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BOOK REVIEWS

I AM THOU : *Meditations on the Truth of India,* Ramchandra Gandhi, Indian Philosophical Quarterly Publications, 1984, pp. xii + 311, Rs. 70/-.

'Only Connect'. That was the gospel of E. M. Forster, the novelist. Sri Ramchandra Gandhi — the author of 'I am Thou' — shows a similar, though much more thoroughgoing passion for connections. Only, here it is not the field of personal relations but that of the impersonal, — or, rather, trans-personal-relations of philosophical truth that the author seeks to cultivate through his rare sense of adventure among ideas. And how brilliantly does he connect; One has only to attune oneself to a few of his meditations, e.g. 'Resurrection and Reincarnation', 'Abrahamism and Advaita', 'Yasodhara and Mary' to appreciate the relevance as well as the coherence of his arguments. The home-connections are particularly illuminating; and interpretations of mythology such as we find in 'Sesa-lila', 'Sri Ganesa', 'Sri Laksmi and Sri Amba' are refreshingly original. One also feels grateful for the insights that are scattered in chapter after chapter — especially in 'Speed is not the end of life', 'Sambodhana', 'A Bania's deal' and 'The world speaks to us'. This last meditation, by the way, reminded me of Heidegger, whose definition of the world as "a mirror-play of the simple onefold of earth and sky, Divinities and Mortals" seems curiously close to Sri Gandhi's own account of it. Similarly, what he tells us about the twentieth century reincarnations of 'Prasthāna-Traya' in the 24th meditation wins our immediate assent and we do like to believe that our assent is neither merely rational, nor merely emotional, but a unified one. How do we make sure of it?

It is a new emphasis indeed — this envisioning of Advaita as the civilisational principle par excellence. There is truth, indeed in the author's observation that "the failure of Buddhism and Advaita to come together theologically and metaphysically has been a major tragedy for Asia"; but if, as Sri Gandhi himself acknowledges, "the spirit of India after Buddha has become deeply dialectical", one wonders how the modern drift in India can be countered through the civilisational-cum-salvational mediacy of Advaita. Is it mere coincidence that three modern exemplars of the truth of India were themselves mutually distanced? Has it not seemed difficult to reconcile the message of 'Hind Swaraj' with the vision of Sri Aurobindo for example?

Sri Gandhi himself says that "we cannot think Advaita and speak Advaita without living Advaita". Further, in the same meditation he goes on to tell us, that "to live Advaita is not easy....Advaitin love is constantly threatened by dualistic doubt." Kaka Kalelkar has put it on record that Mahatma Gandhi had hesitated a lot before including a certain hymn in his Ashram prayer-book. That hymn was pure Advaita: "I am that perfect Brahman, not this lump of matter". Later on, of course, he overcame that hesitation and even declared that "there cannot be a more beautiful thought with which to start our human day"; but that initial hesitation reveals a very significant aspect of the man and his times. It is that aspect which is reflected in his remarks about the concept of 'Guru' — his doubt, whether that ideal can be actually realised by any man now. Not that he doubted the truth of his tradition: in a collection of his religious utterances compiled by G. T. Hingorani, we do find him declaring his firm faith in Advaita. It is perhaps, only a necessary humility and a necessary identification with the fallen state of his moment and his milieu.

Is Mahatma Gandhi's Advaita, then, a specially vulnerable and qualified Advaita? But as soon as one asks this question, one is poignantly reminded of his inner voyage from 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God'? And what about his

Ahimsa? I fully endorse Sri Gandhi's criticism of the limitedness of the translation of Ahimsa as non-violence. But I have always been intrigued by that Calf-episode at Sabarmati. Here was the greatest leader of the masses — and, according to Jinnah, a leader of the Hindus — who was ready to risk everything for the sake of bringing a quicker end to the suffering of an animal. What shall we call it: a failure of nerve? or an unconscionable compromise? or a brand new recognition of and response to the reality of pain?

And yet, Gandhiji was not just another "Sruti-independent" Buddha. J. Krishnamurti — whom the author of "I am thou" refers to as a reincarnation of Buddha, is recently reported to have expressed the opinion that "Gandhi was one of the most violent of men". I wonder if it is not a theme for another meditation.

