

Journals of Opinion

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‘I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.’

These lines, attributed to Gandhi, are engraven in school and college buildings across the land. Emblematic of a once dominant (and now threatened) strand of Indian nationalism, they have recently acquired a fresh lease of life outside this country. Thus Gandhi’s words have been cited in the debates on curriculum reform in the divided campuses of elite American universities. They are, it appears, an argument-clinching mantra for our multicultural times.

How many of those who quote these words here or there know how they came to be uttered? In truth, they were squeezed out of a reluctant Mahatma by Rabindranath Tagore. For Gandhi had started this particular argument as a cultural nationalist, as one who insinuated that Raja Rammohun Roy and Lokmanya Tilak were mere ‘pigmies’ for thinking and writing in English; and also as a political authoritarian who commanded all patriots to take up non-cooperation and a daily round at the *charkha*. Where countless others signed up, un-thinkingly, Tagore opposed both the project and the ideals behind it. Underlying non-cooperation and its presumed cultural superiority, he said in the first months of 1921, was a self-destroying isolationism that, in setting India above, also set it apart from the rest of the world.

Today, at this critical moment of the world’s history, cannot India rise above her limitations and offer the great ideal to the world that will work

towards harmony in co-operation between the different people of the earth? . . . The idea of India is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one’s own people from others, and which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts. . . . Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit at any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house

A wounded Gandhi thereupon pointed out that

Non-co-operators worship Andrews, honour Stokes, and gave a most respectful hearing to Messrs. Wedgwood, Ben Spoor and Holford Knight at Nagpur, that Maulana Mahomed Ali accepted the invitation to tea of an English official when he invited him as a friend, that Hakim Ajmal Khan, a staunch Non-cooperator, had the portraits of Lord and Lady Hardinge unveiled in his Tibbi College and had invited his many English friends to witness the ceremony.

Personal friendship with white men and women was one defence offered by Gandhi; a second was openness to their ideas.

I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

Of these four sentences, the last two are the ones most often cited. Occasionally, the second sentence is included to preface the third and fourth. But I cannot recall, in the dozens of times I have had the words thrown at me, a single occasion on which the critical first sentence has also been included: ‘*I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet.*’

Now the Gandhi-Tagore debate has the same kind of resonance and contemporaneity as the Gandhi-Ambedkar and Gandhi-Nehru debates. It was to continue through the 1920s and 1930s, kept alive by the poet’s resolute opposition to the cult of the *charkha* and his horror at the Mahatma’s characterization of the 1934 Bihar earthquake as divine retribution for the practice of Untouchability. One telling detail about these exchanges is that while Gandhi’s contributions were published in his own journal, *Young India*, Tagore’s were generally printed in that sturdily non-party magazine, *Modern Review*.

Begun in 1907 by Ramananda Chatterjee, the *Modern Review* quickly emerged as a vital forum for the nationalist intelligentsia. It carried essays on politics, economics and society, but also, being run by a Bengali, poems, stories, travelogues and sketches. It was in the *Modern Review* that Radhakamal Mukerjee published his early, pioneering essays on environmental degradation in India; and it was to the *Modern Review* that Verrier Elwin sent his first reports from the Gond country. A more certain indication of the

journal's stature was the publication, within its pages, of Jawaharlal Nehru's pseudonymous auto-critique ('Rashtrapati', by 'Chanakya', November 1937).

Modern Review was the stablemate of *Prabasi*, which was published in Bengali and catered exclusively to one linguistic group. As a vehicle for bilinguals from all parts of the subcontinent *Modern Review* appeared, naturally, in English. While being broadly nationalistic it did not hold a brief for any particular political party. The first feature meant that it could act as a genuinely all-India forum; the second that it stood apart from party journals concurrently run by the Congress, the Communists, the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Scheduled Castes Federation. In both respects it had only one real competitor, the *Indian Social Reformer*.

