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***A Passage to India: A Message to India***

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*A passage to India*, like its novelist Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970), is *sui generis*, a class by itself, for which he was honoured a Doctorate Degree by The University of Leyden. The novel is not only an impressive piece of anti-colonial fiction but a modern classic. F.R. Leavis honours;

*A Passage to India* is a classic... in its touch upon racial and cultural problems, its treatment of personal relations and in prevailing ethos the book is an expression, undeniably, of the liberal tradition, it has as such its fineness, its strength and its impressiveness, and it makes the achievement, the humane, decent and rational-‘the civilized’-habit, of that tradition appear the invaluable thing it is ... Mr Forster’s is a name ... we should peculiarly honour.(Leavis,1952)

This significant document of modern age concerns no less a subject than man’s attempt to find order and a basis for solid, durable values in our disordered and multifarious world.

The Boer War (1899-1902) turned a new leaf in the political life of England. The dreams of peace and security which seized the English mind since Waterloo (1815) were shattered into pieces. The Victorian period was characterized by a dominant faith in imperial nationalism, where by every English man felt that he was responsible for bearing the white man’s burden. Complacency was a characteristic feature of life in Victorian England. The Victorian values of life received a rude shock by the Boer War. It was gradually realised that the era of imperialism was coming to an end and it would be substituted by an epoch of international relations based on mutual trust and understanding. England deliberately tried to make friends in Europe, while Germany came to be filled with hatred for England.

However, England did not meet with a smooth sailing in its endeavour. The Liberals came out triumphant in the elections of 1905. Suffragist Agitation and Coal Strike of 1912 followed. Ireland too was smitten with an unrest followed by mutiny and rebellion. Both at

home and abroad England had to encounter problems. Indians were also asking for freedom under the leadership of Gandhi. In the industrial and political fields England witnessed widespread disturbances.

The First World War came in 1914. Its brutalities and futility brought disillusionment and disappointment. Man started groping in the dark for a surer ground to tread upon and steady guidance to beckon them to the right path. The period of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and *A Passage to India* (1924) was a decade in which the English people as a whole were recovering from the First World War and hoping desperately that things would get back to normal, to the material comfort and moral security of the Edwardian Age, to the old Victorian confidence in the steady march of human progress. To sensitive people the contemporary situations seemed a hopeless muddle setting them for diversion and satisfaction rather than on the interests and pleasures of private life.

Forster's travels in Italy, Greece and Germany (1902-1905) and its influence along with the influence of Bloomsbury Group enabled him to absorb the different cultural traditions. He returned with 'new eyes' and his mind took a liberal direction of intellectual secularism. Moreover he came in contact with Ross Masood at Cambridge in 1907. This stimulating friendship brought him in touch with India and its outlook on life, which was strangely different from that of the west. He stayed with Masood in Switzerland, France, and Germany. When he planned his first visit to India in 1912, his greatest attraction was to meet Masood. He went round to all the important cities of India. He visited many universities. He had been to the famous shrine of 'Khwaja Sahab' at Ajmer. His first visit acquainted him with the ancient wisdom of India, a land of great heroes and sages.

Again, he visited India in 1921 for the purpose of his novel *A Passage to India*. He met Ross Masood, who was the then Director of Education at Hyderabad. He saw India with a different perspective. There seemed a gulf between the India he had tried to create and the India he was actually experiencing. India he discovered is not a mystery but a muddle very much like life itself. He came to India third time in 1945 and busied himself only in the study of the academic and cultural life of India. He delivered a talk from 'All India Radio' on 'The Position of the Artist in the Post-War World'.

Forster's association with Ross Masood and Maharaja Sir Tukoji Rao – III senior of Dewas taught him to harmonise varying attitudes, cultural traditions and east-west gulf. He owed a deep debt of gratitude to Masood. He acknowledged that Masood woke him up out of his suburban and academic life, showed him new horizons and a new civilization and helped him toward the understanding of a continent. Until he met Masood, India was a vague jumble of Rajahs, Sahibs, Babus and elephants and he was not interested in such a jumble. During his second visit to India 1921, he became Private Secretary to Maharaja of Dewas for six months. This acquainted him with Hindu religion. Forster, who was in search of a convincing basis for a harmonious vision of life, obtained the best explanation of the mystery of life in Hindu religion.

