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PROBLEMS OF A SWISS IN INDIA

The following talk was given at the Nouvelle Société Helvétique meeting on Thursday 17 April by Mr Paul A. Ramseyer, First Secretary of Embassy in charge of Press, Legal and Tax affairs.

It was, I remember, the last day of my stay at the Swiss Embassy in Cologne, where I had been sent as a trainee by the Political Department to brush up my German and learn how to behave. My Ambassador, Mr Troendle, receiving me in his office to let me have a look at the "qualifications" he had prepared for me (always a moment of great anxiety in the life of a civil servant), asked me rather bluntly if I preferred blondes or brunettes, adding immediately that it would be better if the latter were my choice because I was to be sent to India. Five weeks later I was in Bombay.

I had received from my parents a strict code of morality. And though my mother is a Catholic (and so perhaps more ready to compromise with the world), I had been educated in Geneva, moulded by the college and university founded by Calvin, confirmed at la Cathédrale de St-Pierre, and was still very much influenced by the environment of my native city and its way of thinking and living. In my naïveté I considered it – because chauvinism is a disease rather difficult to get rid of – to be the acme of perfection.

But, ladies and gentleman, don't imagine that I had never left Switzerland before; with my parents I had spent three years in Paris and started my secondary education there. Later on I was lucky enough to study in New York for a year and to travel through the States and Mexico. I had been sent to Germany as a trainee by the Political Department and during my year there travelled in Europe a great deal. But the meeting with India, the "homeland of spirit", the refuge of all religions, which is willing to call God by all the names that man has given Him, a country, on the other hand, of the most appalling poverty, dirt and misery, discomfort and backwardness – *that is quite a different thing*. It's the building of a love-hate relationship, it's an encounter with the infinite, with timelessness, with beauty, with eternity and death. And, even if I had decided not to be lyrical, how difficult it is not to succumb to the temptation.

But there I was, sure of my

superiority and of my convictions, certain of my beliefs, dressed up in my principles, all prim and proper, about to embark on an exotic adventure and to be the Third Secretary of the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi.

I did rather well in the first exam: a lunch with the Ambassador and Frau Botschafter which, as far as table manners were concerned, represented the most difficult hazards: artichokes from Frau Botschafter's garden, fish – it was a Friday – and peaches, apples and lychees for dessert . . .

My first encounter with the real India was to take place the next Saturday evening when I ventured alone into old Delhi. That Saturday evening in Chandhi-Chowk, the main street of old Delhi, was a sort of introduction to Indian culture and religion. You must picture a rather wide street full of men in turbans, women in coloured saris, people eating and sleeping on the pavements, beggars lamenting in front of temples, full of rickshaws – a sort of vehicle drawn by a bicycle where you sit on the back – donkeys, cows, motor cycles, cars and buses running one behind the other in complete chaos.

On the right entrance of the street you have a Jain temple whose priests walk around naked and wear a kind of cloth over their mouths like surgeons to avoid eating insects because they dare not kill any living creature. *Janism* is a monastic organisation, not strictly a religion. If I want to put it briefly, it is a sect of Buddhism founded at about the end of the 6th century BC. I entered the temple, having left at the entrance my shoes, my belt, my wallet, my wrist-watch, every leather object I had on me, and I visited the hospital for stray animals which the Jains are keeping behind the temple. How strange – people outside living in appalling conditions and birds, cattle and dogs being nicely fed – rather paradoxical, isn't it? Walking along Chandhi-Chowk I paid a visit to a *Hindu temple* dedicated to Siva, the destroyer and reproducer, whose symbol is a "lingam" (a phallus), surprising again to see in a country where sex seems to exist only for conceiving children – every year 12–15 million of them are born and only one million are prevented by family planning campaigns – to see women pouring milk and sugar on those huge and rather suggestive symbols, knowing, I am sure, perfectly well what they represent. I had the same thoughts when I visited the erotic temples of Kajuraho and Konorak

to see the fantasy, the incredible imagination in the sex relations of the Indians of the 13th century when you compare them to the way Indians live today.

