

How India Can be Free

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HOW INDIA CAN BE FREE

BY

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THE PRESENT SITUATION

I WISH to consider carefully with you this evening, what the exact position of India is to-day, within the British Empire. Is it an honourable position, which can satisfy the ideal of freedom? Or is it one that is leading into further unending avenues of dependence and subjection? Is it a position of which an Indian may be proud? Or is it a position which must make every Indian, who loves his country, feel as a yoke from which as soon as possible he must get free?

This, to me, is the all-important question at the present time. It goes

far beyond all questions of co-operation and of Non-co-operation. It is fundamental. That is why I have called my subject to-night 'The Present Situation.'

First of all, I wish to say, that it is only the bitterest experience of disappointed hopes and shattered ideals, which has made me take up the position I have now for many months past publicly declared, that *independence* and *independence* alone is the ultimate goal; that for India to remain permanently within the Empire, is for India to forfeit her true independence.

When I was young, my father, who was a great idealist and a religious teacher, used to put before my mind the glory of the British Empire. He fully believed the British Empire to be a kind of Divine Providence on earth. This belief of my father became a kind of religious creed with me also in my

younger days. I was told, in every book I read, what wonderful benefits the British Empire had conferred upon India. I was told nothing, absolutely nothing, of the darker side of the story. No one could have been brought upon and instilled with more one-sided statements than I was. This almost religious belief in the British Empire ran in my very blood, and in the blood of all my ancestors; for we belonged to those who had been used to deal with Imperial ideals, and to glory in the adventurous spirit of the race to which we belonged.

I came out to India, somewhat late in life, with all these preconceptions. They had never been challenged, either at my school or at my College, or at my University. I had taken all of them for granted; I had been daily fed with them and reared on them, even as my parents and grand parents had been reared on them before me.

British Imperialism as a world-ideal coursed through every vein of my body and nourished all my mental thinking.

As I have just said, I came out to India when I had reached middle age ; and it is very hard to change one's whole mental outlook, when once middle age has been reached. I cannot tell you what a struggle it was in my own case. I fought against the truth, even when I saw it with my own eyes before me. I said to myself obstinately, "No, this that Indians tell me,—when they say that India is getting poorer and more dependent and more discontented under British Rule,—all this cannot possibly be true!" I fought, I say, against that conviction, till it was absolutely forced upon me, by hard, cold, stubborn, naked facts. I saw at last with open eyes that Indians were right in the main in what they

said, and my own countrymen were wrong. I went into the country districts as often as I could and examined the situation with my own eyes. I have travelled up and down India, as few Englishmen have been able to travel. Above all, I have lived with Indians themselves and shared their food and shelter and as often as I could, have worn Indian dress, as I am doing to-day. Thus I was able to avoid being merely flattered as a 'Sahib' and being told, for the sake of *khushamadi*, that all was well. I found out, little by little, that it was not well; that India was suffering from a deep-seated disease, which was becoming well nigh incurable.

And then I found out that every effort, which I made, to come nearer to Indians, was resented by the great majority of my own countrymen. They would say to me "a sahib is a sahib"

and he ought never to be familiar with "natives." That was what I had said to me continually by average Englishmen. Believe me,—that spirit, in spite of Reform Councils and congratulatory speeches, is no less strong to-day than it was when I came out to India seventeen years ago. There has been a hardening of the social division between the two races which has made the word *sympathy* almost a mockery. While, in certain circles, there has been a slight unbending for political reasons, in many other directions there has been a stiffening and a deliberate call of exclusion. If there had not been such a growing exclusiveness how is it possible to account for the almost universal approval of General Dyer's action at Amritsar? My own countrymen are, in the main, kindly and generous hearted people, who would not wish individually to do

any injustice; and yet the almost complete lack of sympathy between the races made the verdict of approval of General Dyer's actions so widespread, that huge funds were collected in his honour.

And so more than ten years ago I began to change my whole outlook. I saw that things had got to such a pass, in India itself, owing to the exploitation of India's poor (in order to keep up vast military expenditure) that it was high time that this economic imperialism, under the thin disguise of philanthropic benevolence, went no further. I saw also, that the racial exclusiveness, which meant perpetual separation of the two races, one from another, made the idea of India remaining within the British Empire, for a day longer than was absolutely necessary, absolutely unthinkable.

