more than three centuries that had elapsed since this great poem was composed; but in spite of it, its immense popularity, amongst all sections of

the people in the Hindi-speaking area, has continued unabated till now, and is not likely to suffer for yet a long time to come. My mother used to read the *Ramayana* daily, and to explain its lessons to the womenfolk, and the children in the house. Thus I learnt the *Ramayana* at my mother's feet, and the intimate knowledge which I possess of the contents of this greatest work in Hindi literature has been a source of inspiration to me throughout my life. Though I learnt from my mother when I was between the ages of five and fifteen, I can still recite correctly from memory long passages from this famous epic. But apart from education (in the technical sense of that term) my mother possessed many noble traits and qualities which contributed to her success not only as a disciplinarian, but also as a highly qualified housewife. Of my mother's stern sense of discipline I have already given an example as to how she chastised me by twisting my little tongue for having chewed betel-leaf, for the first time. There can be no doubt that her sense of discipline had affected for the better my whole life, by making me adopt many good and healthy habits. Early rising, regularity in meals, moderation in food and drink, absolute non-smoking, and many other good traits-including that of adopting method and system in my work for which I had been justly given credit by my friends, and which had contributed to such success as I had been able to achieve - I owe entirely to my mother. As such I am naturally a great believer in discipline and good habits, which next to good character, are the greatest assets which one should possess to be able to achieve even a fair measure of success, as without character, discipline and good habits, the best brain cannot carry one far in life.

The other notable feature of my mother's character was her large-heartedness and generosity. She was always the last in the household to take her meals, at day or at night, when she had satisfied herself that everyone else in the house-guests, servants, menials, and even labourers and coolies-in fact, every one living in the house-had taken his or her meal. I have inherited from her this sense of hospitality, if I may so call it, with the result that during the last fifty years and more, eminent Indians from almost every province and State, in the country, had conferred upon me the honour of being my guest at my two houses at Allahabad and Patna. My mother was not only hospitable, but generous-hearted in the truest sense of the term, until she passed away about the age of eighty in 1932. She lived the life of a true ascetic. She kept for herself just enough for her bare requirements in food and clothing, and distributed, on a lavish scale, amongst the needy and the poor, all the money she could get hold of either from my father, or from myself. This distinctive trait of her character had left a deep impress on my mind and heart, with the result that whatever my other limitations of character are-and they are no doubt many-miserliness has not been allowed by me to touch the hem of my garment.

Though, as will appear in the sequel, I could not amass, even after half a century's practice at the Bar, the same amount of money as did some of my

friends in the profession since I always allowed my public activities to take precedence of professional work-I have been able to make fairly large donations for educational purposes to which I shall refer in a later part of this book. But I may mention briefly here the endowment created by me of half a lakh of rupees at the Punjab University for encouraging research in Science, of the same amount at the Kayastha Pathshala University College, at Allahabad, for encouraging the study of Economics, and of a much larger amount spent on the foundation and equipment of an Institute and Public Library, at Patna, established to commemorate the memory of my wife. As I believe that I had inherited the impulse of generosity from my mother, I cherish her memory in the highest regard and greatest esteem, and had founded a gold medal in her memory, along with other similar medals in memory of my father and my wife, at the Patna University, to be awarded to scholars who had topped the list of successful students, in various branches of learning.

Not only do I owe to my parents all that I have mentioned above, but one thing more, to which I should make pointed reference, and that is my having inherited from them what may be called a spirit of rationalism, or disbelief in the Supernatural. It is not easy for an outsider to appreciate the spirit of conscious or unconscious superstition that governs almost all the daily acts of even the average educated Hindu; to say nothing of the Indian masses the vast bulk of whom-Hindu, Muslim, or even Christian- are all more or less in the same plight. As regards Muslim masses, in India, those who have had intimate knowledge of them, by means of personal contact, are fully aware of the fact - which is amply corroborated by a perusal of the statements contained in the Reports of the Decennial Censuses, held since 1871, of the various Provinces and States of the country - that a very large section of the Muslim rural population are mentally in, more or less, the same condition as the co-responding classes of their co-villagers of the other communities; while even the upper classes of the urban Muslim population are strong believers in divination, as evidenced by their looking out for *faal*, (in certain books, like the *deewan*, or collection of poems, of Hafiz, believed to be sacred or inspired) *istakhara* (through the medium of throwing beads), and various other methods usually adopted for making predictions and prophecies, with the aid of *rammals*, (adepts in *ramal* or Astrology) that is, fortune-tellers and sooth-sayers.

