

INDIA: RETROSPECT

JAMES GEORGE LOOKS BACK ON A LONG ASSOCIATION

Last June, a few weeks before his tour of duty expired, the former High Commissioner to India wrote his last general report to the External Affairs Ministry in Ottawa. Here it is:

I AM flying back to Delhi from Calcutta after opening an exhibition of Eskimo Art which we have been showing in the major cities of India. To my right the serrated line of the Himalayas, snow-white, brilliant against the deep blue; beyond the barrier mountains, China. To my left a mantle of dust, opaque brown as high as Everest, stretching over a parched land, roasting now for two months waiting for the thunderheads to appear from the south announcing the monsoon. I could fly by jet for three hours east-west and a little longer north-south to cover this vast kite of land resting inert on the Indian ocean. What of this land—so opposite in so many ways to Canada—and its people, one seventh of the population of the whole planet, more than the whole of Africa and Latin America combined? Has our help really helped them? Where are they going in the years ahead?

For over twelve years—nearly five of them *en poste*—I have known India, if anyone from the other side of the world can ever say he knows this country in its complexity, its subtlety, its contradictions and its beauty, even in the slums of its cities. In summing up my experience, any formulation is inadequate, partial. About

the whole, one can say nothing—or everything. Any quick generalization is a lie. And yet I must try to distil what I have lived.

It is difficult for a Westerner to see India as it is. Our eyes are blue, theirs brown. We see differently. Yet without an effort to see as they do we shall understand nothing. Even the best Western observers, like Gunnar Myrdal, can fail in this effort though he writes eloquently about the need to avoid looking at India with Western eyes.

Like others, I have gone through phases of attraction and repulsion; but neither love nor hate help to see what is there, to understand India. When the then President of India was asked in 1969 by an important Western visitor what he could do to help his country, Dr. Zakir Hussain replied "Try to understand India"....

It is not an accident that she is ruled by a woman, nor that the Congress Party symbol is that quintessence of motherhood, the cow licking its nursing calf....

At the same time I cannot subscribe to the Gandhian idealization of India. It is not a non-violent country.... Gandhi's non-violence and Nehru's secularism were prescriptions or antidotes for India's problems, not descriptions of the Indian character—a hundred generations of meditating hermits being only the rare exceptions that prove the rule of the masses.

Yet the feminine in India is not weakness. Here it has always

been exalted as power, *Shakti*. It produces today a people in process of becoming strong, even militarily, and self-reliant economically and politically. It produces a pride that can be infuriating and a logic that is more intuitive than mental. It can also produce great charm and great insight. It has helped to civilize the world, nourishing both the artistic and religious sensibilities of mankind. Even today it represents the only major tradition of past epochs that is still alive and fairly flourishing, so that it can be studied not just in museums, but through those who live it. By comparison, Egypt, Greece, Persia and China are dead.

Writing about the time of Indian independence, Professor F.S.C. Northrop called the meeting of East and West "the major event of our time". I think that is still true today but time has shown that the encounter has negative as well as positive aspects. India is a prime example.

We now understand and accept (as we did not always in the past) that stress can be dynamic and creative, or traumatic and destructive. We see this in the lives of individuals and of nations—nowhere better than in India where both kinds of stress are present and the balance somewhat precarious. Unless we are fully sensitive to both the negative and the positive poles of modernization of traditional societies, history may judge our aid—for all its generous intentions—as a mixed