But it was my journeying abroad,

within the British Empire itself, which completely disillusioned me. Every single hope and ideal that I had received from my father and mother about the Empire, was shattered. I found that India was already, for all practical purposes, *outside the British Empire already*. Wherever I travelled I found that Indians were not wanted. The most savage exclusion laws had been passed to restrict Indian immigration. Insulting regulations were in force preventing Indians even from landing. And in South Africa, where Indians had been brought in by thousands to take the place of the earlier slave labour, those Indians who remained after the servile indenture was over, were so insulted and restricted and ostracised, that human life became one long degradation. I have told, in India, the things I have seen with my own eyes. I have related how my blood has boiled with indignation, till

I have scarcely been able to retain myself from returning violence with violence. So terrible were the insults I have seen, dealt upon Indians who were powerless to resist them.

And now,—as the last indignity of all,—we are told that at the next Imperial Cabinet meeting in London next June, the Prime Ministers of the whole Empire are to be asked to guarantee by a signed bond a “White Cabinet Empire.” The rest of the Empire is to be asked, whether it will build great ships to defend a ‘White Australia’ against the inhabitants of Asia. India in her helpless condition is to be asked to be a consenting party to this ultimate humiliation. Just as, for the sake of the British Empire, India has been called upon to shoot down Arabs and Syrians in Western Asia, so now she is to be called upon to *fight* for a ‘White Australia.’ This has been publicly proclaimed in the

“Times,” which quotes Mr. Keith Mardock’s words with approval, when he says that at the Imperial Cabinet meeting in June the subject is to be definitely brought forward by Australia whether guarantee will be given by the Empire to ‘fight for a white Australia.’

I have been blamed and condemned by my own fellow-countrymen for speaking of India as being separated from the British Empire. I have been equally blamed by some of my best friends among Indians themselves, who have never been outside India or seen the things that I have seen.

My answer has always been that the Colonials themselves have ignominiously hurled India, by their savage exclusion laws and white race policies, outside the British Empire. They have done this deliberately and every year that passes they are doing this more and more. They have one interest in India, and one interest alone. India is

useful strategically and commercially. She is useful as the hewer of wood and drawer of water.

But the anxious question may be asked, "How can India escape from this fate, and gain freedom from this humiliating position?"

The answer has been given, nearly forty years ago, by Sir John Seeley himself. He has said with fine logic, and his statement has never been challenged,—that India has no need to take the sword in order to be free: she has a much more powerful weapon ready to her hand. If once her people unitedly decide to be free, they can be free. It is an inconceivably impossible thing to coerce 320,000,000 people! And here we find in a way, that to me personally has been like a light in a dark place, that the supreme principles of *ahimsa* and of *satyagraha*—of 'non-violence' and of 'soul force,'—come directly into play. These are

the very weapons in our hands, by which our victory may be won. And no other weapons are needed !

All over the world, to-day, the greatest thinkers of mankind have been seeking for what has been called, the 'moral equivalent for war.' To me, it now appears, on a scale of unimaginable greatness, that this *moral* warfare is now to be waged for India's freedom. The weapons of that warfare are spiritual, not carnal. They are the weapons of the soul, not of the death-dealing mechanical and chemical devices of man. They are not armoured tanks and bombing aeroplanes and poison gas ; but the will of a united people determined to be free,—the will of a united people, which seeks to purify its own soul from all baser passions, and thus *deserve* and *win* its freedom.

It is true, that we have not, all of us, yet learnt to trust completely in those

weapons. There are still far too many instances of intimidation, and of violence only slightly veiled. But each month, under terrible provocation, the strict discipline of the soul is being gained, the old spiritual teaching of India, "not to return violence by violence," is being understood.

And we shall go on to learn that even greater and sublimer lesson, which was taught two thousand and five hundred years ago by India's greatest Seer and Sage : by Gautama the Buddha,—

“Overcome anger by kindness,
Overcome untruth by truth,
Overcome hatred by love.”

*Speech at Star Theatre
Calcutta, 4th March, 1921.*

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