The *Indian Social Reformer* was founded in Madras in 1890 by Kamakshi Natarajan, an associate of that great campaigning journalist and founder of *The Hindu*, G. Subramaniam Iyer. Natarajan quickly realized that his home town was too provincial for a paper of his kind. In 1897 he moved the journal to Bombay, a culturally catholic city and also an epicentre of social reform and political action. Unlike the *Modern Review*, the *Indian Social Reformer* was a weekly. But it shared with its eastern counterpart willingness to create and catalyse controversy. On the burning social issues of the day (such as the Age of Consent bill) it pressed the wavering nationalist to take a progressive stance. One of its early campaigns, interestingly enough, was inspired by developments on the cricket field.

In February 1906, a representative side of the Hindus challenged the Europeans of the Bombay Presidency to a three-day match and, against all odds, defeated them. The Hindu victory owed itself in the main to the all-round performances of two brothers of the *chamaar* caste, Palwankar Baloo and Palwankar Shivram.

Born in Poona, the Palwankar brothers fought a long battle with Hindu orthodoxy. Alerted to their prodigious playing skills, the Poona Hindus included them in their team to play the annual grudge match against the all-white Poona Gymkhana. At first the Brahmins played with them but would not dine with them. Slowly, inter-dining was also allowed, a practice which continued when the brothers moved to Bombay to play for the representative Hindu side. They were the undoubted stars of that epic victory over the Europeans. In a low scoring match (Hindus 242 and 160 beat Europeans 194 and 102 by 106 runs) Shivram scored 34 and 16 not out and his brother 25 and 11. Baloo, bowling left-arm spin, also took eight wickets in the match.

While Ambedkar was still in school and Gandhi still in South Africa, the *Indian Social Reformer* had fought the good fight for the abolition of Untouchability. Now it opportunistically used the crick-eting triumph to push forward its agenda of caste reform. 'The history of the admission of these *chamar* brothers in the Hindu Gymkhana', it remarked, 'is a credit to all and has done far more to liberalize the minds of thousands of young Hindus than all other attempts in other spheres'. The Hindu cricketers' admittance of the Palwankar brothers, it claimed, was a

a landmark in the nation's emancipation from the old disuniting and de-nationalizing customs. This is a conscious voluntary change, a manly moral regulated liberty, not, as in [the] railways [where members of different castes had willy-nilly to sit with each other], a compulsory change . . . Hindu sportsmen of Poona and Bombay have shown in different degrees that, where national interest required, equal opportunity must be given to all of any caste, even though the offer of such opportunity involved the trampling of some old prejudices . . . Let the lesson learnt in sport be re-peated in political, social and educational walks of life. Let all disuniting and denationalizing customs in all high, low or lowest Hindus disappear and let India cease to be the laughing-stock of the whole world.

I came to these journals through a personal interest in those two vast if generally incompatible subjects, Gandhi and cricket. But, of course, both the *Modern Review* and the *Indian Social Reformer* took up and publicized a wide array of issues—widow remarriage, adivasi rights, conservation of nature and natural resources, land reform. They played a stupendous part in the process of national self-awakening—more's the pity that they have not (yet) attracted their chroniclers. Significantly, the coming of political independence dealt a body blow to the two journals. For their perspective was forward looking, the nurturing of reforming sensibilities among the men and women who would one day come to rule India. When the former freedom fighters slipped comfortably into the chairs in the secretariat, both magazines seem to have lost their bearings. It didn't help either that their founder editors, Chatterjee and Natarajan, had died before 1947. *The Indian Social Reformer* finally ran aground in 1953, the *Modern Review* carried on twelve years longer, unread.'

Into the breach stepped the *Economic Weekly*, begun in 1949 by a *bhadralok* gentleman of more-than-modest means and plenty of leisure. This was Sachin Chaudhuri, who with his money and the money of his friends founded the Sameeksha Trust, which in turn floated the *Economic Weekly*. Within months the new journal had become the leading edge of critical discussion on what India should do with its hard-won independence. Its list of contributors was a veritable who's who of thinking Indians. It included socialists like Asoka Mehta, Gandhians like J.C. Kumarappa, old economists (V.K.R.V. Rao), young economists (Amartya Sen), coming sociologists (Andre Beteille). The topics they discussed took in the whole sweep of social life in independent India: planning, technology choice, rural development, federalism, caste, elections. If you were articulate and patriotic, there was no better place than the *Economic Weekly* to subject your ideas to the cold scrutiny of the reading public. You were sure to be read, and to be disputed. For the historian of independent India, those faded pages still remain an invaluable source of the ideas and individuals that shaped the career of the nation.

