

INDIA
ITS CHARACTER
A Reply to *Mother India*

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PREFACE

PART of the matter of this little book had been published in *The Englishman* of Calcutta, and I have to thank the editor for the courtesy of his permission to me to use the matter. It is here presented, but re-written. The book is not a disjointed collection of newspaper articles, but, God willing, a thing with a unity.

I had for some time intended to write a book on India, and marvel, now that I have written a little one, and realize as I did not before how fascinating a subject for a book India is, that I did not begin my time in the country with the idea of writing one some day. Then I should have begun collecting material for it from the beginning. I had a good deal of material collected, some in print, some in manuscript, when the publication of Miss Mayo's *Mother India*, and friends telling me that now was the time to get out a book, pushed me into writing one before I was ready, or had quite decided what kind of book to write. It is easy to collect material for books on India, but difficult to find threads to string one's beads on, and to be sure always which beads belong to which threads. Much of the material that I had collected remains unused, because it was decided that in this book an attempt should be made to reveal the character of India to the rest of the world; that is, how the Indian soul comports itself during the earthly pilgrimage; and much of my material did not seem relevant to that enquiry. The character of a country is the character of its people, to put it so, when naked. How a man loves and hates, labours and plays, worships, lives and dies, is how the naked man does, not the clothed. The appearance of his country, its forests and fields, belongs to his clothes. He has

made his clothes for the body; he has shaped the face of the land he lives in, or has greatly changed it from its state of virgin forest; they in turn have helped to shape his soul; but the core of it is straight from the womb of Time, and it is because of what it is, naked, that he acts as he does. So in a book on the character of India much must be left out that would have a place rightly in a book entitled, *India: Land and People*; a book that might be wrought into a unity, but with far more labour than the simpler book that I had to decide was all that I could attempt to-day. But in a preface to that smaller book may be given, without too marked an irrelevance, a note made for the larger book, the book that was to speak as much of the land as the people: such a note as follows here. When I wrote it, I had the Vaishnava lyrics of Bengal in my mind. In what setting were they written, I asked; in other words, what was the setting of the love of Radha and Krishna? It has been the same setting, with such differences as there are between, say, Bengal and the United Provinces, between the United Provinces and the Punjab and the South, great differences, but in a greater similarity, for in many ways India is much alike in all its provinces—it has been the setting also for all the loves of all the Indians; all their lives; where the Vedas were written, the Bhagavadgita, all the Puranas, the Upanishads; where to think of Miss Mayo with her pencil and note-books, where to hear her say, as I do in my mind's ear, that the material she wanted was—God forgive us, to think of her there is a desolation in my thought. This is the note:

Then there is the setting. The Plains of India are not wild and beautiful. Wordsworth might never have felt at home. But Keats would have felt at home; wonderfully drawn to the land and soothed and comforted by it. There are evenings in the Hot Season, when the light is so pure, the clouds so white, the grasses and weeds so green, the bamboos so feathery and graceful, the palms so still, the tamarind trunks and boughs so black, the horizons such a sweep in the clean, bright air, that one feels it all descending

like a benediction. The pain is only that no words can express it. Not ours at least; but in my soul I hear a faint echo of the words that I know Keats would have found. It is a marvellous setting for peace in a man's heart. For human love, not for such consuming passion as the Brontës are concerned with, as Madame Bovary was, but for the loves of Radha and Krishna—for a little of love's bread and wine, and betel nuts, and blue *saris*, and flute playing, and the scent of a body rubbed with camphored sandal paste—for that is there anywhere in the world a more perfect setting?

CONTENTS

I. Stranger and Stranger	I
II. Father and Son	5
III. Grandfather and Grandson	8
IV. Mother and Son	12
V. Husband and Wife	16
VI. Brother-in-law and Sister-in-law	22
VII. Miss Mayo's <i>Mother India</i>	28
VIII. The Men	35
IX. The Women	51
X. The Children	59
XI. Animals	63
XII. Indian Literature, I	68
XIII. Indian Literature, II	76
XIV. 'Hinduism is self-condemned'	83