So far as Indian Christians are concerned, considerable light is thrown on their prevailing mentality apart from what is contained in the Census Reports - by the contents of a petition (filed in Court, at Lahore, in January, 1941) containing the allegation that a well-known Indian Christian leader, who had been elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly, from an Indian Christian Constituency, had employed "padris" (Christian priests) to induce the voters to believe that if they did not vote for him, they would become objects of divine displeasure, and would be punished in the next world! This significant

statement was contained in the election petition filed by the defeated candidate against the successful one, than which there can be no clearer proof of the correctness of my assertion about the mentality of the vast bulk of educated Indian Christians, as well. In February, 1944, in the educationally advanced city of Bombay, a Muslim woman was convicted on a charge of having cheated several Muslim ladies of their ornaments and cash, for making intercessions on their behalf, for various purposes, with the ghosts of some Islamic saints, with whom she made her dupes believe, she was in communion. The catalogue of books received by me (as I am writing these pages, in January, 1944) from a leading firm of booksellers, in Bombay, owned by Parsees-intellectually and socially the most advanced community in India - has a list of no less than thirteen books of Astrology offered for sale against only one on Astronomy! Leading nationalist newspapers and journals, in the country, print frequently advertisements, with large-sized photographs, of astrologers, palmists, *jyotishis* and *rammalls-et hoc genus omne*. There are several periodicals (both in English and the languages of India) dealing solely with Astrology. All these facts tell their own tale, and speak volumes in corroboration of my statements about the average educated Indian's innate belief in the Supernatural.

Thus there cannot be the least doubt that even the educated Indians- barring exceptional individuals-are still dominated in their daily acts by an unfounded fear of the supernatural. A deep-rooted faith in astrology, dependence on horoscope-cast by an astrologer at the birth of every Hindu child-the dread of malign spirits, and the influence of evil stars on all human actions, a constant search for good and bad days for doing this thing or that, fixing up marriages, and other important ceremonials, on the basis of the supposed effect on human life of zodiacal constellations - these are but a few only of the numerous superimposed penalties to which the average Hindu - though he be highly educated - subjects himself, so to say, from the cradle to the crematorium. Very few Hindus, indeed, are free from such superstitions, and some of the most educated ones I have come across were the greatest victims to the beliefs I have enumerated above. I claim credit for myself for having shaken off such a halter round my neck, due to the teachings imparted to me by my parents, as the result of my father being a devotee of the teachings of the Vedanta philosophy, and my mother also having come under his influence. As a Vedantist my father believed in nothing Supernatural, and was never tired of impressing upon me that belief in astrology, and it's inevitable concomitants, was not only wrong, but a great evil. And he was, beyond a shadow of doubt, absolutely right in this respect.

My father used to cite to me his own experiences in support of his disbelief in Astrology. I may recall but one of them. He used to tell me that he married his eldest daughter, before my birth, after taking the precaution of consulting eminent astrologers of Benares, that the horoscopes of my sister and her husband tallied remarkable well, in every possible respect, judged by the