In or about 1960 Krishna Raj joined the *Economic Weekly* as an assistant editor. He had been recommended to Sachin Chaudhuri by K.N. Raj, no relation, but a teacher of his at the Delhi School of Economics. When the Bengali grandee died a few years later, the editorship was briefly assumed by the economist R.K. Hazari. In 1966, however, the journal was renamed the *Economic and Political Weekly* (.EPW) and Krishna Raj moved into the editorial chair. He stays there thirty-some years later, an outstanding and selflessly serving editor of a journal whose real worth is reflected not in its balance sheet but in the affection and love it inspires among its readers, and, beyond that, in the privileged position it commands in Indian intellectual life.

The *EPW* is a unique, threefold mix of political prejudice, dispassionate reportage, and scholarly analysis. The weekly begins with a few pages of unsigned editorial commentary, arch and acid reflections on the events of the past few days. The second part of the journal is taken up with signed reports from around the country. Here we find the 'news behind the news', so to say, stories of conflict between landlords and labourers in Bihar or of ethnic and secessionist movements in north-east India. These reports are generally longer than what a newspaper would allow, and (but not for that reason alone) also more informative. The journal's back pages are filled each week with book reviews and two or three academic papers soberly presented and massively footnoted. As in the 1950s, it is here that one finds the most authoritative accounts of the key debates in contemporary India. A student of the Mandal and Masjid controversies, or a future chronicler of the environmental and feminist movements, could do much worse than begin with files of the *EPW*.

For much of its existence the *EW* and the *EPW* have had as their contemporaries three other journals of opinion. *Seminar* was founded in 1959 by that public-spirited and variously talented couple, Raj and Romesh Thapar. It is a monthly, like the old *Modern Review*, but published in the city that, after 1911, took over from Calcutta as the political capital of India. Each issue takes up a single theme, this investigated by contributors of different backgrounds and political orientations. A year after *Seminars* founding there appeared, for the first time, the weekly *Opinion*, printed in Bombay, edited, owned, and mostly written by the indefatigable A.D. Gorwalla, a liberal-minded scholar and ex-civil servant: above all, a steadfast servant of the people of India. Gorwalla was a man of much courage and independence of mind — he dared disagree publicly with Mahatma Gandhi and, thirty years later, with Indira Gandhi — qualities that were richly reflected in his journal. In the late 1960s, the company of exalted journals was enriched by *Frontier*, a weekly edited out of Calcutta by Samar Sen, a man of character and whimsy; and a legendary figure of the Bengali left.

These other journals were also published in English, and they all contributed worthily to the life of the nation. But it is no disrespect to their editors and contributors to say that they could not command the intellectual influence or political salience of the product of the Sameeksha Trust. There is nothing like the *EPW* in India or, indeed, anywhere else in the world. To be sure, there are other independent weeklies of opinion such as the *Nation* of New York and the *New Statesman* of London. Their pages glow with ideas and polemic, but they do not carry the *EPW's* academic authority. Nor are they as consistently non-partisan. In fact, both have been loosely associated with political parties, the Labour Party in the case of the *New Statesman* and the Democrats in the case of the *Nation*. Other journals that come to mind are Washington's *I.F. Stone's Weekly* and *Viewpoint*, once edited by Mazhar Ali

Khan from Lahore. Sadly, both are now extinct. While they lived both shared the *EPW*'s crusading spirit without matching its range of contributors or depth of analysis.

