

A VISIT TO TRAVANCORE

A. GORDON MELVIN

THE most signal humanitarian decree of the twentieth century was that of the Maharajah of Travancore opening the temples of his realm to the untouchables. It was therefore with unusual expectation that I looked forward to an audience with the ruler of Travancore very shortly after his great decree. Most fortunately my wife and I, during our stay in Trivandrum, capital of the State, were guests of members of the Nair caste, the ruling families of Travancore. In the magnificent home of our friends we were privileged to meet "the best people" of Trivandrum, and to sink into the atmosphere of that land of tropical glory. Thus we heard much on every hand of the Maharajah and the Maharani. We saw their photographs in every home. We heard of them as we were entertained at tea, or in boats on the beautiful backwaters. We asked of them as we sat cross-kneed on the floor in Indian costume, at a dinner given for us in Indian style. We ate our excellent curries from a large piece of plantain leaf, with unskilled right hands. As we ate, our hosts sprinkled us with rose water. After dinner the most charming of the guests, a beautiful girl of sixteen, sang sweetly as she accompanied herself in a soft organ monotone. We were presented with a sweet-smelling lime, and a garland of heavy-scented jasmine. Occasionally the conversation dwelt upon the Maharajah, or his mother the Maharani, through whose matriarchal line the throne descends; upon their intelligence or their grace.

Thus as our car hurried through the streets, the brass bazaars, the places of carved ivory, we were already prepared for a pleasant interview. The car tore onward over excellent roads, between bullock carts slowly moving aside almost too late, by pariah dogs asleep on the road, children or bearers of burdens all reluctant to move aside at the raucous honk-honk of our horn. As we went, I planned an interview. I wished to talk of the untouchables, of world affairs, and of education in Travancore—but most of all to see a Maharajah and a Maharani who are close to the hearts of their people—to see, if possible, wherein lay this power of theirs over the hearts of their people, this ability to be great in their behalf. The car moved on to the magnificence of a great tropical park, and up to the door of the great white Kaudiar Palace.

It was four o'clock on a hot afternoon in December, almost the anniversary of a day years ago when Pierre Loti, as he relates in his book on India, was received by the Maharajah. The tiled waiting room was pleasantly cool in a hot land, but we had little time to observe it. A handsome gentleman-in-waiting, in the smartest of white uniforms, invited us to enter the audience chamber, a magnificent room furnished in the best western taste.

Their Highnesses were standing to receive us,—the Maharajah in white, with a turban surmounting his fine features. The Maharani was simply dressed in a white cotton sari, worn about the waist in the mode which denotes aristocracy. Both were in bare feet, the bare feet of their people. Both were simple and gracious in manner. Both spoke faultless English with an English accent, for Travancore, although outside British India, is allied to England. We were invited to sit, and took the liberty of accepting, after our hosts. My wife sat on the blue velvet divan by the Maharani, and chatted with her, while I sat opposite talking to the Maharajah.

His Highness proved to be the most easy and distinguished conversationalist I met in the East. His grasp of world affairs and of the problems of his people was amazing and satisfying. I was eager to have the opportunity of saying to him what the world was saying, to tell him of the world's wide gratitude to him for his freeing of the untouchables. There was no need for me to do more than thank the Maharajah, and to tell him that the whole world knew of his great act, and was thankful. Thankful because the chains of the caste system were shattered, that system which for centuries has held India in fealty, and today still binds her people in states other than Travancore. It is said that the caste system is a remnant of ancient Aryan invasions through the Khyber Pass in North India. As early as 515 B.C., Darius the Great sent an expedition from Persia. In 334 B.C., came Alexander the Great. Genghis Khan came from Mongolia in 1219 A.D., Timur of Samarkand in 1398 and Baber from Kabul in 1525. Each group of fair-skinned invaders intermarried and intermingled. The word caste in Sanskrit means "colour". So the British, the last of the white-skinned people to come to India, were not the first to bring the notion of white-skinned superiority. From time immemorial, lightness of skin has indicated highness of caste and pureness of blood. The two dark-skinned lads who talked most intimately to me in the East each confessed to a determination to marry a white girl. By age-long tradition Indian culture associates high caste with white colour and pure blood. But birth and blood tie a man to his caste. Birth thus limits him to his vocation, whether to the

priesthood or to the washing of clothes. It limits him to his own racial connections, his own social contacts and comrades. To break caste is to become a social outcast, whom no one will receive, employ or help in time of need. And as the Maharajah pointed out to me, reconciling men to it all is the creed of the common man, the belief in *karma*—that fate which decrees all that comes to a man—what is, must be, one's fate. For who knows that better or worse may come in some future reincarnation?

Most degraded among the castes, dark inheritors of the toil and travail of this world, have been the untouchables, and more pitiful still, the unapproachables. To be near them was to be polluted, even as they themselves. But to-day these same untouchables may enter and touch the "holy", the innermost of the temples, the great temples of India, their towers high tapering oblongs, encrusted with grotesque figurines, smoky within their lamplit shrines to Shiva or some other. They may steal in at evening where the other villagers gather at some rural retreat of Hinduism. Here I saw these untouchables of the countryside bringing their flowers at evening, stand watching the flickering lights within the small temple, pass camphor smoke with their hands from lamp to brow, as the priest brought forward the lamp just raised before the innermost idol. To them these things are, after a fashion, holy. Now these holy things are for them also. As the Maharajah explained to me, if they may enter and touch what is regarded as holy, where may they not go? They can no more be barred from any place or any people.

