



## **Bourgeoisie and Samurai**

*Thursday, August 04, 2005*

A few weeks after Mr LK Advani's much-debated remarks on the secularism of MA Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, the history of India was once again revisited, this time by the Indian Prime Minister. The occasion was Mr Manmohan Singh's acceptance speech for an Honorary Degree conferred on him by his alma mater, the Oxford University.

The date was July 8, a day after the terrorist attack on the London underground and three days after the suicide bombers' attempt to blow up the makeshift Ram temple in Ayodhya. Indeed, India and Great Britain had something in common and for the first time perhaps the Blair Government began to realise it. But the Indian Prime Minister thought there was more. He pronounced the small sentence which has now become the object of a heated debate and controversy: "India's experience with Britain had its beneficial consequences too." Mr Singh went on to add: "Our notions of the rule of law, of a constitutional government, of a free press, of a professional civil service, of modern universities and research laboratories have all been fashioned in the crucible where an age old civilisation met the dominant Empire of the day... Our judiciary, our legal system, our bureaucracy and our police are all great institutions, derived from British-Indian administration and they have served the country well." And of course India's soul: The famous game of cricket!

I was pondering 'historically' at the pros and the cons of Mr Singh's

pronouncements, when an old text written by Sri Aurobindo in the first years of the 20th century came back to my mind. In this handwritten note, the great nationalist leader (a Cambridge alumni) takes the example of India and Japan and studies their evolution during the 19th century.

He first remarks that while "the smaller nation (Japan) has become one of the mightiest powers in the modern world, the larger, in spite of far greater potential strength, a more original culture, a more ancient and splendid past and a far higher mission in the world, remains a weak, distracted, subject and famine-stricken people, politically, economically, morally and intellectually dependent on the foreigner and unable to realise its great possibilities."

The commonly held belief was that this difference was due to the reforms that Japan had undertaken. While India continued to cling to "outworn and effete" beliefs, Japan had "got rid of ideas and institutions unsuited to modern times". Sri Aurobindo does not accept this explanation, for he believes that "it is the spirit in man which moulds his fate, it is the spirit of a nation which determines its history".

Contrary to India, Japan had remained faithful to its ancient spirit: The spirit of the Samurai. It may have used social and political forms originated from Europe, but only to "complete her culture under modern conditions and poured into these forms the old potent dynamic spirit of Japan". The Samurai spirit was dominant in Japan while India remained asleep, and "European culture has had upon (her) a powerful disintegrating and destructive influence, (India) has been powerless to reconstruct or revivify (her culture)."

Having forgotten its ancient spirit, India chose to copy Europe: "In India, the bourgeois, in Japan, the Samurai; in this single difference is

comprised the whole contrasted histories of the two nations during the nineteenth century," says Sri Aurobindo, and goes on to define what he calls the Bourgeois prototype: "In the conduct of public movements he has an exaggerated worship for external order, moderation and decorum and hates over-earnestness and over-strenuousness.

Not that he objects to plenty of mild and innocuous excitement; but it must be innocuous and calculated not to have a disturbing effect on the things he most cherishes. He has ideals and likes to talk of justice, liberty, reform, enlightenment and all similar abstractions... He wishes to have them maintained, if they already exist, but in moderation and with moderation; if they do not exist, the craving for them should be, in his opinion, a lively but still well-regulated fire, not permitted to interfere with the safety, comfort and decorum of life."

The Sage continues: "...The bourgeois is the man of good sense and enlightenment, the man of moderation, the man of peace and orderliness, the man in every way 'respectable', who is the mainstay of all well-ordered societies. As a private man he is respectable; that is to say, his character is generally good... he is all decorous in his virtues, decent in the indulgence of his vices or at least in their concealment, often absolutely honest, almost always as honest as an enlightened self-interest will permit."

Unfortunately for Sri Aurobindo: "Such a type may give stability to a society; it cannot reform or revolutionise it. Such a type may make the politics of a nation safe, decorous and reputable. It cannot make that nation great or free." And indeed the Indian bourgeois was a creation of British policy, English education, an avatar of Western civilisation.

Ancient Indian culture was not a favourable soil for the bourgeois: "The spirit of ancient India was aristocratic; its thought and life moulded in the cast of a high and proud nobility, an extreme and lofty

strenuousness. The very best in thought, the very best in action, the very best in character, the very best in literature and art, the very best in religion and all the world well lost if only this very best might be attained, such was the spirit of ancient India."

Having forgotten his own roots, his own spirit, the bourgeois depended on conventional outward signs of merit: "A university degree, knowledge of English, possession of a post in Government service or a professional diploma, a Government title, European clothes or a sleek dress and appearance, a big house full of English furniture, these were the badges by which society recognised its chosen."

Nobody denies that the British legal system, British bureaucracy, British police or British universities were great institutions. However, it is not the true question: Does the Prime Minister's statement mean that what is good for the British is automatically universally good (and particularly good for India)?

Indian independence's greatest tragedy is that the leadership of free India was possessed by the bourgeois spirit. Perhaps they wanted to show the world that they had been well-trained by the British, but the fact remains that the Samurai energy had vanished. Take Kashmir for example. Instead of looking at the problem in the Samurai way, the Indian leadership tried to please the British and take "a safe, decorous and reputable way" to the UN Security Council. The result is that 58 years later, the issue has not moved an inch (or, a centimetre).

To give another example, soon after India's independence, it was decided to adopt the Soviet model of planned economy and neglect the traditional system: India thus became a sub-power. Ironically, it is to the credit of the person who today praises the British, to have initiated India's economic resurgence: He made it possible for the nation to stand on its feet.

Sri Aurobindo had predicted: "Our only hope of resurgence was in some such great unsealing of the eyes to the Maya in which we existed and the discovery of some effective mantra." It happened in the 1990s in the economic field: "We can do it" was the mantra.

Unfortunately the British institutions adopted at the time of independence have remained and are still impeding India's growth. The nation still suffers and is unable to find its true place in the world. During its history, India has never shone when it has aped other civilisations, but rather when it has followed its own ancient spirit. Nalanda or Taxila and not Oxford is the answer.