Forster's image of India is;

India is the country, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills, and more fields... How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble. She knows of the whole world's trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls 'come' through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal... (*A Passage to India*, 2005: 127)

The great chords begin to sound as one reads *A Passage to India*. The India that Forster describes, with its multitudes of peoples, its races, creeds and hierarchies, its conflicting aims and aspirations, is the modern world in epitome. According to Benita Parry;

The aspiration of man to understand himself and his universe has resulted in various systems of belief and codes of behaviour – but also in alienation from his fellow-men within other cultures and therefore in a more complex bewilderment about his social and spiritual identity. This is the paradox explored in *A Passage to India*. (Benita Parry, 1966)

This paper attempts some large questions in connection with characters and incidents that engage our sympathetic interest. Is it a novel which after attempting to reconcile the

differences between races, religions, social creeds, nature and man, asserts failure? Is it a novel which, reaching beyond accepted faiths and accepted interpretations of the mysterious, the unseen, asserts a positive vision of unity? Is Forster a spiritual and social optimist? Are his conclusions those of pessimism and defeat? To what extent do man's attempts to achieve order of cosmic harmony are realized? To what extent can purely human and personal values flourish in it?

In *A Passage to India* two lady travellers, Mrs Moore and Adela Quested come to see India. As Adela wishes, "I want to see the real India". (2005:21) Ronny asks to Fielding, "How's one to see the real India?" (2005:23). The man answered, "Try seeing Indians". (2005:23). Both the ladies are involved in a series of situations. They have been informed that nothing is private in India. India likes Gods, and Englishmen like posing as gods, Englishmen know all about Indians but not Indians. India is not as bad as all that. There is nothing in India but the weather, India is part of the earth, India is not home and India is a muddle. All these undermine Mrs Moore's religious faith and lead Adela to realise that the world is more mysterious. However Mrs Moore transcends the barriers that separate man from man. Frank Kermode notes;

The search for a significant order leads Forster into creating characters who represent, symbolically, an aesthetic or ordering approach towards life.....  
Characters like Mrs Moore. (Frank Kermode, 1958)

This spiritual lady's Christian God is, God of love. She visits Mosque which leads her to friendship with Dr Aziz. While Adela is, "a queer, cautious girl". (2005:21) She has little openness and intuitiveness. She has a belief that everything, in theory at least, is comprehensible.

At the start of summer Aziz, Adela and Mrs Moore visit Marabar Caves. They baffle man's instinct for order and suggest primordial chaos. They echo dull philosophy of life. Forster writes;

Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it, and the books and talk that would describe it as interesting are obliged to exaggerate, in the hope of justifying their own existence. Inside its cocoon of work or social obligation, the

human spirit slumbers for the most part, registering the distinction between pleasure and pain, but not nearly as alert as we pretend. There are periods in the most thrilling day during which nothing happens, and though we continue to exclaim 'I do enjoy myself' or 'I am horrified' we are insincere. 'As far as I feel anything, it is enjoyment, horror'- it's no more than that really, and a perfectly adjusted organism would be silent. (2005:124)

The echoes of the caves make a devastating impression on Mrs Moore and Adela. Their boum...boum suggest a disordered universe in which everything exists but nothing has value. They rob infinity and eternity of its vastness. There man hopes, "Let there be light", (2005:139) and feels, "It is finished"(2005:139). There man tries to discover order and to order his life accordingly. Beyond these echoes lie an inspiring vision of eternity for Christian, Muslim and Hindu. The caves are the reality. It is the universe leading to heaven, hell, nirvana, the projection of man's desire.

It is man's instinct to get a little order into the chaos through relationship. *A Passage to India* is in part the story of three personal relationships. They are beyond the control of the individuals concerned and largely disintegrate under the force of circumstances. Aziz's friendship with Mrs Moore dies with her death. Fielding's friendship with Aziz suffers as he treats Adela lovingly after the trial and persuades Aziz not to sue her. Adela's engagement to Ronny is broken by her conduct at the trial. The forces that divide people outweigh the forces that draw them together. Man's quest for order is precarious. All relationships seem echoes, meaningless boums and no harmonious sounds, "The original sound may be harmless, but the echo is always evil" (2005:260).

Forster, a liberal humanist, centres the novel thematically on the clash between imperialism and the growing spirit of nationalism in India. The collision of the cultures of the East and the West is in focus. He disapproves English bureaucracy and the conventional ideas of British Empire. The picture of British officials of Chandrapore is satirical, although their efficiency is admired, their arrogance and racial prejudices are ridiculed. Ronny Heaslop, the City Magistrate, is portrayed as a racial snob, who looks at natives with a contempt. For him the duty of the British officials in India is simply to maintain law and order. He considers it necessary for the English to rule India in the interest of the Indians. He does not approve his

mother's friendly feelings towards Aziz. He breaks off his engagement with Adela, when she ultimately withdraws her charge against Aziz, as marriage with her would mean the end of his career.