But the Maharajah would take no credit to himself. He denied any merit in the matter. All he would say was said in thanks to his people who, he said, wanted the reform; to his ministers and the leaders of society who were helping in its realization. Yet his modesty should not blind us to the fact. It is due to the rich humanity of this young man of twenty-four, whose birthday celebration, held in a vast pageant of Eastern tribute, was followed next day by his epoch-making decree. Nor should we forget the fine human superiority of his mother, the Maharani, who has educated him at home in the finest ideals of sovereignty descending from a long line of great rulers. "One must consider what is just. Then, if it be just, it must be accomplished," said Her Highness. Only by being just can a ruler be happy. For then he is without a troubling conscience. We hold a trust, a trust from God. That trust we must strive to fulfil. Only such a philosophy could support a sovereign through the magnificent series of reforms which have been promoted by these faithful rulers.

Years ago, in a brave line of duty, men and women in Travancore pioneered against social odds. Ignoring the severe consequences of the breaking of caste which followed any trip across the waters to another country, these men went abroad for a modern education. This power of education which had broken their bonds they brought back to their people to free them also in their turn. Their bravery was rewarded, for in time the Maharajah decreed restoration of caste to these pioneers. This in turn opened the way, so that in a few years Maharajah and Maharani travelled to England, France and Germany, the first of their line to leave their lovely Travancore.

In the accomplishment of reform skilful political leaders have been at work. Not the least of these is the Prime Minister or Dewan, Sir C. P. Ramaswami. A distinguished figure in Indian affairs, Sir C. P., as he is called locally, has participated in the Round Table Conferences in London, particularly that to which Gandhi went a few years ago. We were fortunate also in being received by the Dewan, who had just returned from an important conference with the Hindu leaders of the State on problems arising out of the decree. The room in which we were received would do credit to any London mansion. Furnished throughout in modernistic style, it was tastefully decorated with choice Oriental art. Old vases from China, oriental rugs on a polished floor, an ancient Chinese scroll of great beauty, and a superb painting in rich greens and reds of some old tree, painted by Tagore! The Dewan felt satisfied that the changes coming as a result of the new decree were proceeding satisfactorily. That this is so, is due largely to his ability. The various oppositions to reform have been met with excellent statesmanship. Hindu leaders were called together before it was made. They were told that the untouchables were in revolt. Many believed that they would leave Hinduism in a mass and go over to Christianity. "Not that we would object to that," said one Hindu gentleman to me in conversation, "if they went over by conviction, but any such mass movement for political purposes alone would have no value to any group." Carefully the Hindu leaders were persuaded that they must accept the inevitable. Most disturbed of all are the Brahmins, privileged priestly caste. Clustering about the temples in compact and crowded villages, they live a comparatively idle life. As long as they can find lodging they are free, for their caste is entitled to food from the temple supply. Such a new ruling, destructive of the principle of caste, must be against their private interests. But so wisely has all this been handled that when the decree came the people were ready, so that no social disturbance has followed.

One should not be misled, however, into a belief that the bondage is entirely broken overnight by a decree. The old ways are too strong to fall away in a night. The untouchables themselves are too bound in a web of custom to aspire to new rights. Realization must come gradually. A little trying out by the untouchables, a little pressure from the missionaries! In one village, for instance, although the untouchables had been given the right by law to draw water from the village well, they were being forbidden. The local missionary went to the Headman of the village. They had a pleasant talk, during which the Headman said that he had no objection, but the people would not allow it. His attention was called to the fact that the law had come through to him, and the rights of the untouchables were insisted upon. So, from then on, they drew their water at set times when others kept away. At first there was resentment. Attempts were made by the orthodox to secure water elsewhere. But gradually the effort became too great, and the new order was established. Sometimes a little government pressure is necessary, a calling together of the religious leaders of the temples. But the walls are down, and men will soon forget them and pass by.

In the wider affairs of the world the Maharajah is well versed. He views Europe as ready and armed for an outbreak, but he does not expect a world war for some years. With this opinion the present writer is in agreement. As the Maharajah indicated, in spite of the fears of alarmists there is a general awareness of the dangers involved in current armament races. It is this awareness which will operate to prevent a world conflagration. Troubles may break out, as they have already done, in Ethiopia and China. In these cases the diplomacy of the world outdid itself to avoid a spread of the conflict. Such is the pattern of the times. Just as the realization of the violence of a high voltage charge makes men insulate against it, so a new and greater caution may defer a world war for some years.

Cultural development is well under way in Trivandrum. The rulers have shown great interest in the development of cultural and educational institutions. The art gallery, which was organized with the help of Dr. Couzens, the Irish poet, is admirable. There may be seen Bagh's copies of some superb murals from ancient temple walls, as well as the original work of some modern Indian artists. Educational institutions are numerous and modern. We visited with admiration the Science College, the beautiful Women's College, with its unusual group of buildings, one of them in Egyptian architecture, and the Training College for Teachers,

with its model school of young aristocrats. It is not difficult to see how the force of education is everywhere at work for reform.

The Maharani herself showed a most amazing interest and understanding of education. So brilliant were her remarks on the real needs of her people that I wish they might have been written down as she spoke them. She realized that the children should not be educated out of the life they are in, into so far-away a realm as that of unpractical literacy. She realized that they should rather be educated from the beginnings in their own homes and communities into a coordinated use of the hands and head. The need for some basket for use at home should proceed through a purposeful making of the needed object and the fulfilment of the children's living. Education, she said, was not compulsory for children in Trivandrum. All children go to school voluntarily; and so, why should education be made compulsory? It is better to have them come willingly, than to bring them by force. So Eastern and Western concepts merge in practice. Through education, reforms in Travancore proceed with peaceful thoroughness.

And now freedom for the untouchables! After this, the deluge. Now any reform may come—nothing can be too radical. The Maharajah and the Maharani have themselves taken the lead among a devoted people.