

Smallness

Let me warn you , reader , that this essay is a place for me to not just critically and unsparingly analyse the greatest malady that our nation is afflicted by, but also a receptacle for the emotions inspired in me by this same malady. Our dreams, our aspirations, our hopes and expectations, all of these can only be described as 'small', and not befitting the greatness which our nation must lay claim to as her right.

Let me begin with our history. We all know – or rather, have been told – that our nation has a glorious past, that it was the most advanced and prosperous country of the world, during the time beginning with the urban revolution and ending with the coming of the industrialised European imperialists (clichéd as that sounds). We all have been told that ours is the culturally richest nation, and the only one with an unbroken religious, social, political, economic, literary, and in general cultural tradition .

This is partially true. In the same way that the ritual remains long after its symbolism is gone, our traditions have remained long after the institutions which developed them, and which they in their turn nourished, have perished. Our traditions have no soul left in them, no life, no regenerative capacity. They are, however, the last remnants of institutions which can still be made relevant and can still restore us to the glory to which we are today too small to aspire, and beyond, and therefore the need today is not to stick to them blindly, but to infuse new life into them.

But we ignore the cause of the lifelessness of these traditions and institutions. Why did the life-force leave them? Why is it that they are today being supplanted by Western institutions? Why do they no longer inspire and ennoble the people as they once did? Why is it that the elite looks down upon them?

I will address these questions one by one.

Let us start with the first. Why did the life-force leave the institutions created with great care by our ancestors? The answer is not easy to find in today's intellectual climate, though it is obvious from a simple and unbiased perusal of Indian history. For the last thousand years, India has been under the rule of imperialists bent on wiping out India itself. When I say 'wiping out India', I refer to the attempt made by the Islamic invaders and the British to completely destroy the culture and prosperity of India, respectively.

The British succeeded completely, the Islamic invaders partially. If you want to see the success of the British, witness how impoverished not just India, but also Greater India is today. Afghanistan is a hellhole, Pakistan is a failed state, India is only now picking up the pieces of her tattered economy and recovering around a tenth of what she once possessed, Nepal is an economic mess, the Bangladeshi problem needs no introduction, and Indonesia is going down the fundamentalist drain.

If you want to see the success of the Islamic invaders, then see how Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan have completely lost their cultural ties to India (even though India is slowly re-establishing relations with Afghanistan for her own purposes), and how Indonesia is going down the same path of fundamentalism and eventual collapse (for an example, just see how Aceh province has adopted regressive Shariah laws).

For a spectacular demonstration of these examples, look at the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

The Taliban had no affinity with these symbols of Afghanistan's glorious past, of its rich history, of its culture and its traditions, they had eyes only for Arab glory, for what they perceived to be Muslim glory. And in their eyes, Muslim glory consisted of destroying idols. The cruelty of this act is brought out most starkly by the fact that the locals of Bamiyan are looking to rebuild the Buddhas, because they depended on them for the income brought to them by tourists.

Now imagine such cruelty happening continuously, imposed on a land for over a millennium, imagine iconoclasts as bad as the Taliban ruling over our beloved mother India for over one thousand years. And imagine how much cultural destruction they must have wreaked on her. What we see today are but the last remains of our cultural heritage. We cannot even begin to imagine what we must have had when we were whole. Remember Nalanda library? The fire in which it was consumed burnt for a full seven days. The knowledge which was lost can never be recovered, but we have tantalising hints of what the ancients must have possessed, specially in the fields of philosophy and mathematics.

After the Islamic invaders came the British, with their plundering of our natural resources and the wealth we had build up over many thousand years. All the wealth of the temples, of the kings and the state, of the people, of everyone, in fact, was taken away bit by bit in a span of a hundred and fifty years. The best and hardest-hitting example of British success I can give is that I am writing this essay in English, and that an English-language education is a necessity for succeeding in India today.

After seeing how these invasions literally 'interrupted' India for over one thousand years, it becomes obvious why our traditions lie lifeless today. It is because the institutions which they created and depended upon were destroyed. With those gone, how could everything else continue as if nothing had happened?