Sri Ramchandra Gandhi is not a traditionalist like Coomaraswamy who grounds himself in ancient texts and holds most of modern art and modern thought in undisguised contempt. But neither is he a modernist like Nehru, whose *Discovery of India* was anything but a self-discovery. A few of his meditations have been motivated by contemporary exemplars and not by the customary approaches to the traditionally recognised authority of a Gaudapāda or a Sankara. Had there been no Ramana, no Gandhi and no Aurobindo, this book perhaps, would never have made its appearance. This is what distinguishes him from all other writers on Indian philosophy. Advaita is not just an intellectual addiction or an academic exercise for him; it is an existential commandment; a matter of life and death. "To live Advaita", as he himself recognises, "would involve the most strenuous overcoming of a variety of illusions in public life and official thought". It is not for nothing that among the many illusions listed by the author here, the last, but not the least, concerns Advaita itself, Heidegger says somewhere that of the three dangers threatening thinking, one

is 'thinking' itself; and the only antidote against this danger would be "thinking against itself". Well, the author of 'I am thou' seems to be quite aware of this danger and he does not hesitate to apply this antidote of 'thinking against itself' — as is apparent from his own treatment of this illusion. Let us quote the relevant passage here.

"The illusion that exoteric advaita and exoteric dvaita, are other than one another. The truth is that both are illusion. The illusion that they are not, generative of comic — pathetic distortions of truth, can be overcome only by distinguishing between and combating with the light of reason and insight and love the ironical isolationism, solipsism of cloistered advaita and the self-contradicting hegemonism of dvaita, in their rampant hypocritical forms."

"Neither Buddha, nor Socrates nor Christ ever wrote a book, because to do so would be to reduce life to a logical process". This is what Madame Blavatsky told young Yeats, who quotes her statement with apparent approval. There is no doubt that the continuity of Indian tradition has been maintained less by texts and more by ritualistically organised life on the one hand, and living embodiments of the traditional wisdom on in the other. But can this fact serve as a sufficient compensation for the steep decline in philosophical scholarship and interpretative endeavour? Is it possible to excuse such apathy in a tradition, which, from its very beginning, has attached such supreme importance to Vāk'? Is it mere coincidence that a contemporary exemplar such as Sri Aurobindo should find it imperative to concentrate on both fronts at once — on the experiential processes of Yoga, as well as on the expressive aspects of the Vedic vision of truth — on invocation as well as evocation? Is it not very lack of a self-centred philosophical as well as artistic creativity, that is most depressing and self-defeating to-day? Particularly when traditional life and traditional wisdom themselves have been seriously threatened, first by the British domination, and then, by the virtual Europeanisation of the earth? And is it not the rebelliously oriented,

and creatively heterodox thought and literature of the West, that is our natural ally rather than its religious and philosophical orthodoxy?

Max Müller laments the fact that a great opportunity for implanting Christianity on the fertile Indian soil was lost when the Christian friends of Rammohan Roy failed to undermine his belief in Advaita. The implication is, that Advaita is the sheet anchor, the last refuge of Hinduism.

Now, here in this book, we find a modern Indian philosopher suggesting something which sounds almost like a reversal of that Indological and missionary logic. To quote Sri Gandhi himself: "Christ is a self-sacrificer — he is the Jñāni whose ego has vanished in Brahmabhava, in identity with his father..the truth of christ, the Abrahamic exemplar of Advaita Janana, the first advaitian martyr perhaps, in this way tragically aligning itself with the killers of Christ." Hasn't the wheel come full circle?

I wonder how a scholar like Coomaraswamy would have reacted to Shri Gandhi's 'Abrahamic Manifesto' and, 'An improbable humanist declaration'. But about one thing one is convinced of his total support. He would certainly have endorsed the spirit as well as the content of, 'Issac, Nachiketa, Christ, Ramana',— an illuminating piece, in which Shri Gandhi estabishes a vital connection between Ramana's doctrine of the heart on the right side and the Vedic discovery of the truth of sacrifice: "the very puruṣa, whose sacrifice has been described in the Rigveda as the foundation of all that is". Not only this, but the way he connects this Vedic discovery with the central insight of the upanisads is equally illuminating. Could it be, that the real key to the solution of that problem posed by the author himself as 'the mutually distanced self-confidence and self-consciousness of sruti" lies somewhere in this very connection? It would be well here to remember that Coomaraswamy attached the highest importance to this particular

Vedic symbol and his essay entitled 'An Approach to the Vedas' is a pioneering study in that area.

Coomaraswamy achieved his work independently of Sri Aurobindo and it is all the more valuable for being so. But we surely cannot afford to ignore the findings of the latter, who must be credited with having blazed a new trail in Vedology. I find it rather surprising that although Sri Gandhi speaks highly of Shri Aurobindo's spiritual writings, he does not come to terms with his philosophy in the overall context of advaitic tradition. We are kept wondering about his assessment not only of Sri Aurobindo's peculiar utopia, but also of his interpretative account of the evolution of Indian philosophy. Does he, for example, agree with Sri Aurobindo's account of the Bhakti movement in general and of Vaishnavism in particular? One would also like to know whether he accepts Sri Aurobindo's characterisation of Samkaric advaita as 'the Ascetic Denial'. If noa, then, what is his own intellectual stance vis-a-vis Sankaracharya, or, the author of Māndukya-Kārikā, for that matter?.