The attitude of other English officials is not different from Ronny. The collector, Mr Turton, is ridiculed for considering himself to be a 'god'. He is strongly opposed to any kind of intimacy between an Indian and an English man. The Superintendent of Police, Mr McByrde regards the records of mutiny as infallible guides to the Englishmen in India. The Civil Surgeon, Major Callender, is a sadist, who finds pleasure in the sufferings of his Indian patients. The wives of English officials exult over their offensive attitude of racial superiority and snobbery. The British Imperialism is not directly condemned but it is not defended either. The day is not far off, so it is visualised, when India would become free and emerge as a nation. Aziz wishes "India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah! Hurrah for India! Hurrah! Hurrah!"(2005:306). Aziz is in awful rage, he shouts at Fielding;

Down with the English anyhow. That is certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then' - he rode against him furiously – 'and then,' he concluded, half kissing him, 'you and I shall be friends. (2005:306)

Mrs Moore and Fielding represent the point of view whereby a connection to bring Englishmen and the Indians closer together will be established, but they both fail. Fielding's views are indeed largely Forster's, but Fielding's humanism is conventional. So far it seems that *A Passage to India* is a negative gospel of chaotic world.

Forster transcends and reaches to liberal humanism, which enables to read him again and again. His novel does communicate a sense that life is valuable. As while returning to England, Mrs Moore thought, "I have not seen the right places" (2005:197). Forster writes;

She would never visit Asirgarh or the other untouched places; neither Delhi nor Agra nor the Rajputana cities nor Kashmir, nor the obscurer marvels that had

sometimes shone through men's speech: the bilingual rock of Girnar, the statue of Shri Belgola, the ruins of Mandu and Hampi, temples of Khajuraho, gardens of Shalimar. (2005:197)

She may die but life continues, love continues, friendship continues. They have their own validity and strength. India still exists and must be experienced for its own sake. It is not a futile and meaningless land. None of the characters are emblems of futility. They have been positive forces. They are committed to the belief that life is worth living and friendship is the best relationship. Fielding holds Aziz affectionately and says, "Why can't we be friends now?... It's what I want. It's what you want" (2005:306). They do not succumb to the destructive forces. They value life, they value friendship and they value human brotherhood.

More than a novel, *A Passage to India* is a significant document of Forster's thoughts and emotions about India. From India he learnt the lesson of the faith in the values of heart. To get to the truth, heart is the only reliable guide. Being a westerner, he believed in the supremacy of intellect and reason. His mind was nourished on the classical ideals of harmony and proportion of Greek and Roman civilisations. In India he found that form and reason were relegated to subordinate position to the values of heart. In this incomprehensible mess of universe, heart steers a man through the muddle of reason and mysteries of the soul. The west suffered and still suffers from a lack of trust in the heart and failed to observe the whole of reality through all complexities. India honours what is defined by heart. Its profound philosophy is, "The secret understanding of the heart!" (2005:17).

E.K. Brown praises;

*A Passage to India* is a prophetic novel, a singing in the halls of fiction, the infinite resourcefulness of Forster has given it a rhythmic form that enables us to respond to it as prophecy and song. (E.K. Brown, 1944)

The last and third part 'Temple' of the novel harmonises the boum...boum echoes into "the millennial myth of love" (Wilfred stone, 1966). It celebrates Gokul Ashtami, the birth of Lord Krishna, the universal friend, the God of love. It fuses the separateness and brings desired union. It is a vision in which the arbitrary human barriers sink before the extinction of all things. It is a prophetic vision, for what happens in 'Temple' is reconciliation on the



human level. Hinduism takes its place at the core of the novel just as it lies at the heart of India. India has tamed the proselytizing zeal of Islam and imperialism of Christianity. It triumphs against all comers simply by integration. It survives and grows. It influences and even transforms the comers into 'Esmis Esmoor', the local deities. Its all-inclusiveness contains a profound apprehension of a world in which good and evil, the ridiculous and august, cruelty and pacifism coexist. India is the home of religion and the universe it mirrors is one. As the song recites the eternal message of India:

Tukaram, Tukaram,

Thou art my father and mother and everybody. (2005:269)

To sum up it suffices to submit that in an age of James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster should be remembered with hushed awe.

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