Let us take the example of the university system of ancient India. Since time immemorial, we have had a tradition of learned men congregating in small townships with state patronage, in order to spread their ideas and come in contact with the new ideas of others. With the patronage of the state gone, how could this go on? The Islamic invaders were not the sort of people to fund gatherings of learned Hindus. Not only that, they actively destroyed the universities they could get their hands on. Remember Nalanda. Remember Takshashila. Remember Vikramshila. Remember Somapura. Remember Vallabhi. Remember Odantapuri. These could have been our Oxford and Cambridge and Harvard and M.I.T. and Berkeley. We were the ones to give the idea of a university to the West. Yet our own universities were destroyed.

Or take the example of the traditional system of education. It was destroyed by the British. The examples can be multiplied manifold, but the lesson is the same – the institutions which these traditions created and were dependent upon were destroyed, and thus it was that the traditions themselves lost their meaning and became mere ritual.

Now for the second question. Why is it that the traditional institutions are being supplanted by Western ones? The first and obvious reason is that it is because, as previously stated, they are hollow. The second reason is because it is the West and its institutions today which are most suited to modernity. The definition of modernity I am using is, of course, a Western one, but that is inevitable given our circumstances. Alternatives can, however, be developed, and that is the crying need of the day – to provide whatever gifts the West has given an Indian context, to make them suitable to our civilisational ideals.

The third question also has the same answer. Why do they no longer inspire the people? It is because they are hollow and no longer relevant. Not having had the necessary opportunities to evolve, old

traditions today are mostly worthless in and of themselves, but are valuable because they can be made to hold a new meaning.

The fourth question is an important one. Why does the elite look down upon them? It is precisely because they fail to inspire the people – because even though they may be the elite, they are still people. That, however, is symptomatic of a greater failure – the failure of the elite to infuse new meaning into old ways, which is their job since the beginning of organised Indic society. It was always a few people at the top who showed the way to the rest, and if what was being said was reasonable, it was adopted by the masses. The outward form or ritual usually remained the same, but the meaning changed profoundly. It is a shame that we have no person of that calibre with us today. It is also a shame that the elite today is not willing to recognise itself as such, because that entails a great responsibility, a responsibility which they are afraid to take on, even though it is their national duty, and this fear is another manifestation of that same 'smallness' of men in general which India is afflicted with today.

After having taken that rather lengthy detour about why our institutions and traditions lack spirit, let us see the consequences of this systemic failure. Because of this, we have become a small people. We have lost faith in ourselves. We no longer dream of conquering new frontiers. We no longer trust our own creative ability. We judge ourselves by foreign standards. We consider imported goods better than indigenous ones without comparing the two. And the worst thing in all of this is that even these things are not of our own judgement, they are the products of an entirely imported view of the world. We even see ourselves through foreign glasses.

'Smallness' is a very difficult concept to define. The closest I can come to defining it is that it is as the state of a person whose dreams have died. He no longer has any ambitions, any drive, and his only thought is of surviving. He never tries to be creative. He is incapable of facing the past and the future. He is no longer fully alive.

Whenever it seems a Bollywood film has any chance of netting a foreign award, we all rally behind it, nor realising that we deserve much better, and that we should have our own institutions to reward good movie making, recognition by which should be sought by the rest of the world. And this is not specific to movie making. Even our literary world is afflicted with the same malady. We start immediately loving an author after he has writing wins recognition in the West. We do not trust our own judgement when it comes to our own authors.

We have completely lost faith in ourselves and our ability. We no longer control our own destiny. Societal changes today are random, and mostly a reflection of what is happening in the Western world, and not representative of an Indic civilisational ethos. We never undertake anything that seems to be too large, or too ambitious. We never seek to achieve the impossible – one of our specialities in the ancient era. In circumstances under which any other civilisation would have given up, during that same era, we achieved the impossible.