The poet Yeats once said that, for him, the act of philosophising meant "reducing things to a single intensity". Heidegger also has something corresponding to it, when he tells us in his 'The thinker as poet?' that "to think is to confine yourself to a single thought that one day stands still like a star in the world's sky". Does Sri Gandhi — the author of 'I am thou' — also enact a similar passion — Advaita being that 'single intensity', in his case? The terrible paradox that stares us in the face to-day is that the world never needed a unifying philosophy as urgently as it does to-day, and yet, nothing else to-day seems more suspect, more doomed to deflation than this very act of philosophising. The times are out of joint, it seems; and even among philosophers, those, who would appear to be best equipped to set them right tend to conceive of their vocation in quite different terms. Heidegger, for example, feels that, "of the three dangers, threatening thinking, the bad and thus muddled one is philosophising". The other

two dangers — good dangers though, are 'thinking' itself and the 'proximity' of the singing poet'. If this is really the case, then, what is a philosopher left with? It is not philosophy as such, however which is the real concern of Heidegger. His real concern is with 'thinking', which in order to come to its own must overcome the temptations of metaphysics.

Of course we are not concerned with Heidegger here, but with the author of "I am thou", who is far from sympathetic to existential thought. In fact, he finds it "tainted with nihilist and obscurantist tendencies" and looks upon it as an enemy rather than as an ally. He tells us very clearly that, "the only way of resisting the dark temptation of refined and yet nihilistic existential European thought is by aligning ourselves with the truth of self Ātman-Brahman. "The truth of Self, that is Advaita, is the heart of Shri Gandhi's Philosophising in this book. Curiously, however, the one philosopher, who is credited with having restored Advaita in its pristine purity is not discussed in its pages. What we do find here invoked instead is Sri Ramana Maharashi's doctrine of the heart on the right, which, according to Shri Gandhi, is "in absolute harmony with the most developed existential and aesthetic sensibility of our age". By implication, then, this should be the solution to the problem posed at the outset: that is, the problem of "the mutually distanced self-confidence and self-consciousness within Vedic sruti". This in fact, occupies the foreground of his thinking.

It would be interesting as well as instructive to compare and contrast the situations as well as the responses of the Western and the Indian thinkers. The situation here in India is acute enough in itself, apart from the global involvement; but as we go through the pages of what our author calls his 'speculative spiritual history', we do get a feeling that this is not the first time that we are confronting such a situation. We have faced it before, and we shall cope with it this time also. Earlier, it was the nihilism of

Ajit Keshkmbali, and now it is modern annihilationism. Our redemption at that time was wrought by Buddhāvatār by Buddha's Sruti-independent discovery of the truth of Ātman-Brahman. Similarly, this time also, we have our saviour in Ramana Maharshi — "the chief exemplar of regenerate consciousness in our own age.

The western philosopher, on the other hand, it would seem, has been less fortunate in the history of his discipline. No Sruti-independent rediscovery of the original truth there — no Buddha, no Sankaracharya, and no Ramana Maharshi to retrieve for him the authentic original source of truth. But there is a parallel too. If Buddha "risked the distortions of history" — according to Shri Gandhi, — so did Socrates or his successors. For, if we are to lend credence to the most philosophical intellect of the West in this century, this modern annihilationism is not just a recent happening, but the natural outcome of two thousand years of European philosophising. "The Bomb's explosion" — as Heidegger puts it — "is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long-since-accomplished annihilation of the thing". This annihilation of the thing was, of course, accomplished by science; but then, science, according to this philosopher, has only carried to its logical conclusion what the first wrong step of Greek philosophy had already sown the seed of. To quote Heidegger again:

"The hidden history of Greek philosophy consists in this that it does not remain in conformity with the nature of truth that flashes out in the word 'Aletheia' ('the unconcealedness of beings') and has to misdirect its knowing and its speaking about the nature of truth more and more into the discussion of a derivative nature of truth. The nature of truth as Aletheia was not thought out in the thinking of the Greeks, nor since then, and least of all, in the philosophy that followed after. Unconcealedness is, for thought, the most concealed thing in Greek existence, although from early times it determines the presence of everything present".