It must be admitted, however, that the anti-establishmentarianism of the *EPW* has, at times, a weary air about it. Among the journal's regular columnists are some Maoists who should have been put to grass long ago. Their idea of Utopia on earth is the one proposed (and brutally implemented) by the Red Guards in China during the Cultural Revolution. In general, the *EPW* tends to give excessive space to doctrinal disputes within the left, a misallocation of scarce resources that could more fruitfully be used by the publication of additional research essays.

A German friend of mine once described the *EPW* as 'sometimes impossible, but always indispensable'. There is an austere integrity about the journal and its editor that shines out in an epoch when the business of most journalists has become business. A recent and half-hearted 'redesign' has left it looking much the same as before. The type remains small, the paper is still faded, the covers wearily semi-lar—but the contents as astonishingly diverse and unpredictable as ever.

For twenty years now the *EPW* has been the item in the post I most look forward to. I feel extraordinarily proprietorial about it—and I am not alone. Some years back the economist Dharma Kumar—a reader of and writer for the journal since its inception—wrote in annoyance that a once-liberal church was now dominated by arcane leftist jargon. This provoked a furious correspondence, pro and anti. More recently, a bunch of scholars from that last redoubt of intellectual Marxism—New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University—have written in to complain that the *EPW* is getting to be dangerously liberal. These anguished and emotional letters bespeak a readership that cares, of a commitment and engagement that must be the des-perate (but usually unfulfilled) desire of every journal's editor.

Let me, in conclusion, compare the low-circulation journals I have paid tribute to here with periodicals more widely read and more handsomely paying. Browsing through some old issues of the *Bombay Chronicle*, I came across an interesting and still relevant comment by one journalist on another. In October 1944 Frank Moraes of the *Times of India* was due to speak at the Tata Institute of Social Service on 'Journalism as a Social Service'. In his widely read 'Half-Column' carried in the *Bombay Chronicle*, D.F. Karaka remarked that 'friend Moraes is always inclined to take a kind view of things in life. I suggest, however, that to give a balanced view of journalism there should be a sequel to this lecture: "Journalism as a Racket".'

The tension between racketeering and social service exists in a good many professions that pretend to a higher calling. A politician, a lawyer, a university professor: all claim to dedicate their life to the public weal. In some cases this claim might be justified, but in other cases it serves merely as a fig leaf for personal advancement or monet-ary gain. There are lawyers who are moved by the call of justice, and there are lawyers whose talent lies in greasing the system. There are professors who live to seek knowledge and serve students, and there are professors whose energies are directed to building a political base, to becoming vice-chancellor, or, better still, member of the Planning Commission when their party comes to power. And there are journ-alists who are racketeers, and journalists who are not.

One would be hard pressed to find someone now employed in the *Times of India* qualified to speak (as Frank Moraes undoubtedly was) on journalism as a social service. While that newspaper—and others too—have succumbed to the pressures of finance and fashion, the ideals of the profession are still upheld by the odd fellow here and the odd journal there. *Opinion* passed away with A.D. Gorwalla, but *Seminar* has survived the death of the Thapars and *Frontier* the death of Samar Sen. And, still published week after week is Krishna Raj's *EPW*.

This is a role that cannot be played by newspapers. Even before Rupert Murdoch came to cast his baleful shadow over Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, the 'premier' newspapers of India were seriously cons-trained by the bottom-line. That is to say, they could not *afford* to print essays that are too long or too contentious. They would never carry 10,000 word accounts of the genesis of agrarian class conflict, or 5,000-word analyses of what is wrong with Indian foreign policy. Journals like the *EPW* have acted as a moral conscience for independent India. They have consistently exposed wrongdoing, whether by the state or political parties or landlords or industrial houses; explored, in refreshing detail, the patterns and processes of social change in city and countryside; and highlighted critical issues (environmentalism, for instance) ignored by the formal political system as well as by the Establishment press. They constitute a vast and continually enriched archive of the history of independent India, an archive raided by generations

of students and scholars. There will, I trust, be a history, one day, of the *Economic Weekly* and the *Economic and Political Weekly*, as indeed of their distinguished if insufficiently acknowledged predecessors, the *Modern Review* and the *Indian Social Reformer*.

End