Siva, his wife Kali, and their son Ganesh represented by a fat body with an elephant's head. I saw Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and his nine incarnations whose three last ones are the most famous: *Rama*, the hero of the epic poem "The Ramayana", *Krishna*, whose biography is given in another epic "The Mahabharata"; both poems are known by heart by every Hindu in India and, during the Diwali festival – festival of lights in October – in every town, in every village the whole population gathers under the banyan tree (the baobab) to sing verses and sometimes dance the adventures of Rama and Krishna. The last incarnation is *Buddha* – the enlightened – and his adoption as one of Vishnu's Reincarnation aimed at a compromise between Buddhism and Hinduism and led India to absorb Buddhism into the general Hindu culture. This is perhaps one of the best examples showing India's genius in absorbing any sort of philosophy, doctrine, technique and even science and transforming it into a truly Indian product.

Going down further along Chandhi-Chowk, I saw the Sikh-temple; the Sikh follow a guru named Nanak; they form a brotherhood in order to establish castes but in a way they have created a new one. They don't cut their hair, wear underwear – a rare thing in India – turbans, iron bangles and are usually well fed and heavy drinkers. They are not allowed to smoke!

The Sikhs in modern India are the target of a number of jokes, because it is said that their turbans, which men wear from the age of 12, have prevented their brains from developing normally. But beware, they are about 10–12 million, very good farmers – their land Punjab is the Texas of India – fine fighters, handsome and many ladies of the British Raj did not refuse, as I was told, their favours. Today, as I later noticed, they are the only Indian men who are absolutely sure of themselves when they have to deal with a white lady. They are indeed the "terrors" or the "pleasures" – it depends how you look at it – of some ladies of the diplomatic corps. Delhi, either because of the climate, the hot food, the strong smell of everything and everyone, or because ladies have nothing else to do but to give orders to a horde of

dedicated servants, is a bit of a "Sodom and Gomorrah" . . . For the rather naïve fellow I used to be, it was indeed fascinating to follow the intrigues of the long, warm summer nights, the gossip around the swimming pools. I felt sorry for the neglected spouse, until I was myself to be pitied, but "revenons à nos moutons".

I shall tell you that the *Moslems*, who form the largest minority of the country, were the rulers in the north for many centuries and, though they are more than 80 million, they no longer have an influence in proportion to their numbers. The President of the Union of India, Mr Ali Ahmed, is a Moslem, as his name indicates, but is a figurehead and nothing more.

I would not like to be tedious, but let me mention all the same the *Parsis* — followers of Zoroastra — who form a numerous and influential part of the population of Bombay. You have certainly heard of the Tata family who own half of the country and the number two of the Tata empire has married, fortunately for us, a Genevese, Mlle Dunoyer, the second-richest lady in India who has still a great attachment to her homeland. Let me also speak about the *Jews* in Kerala. And why not speak about the *Christians* and, to go back to Chandhi-Chowk, I discovered a tiny baptist chapel there, a rather queer symbol of Christianity in this strange street. The Christians came to India in the 6th century. They were Syrian Christians and settled down in the southern part of India, in Travancore and Cochin, and they were to be followed later by missionaries of all sorts of creeds and faiths, who worked hard to help the backward caste and the aborigines (Nagas, for example). The Christian population is estimated today at about 18 million, a drop of water in the nearly 600 million which India counts. *This small chapel was a shock for me.* It suddenly dawned upon me that I was merely one of those 18 million who believe in the notion of equality among men, of charity, even if I fail to practise it. What was I in this strange world, inhuman by its acceptance of poverty, selfish in its approach to society with this awful caste system, but a world which I have to confess could achieve for its people a peace of mind which eludes most of us Christians of the West and which so many young fellows, hippies and so on, are seeking on their way to Katmandou.

The most important difference between a person of the West and an Oriental is certainly the way an Oriental looks at things. We of the West have been involved in exploring the world we see and stripping it of its mysteriousness. The Orientals and the Indians most of all, instead of exploring the visible world, are asking above all: "What is it all about? Is it real? What part do we Indians form in this vast world?" That is perhaps as Kuswant Singh, a modern Indian author, wrote: "One of the explanations why the Indians never have completely succeeded in fighting against the elements and are

still today at the mercy of droughts, monsoon floods, epidemics and famines." We, in the West, have more or less mastered nature — some terrible avalanches, as those of last week, reminded us that we are still at the mercy of elements; but in India nature is still very much the master.