I leave it to the metaphysical imagination of the reader to speculate about this 'Unconcealedness of beings' and its probable correspondances in Indian thought, which conceives of the sourceward progression or liberation of the 'Jivātman' as the gradual unconcealment of its true nature as Self (ātmā) through a gradual removal of the coverings (āvarana) of Māyā, that conceal it from itself. At the same time, if we choose to understand this 'unconcealedness of beings' as corresponding to 'Satya', we are poignantly reminded of the spiritual evolution of Mahatma Gandhi -- his inner journey from 'God is truth' to 'Truth is God'.

Now let us listen to what Shri Ramchandra Gandhi has to say in a comparable context. "What is our truth" — he asks in 'An Improbable Humanist Declaration' — "is it the truth of science?....Can we overlook the philosophically important fact that physics, as it is today does not highlight any principle which yields logically even the moral outrage and aesthetic recoil? Our moral outrage and aesthetic recoil are founded upon our Greek recognition of justice as the goal of all things". He then demonstrates how all revolutions have failed because of the dualistic assumption that justice has to be established between ourselves and others. "Could it not be" — he disarmingly suggests, "that there is no real others?" The comparative perspective, thus, between the Indian philosopher and his western counterpart is not without some interest. If Heidegger, on the one hand, has diagnosed the failure of western thought as "a misdirecting of its knowing more and more into discussion of a derivative nature of truth", Shri Gandhi has pointed to "the misconceptions that are inherent in dualism." But if it is so, one wonders how Shri Gandhi finds it possible to long for a synthesis between Greek Reason and Indian wisdom?

Budha, Shri Gandhi tells us, had cured us of the rampant nihilism of his times. But he achieved his success, in Shri Gandhi's own words, "by abandoning ātman language in Dharma instructions and by risking the distortions of his-

tory which remain with us still." The question is: how to counteract these distortions? Particularly, when, yet another distortion has now been added to it by our easy vulnerability to the modern technological civilisation of the west. What makes our situation particularly tragic is the fact that it does not have the look of inevitability. Is this nihilism really indigenous like the earlier one? Who knows if it is derivative and feeds itself upon the hard-hearted and soft-headed cynicism of a rootless, ruling intelligentsia. The singular good fortune of having been blessed with three living embodiments of the ancient wisdom seems to have evaporated in thin air. It is interesting to see this book starting with an account of the film on Gandhi. I whole-heartedly agree with the author's criticism of the film, but keep wondering what we would have got, if an Indian film maker had produced it instead of Attenborough. As Stephen Spender may feel that art is like a Hindu temple with its perfect democracy of gods; he may even assert that Advaita offers the most congenial, the most creatively fruitful philosophy for a novelist. But what about our own writers and artists? How is it that the mainstream of modern Indian creativity in the arts of literature or painting or theatre or film-making is any thing but Advaitin? Is it merely a case of spiritual bankruptcy and rootlessness or is it a matter of the simple and inevitable attraction between two polar opposites? How is it that the only work of fiction that takes Vedanta at all seriously happens to be written not in any of the Indian languages but in English? And how is it that the best Indian novel which succeeds in recapturing the real 'presence' of Gandhi in the imagination of the people is again a novel in English written by the self-same author?

The reviewer may be pardoned for these rather gloomy reflections, which, he of course, never intended as a conclusion. It is reassuring to mediate on the story and the image which forms the conclusion of this admirable book. The lion in the zoo, which sent Sri Ramkrishna into a trance,

does symbolise India's "self-betraying self-enslavement in the modern world". These are strong and precise words that convey the real malaise of this land and they would certainly have been endorsed by a Coomaraswamy, a Sri Aurobindo and a Gandhi — were all of them by some miracle to present themselves out of the Heideggerian Shrine of Nothing. It is in fact an appropriate conclusion to this series of meditations which had been inaugurated by the most adequate response to a well-meaning foreigner's truncated vision of Gandhi. Heidegger had expressed his conviction that "the world's darkening never reaches to the light of Being"; well, the author of, 'I am Thou' also has been inspired by a self-confidence and a self-consciousness which spring from reverential listening to a source which is much more immediately available to him than to his western counterpart. And what is more important, this self-confidence of his is by no means self-complacent or merely rhetorical. Thus, I can find no better way of concluding this rambling review than to quote the last sentence of that opening meditation, which is eloquent enough to sound as a benediction and realistic enough to subsume our gloom as well. This is what he has to say.

"India" Sri Gandhi warns us, "must fearlessly face all the existentially and Civilisationally isolating consequences of such a self-identifying discrimination between reality and illusion, or perish in approval-seeking inauthenticity".

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