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OP-ED

India of old-new dreams

Claude Arpi

The first days of the New Year are a time for reflection. During the last few days, I have been "musing" over the past 28 years that I spent in this country. Though I am still a French man, I adopted this country as my own long ago.

However, today, I am sad.

When I left France for India, I came with a dream: I was going to the land of the Vedas, of the Buddha, a continent with an eternal religion. I thought everyone in this country was turned "inwards", seeking a higher light; I believed India would soon be able to guide the world towards a more meaningful tomorrow.

Why I am sad now? I can't help feeling a terrible divide between this dream and today's reality (at least the one depicted in the English media). Opening a "national" newspaper is a most depressing act. This morning for example, I read: after three days of deliberations, an Indian History Congress has decided to set up a committee to examine the new history text-books brought out by NCERT. Their reason is that the Congress "takes note of the reports in the press that elementary requirements of impartiality when dealing with religious, linguistic and cultural traditions had been given a go-by."

Is it not disheartening that historians base their judgement on press reports and not on their own scholarship? Then why do they spend three days discussing text-books when there are so many more important subjects related to history to be discussed? What about the neglected discoveries of Poompuhar or the new sites in the Gulf of Cambay? What about the non-release of the Henderson Brooks Report of 1962 war or Indira Gandhi-Bhutto negotiations of 1972 which are still classified? Are they not history too?

What is sad and shocking is that these historians, like many intellectuals in India, are not at all concerned by what has always made India great, they prefer to denigrate India. Fifty-five years ago, Mahatma Gandhi wanted "a Harrow boy, a Cambridge graduate, and a barrister" to carry on the negotiations with the British. More than half a century later, India's so-called elite are ashamed of what has been the fabric and genius of their culture.

One can see the tremendous repercussions of this mentality in all fields of life and most particularly in education. For example, India should be proud to have an Education Minister who is not only a physicist, but also a knower of the country's deeper traditions. But the reaction is reverse. He is constantly maligned for no rhyme or reason. His only crime is to have tried to introduce some Indianness in a colonial system of education. On several occasion, talking to Indian friends, I have had the surprise of being told that "Indianisation" of education is part of a "fascist programme".

At the dawn of this New Year, this makes me sad. I still believe in "India of the ages", but I cannot grasp why Indians themselves still refuse to acknowledge the greatness of their culture. Even if you look at what is happening abroad today, you

can see the truth of Andre Malraux's words: "The 21st century will be spiritual or will not be." It is estimated that 12 million Americans are today practicing yoga and that 450 yoga centers are blossoming in the US. The same tidal wave is submerging Europe. In France alone, more than one million people are practicing Buddhist meditation.

Recently, some disciples of yogacharya BKS Iyengar decided to teach yoga asanas to villagers. As a first experiment, Jalore, a small town located in Rajasthan, was chosen and a few selected teachers went there for a week. One teacher recounts: "The greatest challenge came on the day of our arrival, when we were briefed about the tradition and lifestyle of the people of this region. Society here is very traditional and conservative." Women wear saris with pallu in front of elders; a daughter-in-law could not sit in front of elders; men had never worn shorts.

A few days later, all barriers had gone. The teacher reported: "We had not realised it at first, but along with teaching yoga, we had brought about some kind of social change in this small town... Even the organisers were very much surprised when they learnt how easily people had accepted 'mixed' classes... the response, the enthusiasm, the love and affection shown by the local people willed us to continue."

This experience shows not only how ingrained these traditional sciences are in the very blood of the ordinary Indians but also how they could bring immediate benefit to the Indian society. If experiences similar to Iyengar's could be multiplied by hundred or thousand, if every school in this country could be given the possibility to study and practice India's ancient knowledge along with modern subjects, India would become closer to the place I dreamt of thirty years ago.

READERSPEAK

Latest comment: "I really liked the article, Indians need to look into their own past to make a better future instead of looking at the west for all solutions. The Gandhi Nehru philosophical impact on the Hindus of India has greatly contributed to the present day situation. Nehru distorted the Indian history and made a rule to hate and make fun of any thing that is related to Hinduism. The present day English media is walking the same path. They try to look towards western masters and criticize their own religion. "

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