In spite of this hard nature, the Indians have, during the last 27 years of their independence, achieved more than in the preceding 200 years of British rule. The British had certainly done a lot: built harbours, established a railway link all over the country, left behind them a very good administrative and legal system, a good educational system too with a link-language, English, being spoken by every Indian who counts . . . But that was certainly not enough!

In what I shall be telling you now there is nothing, be certain, that could be taken for a propaganda weapon or for brainwashing, but they are the facts. When the British left, the average span of life of an Indian was 27 years, today it is 50. Illiteracy was about 90 per cent in 1947 when the British left. Now the proportion of literates has reached about 30 per cent; a very small amount, you will say, but in terms of figures it is simply enormous. 120 million people know how to read and write; more than 100 million boys and girls are going to schools and universities; what a task to educate them all!

Today nearly all the goods you find on the market are home-made products; the Indians make their own cars, buses, trucks, jet aircrafts, radio and television sets, and very sophisticated instruments and, as you know, in nuclear energy they are by no means underdeveloped! The atomic bomb which exploded last spring in the Rajasthani desert made enough noise . . .

In doing all that, unlike all their neighbours, the Indians have never renounced in any way the freedom of the individual, the principles of democracy, or the rule of law, and it is, especially for a Swiss, the most fascinating experience to see about 250 million men and women going to the polls, choosing their representative to the "Lok Sabha" — the national council — freely in spite of the corruption, the bribery and all other means in order to buy votes. At the end, even after accepting money from the candidates and sometimes large sums of money are involved, the citizen chooses whom he considers the most suitable one.

In India you have this wonderful feeling that you are free. The Press is incredibly free. You can call the Prime Minister whatever names you wish and many journalists do not hesitate to do so, and during my stay there they used to call her "the most charming witch", and that without being arrested or put into prison. I was told recently that freedom of the Press has been a bit eroded but, for God's sake, freedom is still there. Nothing is secret in India. There will always be someone to talk or write about it, and that, in the whole Third World, is only true of India. Radio and television —

where it exists — are state-controlled and don't show the same amount of objectivity as the Press does,

I know what you will tell me: "What does democracy mean when millions and millions of people live under the shadow of famine, the threat of unemployment, of disease, and epidemics?" But, as many of my Indian friends told me, and I suppose rightly, it is wiser to try democracy than to keep it in store for better days, which are, in any case, far away in the future. The women of India are the greatest asset of the country because they are tough, disciplined, courageous and have developed out of their mothers' bounds a strong personality which most men don't possess; but in fact their lot is still very hard indeed. They have a great influence on the country because they are the guardians of the house, of traditions and customs and it is not surprising that a woman is at the top; and what a lady! Mrs Ghandi is a shrewd politician, a fighter; and what femininity, what devastating charm, class and style! The only thing she is not is what she would need most: to be a true statesman, but that's another story. To govern a country of 600 million people divided into all sorts of creeds and races, with 57 languages, each spoken by more than one million people, with millions and millions of unemployed, millions living under inhuman conditions, with lower castes suffering humiliating discrimination; *that is not easy.* I always remember what I had said to the solicitor of the Embassy, a very brilliant Bengali: "Confronted with such a task of governing India, I would sit there, cross my arms, and do nothing." And, with a smile, the solicitor answered: "But that is precisely what they do, be sure!"

Corruption is also the topic of the day; it exists indeed but, ladies and gentlemen, tell me where corruption doesn't play a great role, with the exception of a few privileged countries, which we could count on the fingers of both hands. *Non-violence*, which many foreigners praised in the Indian citizen, is simply a myth; I have never seen, except in the streets of New York, so many fights, so much blood and violence, but on the other hand the country has given birth to great non-violent leaders: Buddha, Guru Nanak and Mahatma Ghandi. Again a paradox . . .

Money is also the favourite topic of the average Indian. But he speaks about it without the hypocritical approach we have towards it in the West. He simply enjoys it when he has it without any guilt complex or whatever else.

I could go on and on because India, in spite of all her terrible aspects, if you have once been taken by it, is like addiction to a drug, you cannot stop liking it. In order not to inflict such a spell on you, I had better stop talking or, to put it better, in more Western style, I shall simply stop talking to avoid committing the unforgivable crime of a talker who becomes a true bore.

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