We built infrastructure which would be difficult to reproduce even today. The balance of trade was so favourable to us in those times that Indian kings did not have to mint their own currency – the currency obtained from the rest of the world via trade was enough to run the economy of most kingdoms! We controlled more than 22% of the world's wealth. Many temples used to be lit at night with the *ghee* obtained from more than a thousand cows – in one day. People from China and places as far as Greece came to study at our universities. Our philosophy and culture spread all over Indonesia, and acted as a quick-starter to their own development.

But tell me this, reader – how many of us dream of regaining even a fraction of that glory? Today, most of us would be content to have Kashmir. How many of us have the vision in front of their eyes of an Indic world renewed, stretching from Afghanistan in the North-West to the southernmost tip of Indonesia in the South-East? We are proud of our foreign exchange reserves – but who dreams of the day when we won't need them? We today lament the increasingly pernicious effect that many imported social institutions are having – but who thinks of the day when our own society will be the one that is reflected across the globe? We take pride in our past mathematical and scientific achievements – but science and mathematics are neglected subjects in the universities today. We were the centre of philosophy in the world for a very long time – but today, there is not a single Indian philosopher worthy of note. We are proud of being an 'IT Superpower' – even when this consists of essentially acting as the back-office of the world, and doing what amounts to grunt work. We consider the ideal state to be that which America has achieved – but have we ever considered that we were far greater than them once, and can be once again?

We no longer think of conquering new frontiers. We are content to play catch-up with the rest of the world, we are afraid to take the risks involved in blazing a new trail. Today, there is talk of putting an Indian on the moon by the year 2020. Yet, how many of us can conceive of a far greater and more productive goal – the conquest of the asteroid belt? The minerals in that belt are enough to fuel the industries of Earth for millennia. It may seem to many like an unachievable dream – and that precisely is why it must be undertaken. We should be willing to commit the resources necessary to undertake to such a project. We should be willing to think in terms of the many decades required to achieve such a goal. The spin-off technologies from such an undertaking are enough to justify the investment, even if the project itself fails. But small as we are, we cannot even begin to imagine something of this scale.

When it comes to philosophy, the ancients sought to “know that by knowing which everything becomes known”. Yet how many original philosophical thoughts have come out of India since independence? There are two ways to achieve the old goal – the first way is science, and we are woefully lacking in that area, and the second is philosophy, the grimness of whose situation is such that there is no point in elaborating further.

We no longer trust our own creative ability. Whenever there is some difficult piece of engineering to be done, we prefer that it be done by outsiders, most commonly the Japanese or the Germans. How many of us dream of elevating Indian engineering to the top, of making Indian engineering the standard, by which all other countries are judged? Indian art is but a pale imitation of whatever happens to be the latest fad in Western artistic circles. Our own incomparably beautiful art finds no takers. Indian classical music is probably the one field where we still retain our self-confidence.

As is amply clear from all the examples I gave till now, we persist in judging ourselves by standards which are not our own. And therein lies the root of a lot of the trouble. By accepting the criticisms which have been levelled against us by our civilisational enemies, and by internalising them, we lose faith in ourselves, and all the other things are a by-product of this. We need to redefine ourselves, and this time without the imposed baggage.

In the Valmiki Ramayana, when Sugriva is ordering his generals to search the whole Earth in order to find Sita, he describes the ancients' view of the world. In it we come across a reference of 'Yawadweep', which is modern-day Java. So even in that time, we had our own coherent view of the world. We need to develop such a view once again, and this time it should not be from the point of view of our colonisers, but from our own.

Having examined the consequences of such a systemic failure, what is the way out? I must confess

that I do not have it, but the first step is clear – do not think small. Get out of this negativist mindset. Think big. Very big. Very, very big.

Throw off the chains of conditioning. Learn to think for yourself. Realise that revolutions are possible, and that they can be worked by even one man, and that that is the man you could be. The first step is to work the revolution within – the rest will come on its own. Let me conclude with a quote:

“Instead of passivity, activity; for the standard of weakness, the standard of strength; in place of a steadily-yielding defence, the ringing cheer of a invading host. Merely to change the attitude of the mind, in this way, is already to accomplish a revolution.”

- Sister Nivedita