test of strictest astrological calculations. Amongst other things the Pandits had assured my father that the bride and the bridegroom would have a long life of conjugal happiness and prosperity; but the bridegroom suddenly died of cholera within three weeks of the celebrations of the marriage! I would not, however, have been impressed with this, and the other instances mentioned by my father, had not something happened, to my personal knowledge, when I was in my fifteenth year. One day I saw sitting with my father a fair and handsome young Pandit, dressed in fine clothes, whose appearance made an immediate impression on me. I went to my father to find out who he was. I was told that he was a very renowned astrologer from Lahore. The Pandit asked me to show him the lines on the palm of my hand, and on the sole of my feet; which I did. He then made, on the basis of information which my father gave him in replies to his questions about me, some calculations on a piece of paper, and was then ready to answer my father's question as to whether I would take the degrees of Master of Arts, and also Bachelor of Laws. The Pandit said that my education would not extend so far, but he added that though I would not succeed in taking degrees in Arts and Law, I would nevertheless be highly successful in the profession I might choose, which answer, I remember, cheered me up, a great deal. Next, he said, as the result of the examination of the lines on the sole of my feet, that I would be a great traveller, and would see a great part of world. I remember my father's comment on it to the following effect. "Why, Panditji, I have travelled throughout the length and the breadth of the country, north to south, and east to west. I wonder if my son will do more than what I have done." On which the Pandit said that he thought I would do so.

Now, if the matter had rested there, I would have been certainly all my life a great believer in Astrology, for the two predictions of the Pandit can be said to have turned out true, to a fairly large extent. But, very unfortunately for the Pandit, and my faith in Astrology, there was a distant relation of ours sitting there at that time. He was most anxious to learn from the Pandit about the length of his days-whether his life would be long or short. The Pandit, after making the necessary calculations on paper, said to him that he was blessed with a very long life, and that he might expect to live up to the age of eighty-on learning which he naturally left us highly gratified. Within a fortnight of the incident recorded above, my father said to me: "have you heard that our relation who went home the other day so much elated on the assurance of the Pandit, at the prospect of living to the age of eighty, had died the other day, and his younger brother had just sent me word to that effect". This was something which astounded me, and it made a tremendous impression on my mind, which I have never been able to shake off. From that day onwards I forsook all faith in astrological calculations and predictions, and have never been able to return to them. Throughout my long life I have never consulted a Pandit, or a priest, or an astrologer, on any single occasion, but had fixed my own date for everything,

and asked the family priest to agree to that date as being the most suitable for the object in view, on pain of his losing his perquisite. He had never cared to lose it.

The result had been pre-eminently successful, and I have gone through my life without being bothered in the least by apprehensions and fears which constitute the most painful curse of the life of even an educated Hindu, at the present day. Later when studying for the Bar in London, I read in one of Herbert Spencer's essays, which confirmed me in the view that the wisdom of that "Infinite and Eternal Energy" (to quote Spencer's scientific term for Providence) is manifested as much in the knowledge open to us to obtain, as in what it had kept back from us from knowing of our future. My father being a careful student of the Vedanta philosophy, and also fully conversant with the literature of Sufism (in Persian and Urdu, held views which were rationalistic and has no taint of superstition about them. Brought up by him, I have never had the least faith in the Supernatural, (though it may be dignified by being given the name of the Science of Astrology, or any other equally pompous name), and have never cared to know the future. I have had a happy life, on the whole, as I have been quite content with a knowledge of the past and the present, and absolutely unconcerned with a knowledge of the future, which I am satisfied is denied to humanity in its own interest. If this sound view were to gain acceptance in the country, Indian society, in general, and the Hindu community, in particular, would be in a very much less miserable condition, than they are now.

But, I fear, it will take a long time yet before freedom from superstition comes to obtain widely amongst the vast bulk of the people of India. Decades-if not centuries must elapse, and education in Science permeate the mind of the people, on an extensive scale, before it may reasonably be hoped that beliefs in the Supernatural shall have disappeared from this land. It should also be recognised that beliefs in the Supernatural - in angels, devils, gods, goddesses, godlings, ghosts, spirits, and tombs, and in individual planets and stars, and zodiacal constellations, with the alleged intercessors with them, in the shape of astrologers, exorcisers, sorcerers, wizards, fortune-tellers and soothsayers, of the male and female brands, *et hoc genus omne*, - is not limited to India alone, though they may exist here in an intensive form. All countries and peoples have lived for thousands of years under the shadow - so to say - of such blighting beliefs and influences; traces of which are still to be found even amongst the peoples of the most advanced countries. But I am satisfied that it is the people of India who, even now, have the shadow of their life lengthened in misery by their inordinate beliefs in the Supernatural.