

Civilization and Progress

*Rabindranath Tagore, a lecture delivered in China, 1924
(excerpt).*

A Chinese author writes: 'The terribly tragic aspect of the situation in China is that, while the Chinese nation is called upon to throw away its own civilization and adopt the civilization of modern Europe, there is not one single educated man in the whole Empire who has the remotest idea of what this modern European civilization really is.'

I have read elsewhere an observation made by a Frenchman, quoted in a magazine, in which he says that China is not a country but a civilization. Not having read the full discussion, I cannot be certain what he means. But it seems to me that, according to the writer, China represents an ideal and not the production and collection of certain things, or information of a particular character about the nature of things; that is to say, it stands for not merely progress in wealth and knowledge and power but a philosophy of life and the art of living.

The word 'civilization' being a European word, we have hardly yet taken the trouble to find out its real meaning. For over a century we have accepted it, as we may accept a gift horse, with perfect trust, never caring to count its teeth. Only very lately, we have begun to wonder if we realize in its truth what the Western people mean when they speak of civilization. We ask ourselves, 'Has it the same meaning as some word in our own language which denotes for us the idea of human perfection?'

Civilization cannot merely be a growing totality of happenings that by chance have assumed a particular shape and tendency which we consider to be excellent. It must be the expression of some guiding moral force which we have evolved in our society for the object of attaining perfection. The word 'perfection' has a simple and definite meaning when applied to an inanimate thing, or even to a creature whose life has principally a biological significance. But man being complex and always on the path of transcending himself, the meaning of the word 'perfection', as applied to him, cannot be crystallized into an inflexible idea. This has made it possible for different races to have different shades of definition for this term.

The Sanskrit word dharma is the nearest synonym in our own language that occurs to me for the word civilization. In fact, we have no other word except perhaps some newly-coined one, lifeless and devoid of atmosphere. The specific meaning of dharma is that principle which holds us firm together and leads us to our best welfare. The general meaning of this word is the essential quality of a thing.

Dharma for man is the best expression of what he is in truth. He may reject dharma and may choose to be an animal or a machine and thereby may not injure himself, may even gain strength and weal from an external and material point of view; yet this will be worse than death for him as a man. It has been said in our scriptures: Through a-dharma (the negation of dharma) man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root.

One who is merely a comfortable money-making machine does not carry in himself the perfect manifestations of man. He is like a gaudily embroidered purse which is empty. He raises a rich altar in his life to the blind and deaf image of a yawning negation and all the costly sacrifices continually offered to it are poured into the mouth of an ever hungry abyss. And according to our scriptures, even while he swells and shouts and violently, gesticulates, he perishes.

The same idea has been expressed by the great Chinese sage, Lao-tze, in a different manner, where he says: One who may die, but will not perish, has life, everlasting. In this he also suggests that when a man reveals his truth he lives, and that truth itself is dharma. Civilization, according to this ideal, should be the expression of man's dharma in his corporate life.

We have for over a century been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot, choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, humbled by our own helplessness, and overwhelmed by the speed. We agreed to acknowledge that this chariot-drive was progress, and that progress was civilization. If we ever ventured to ask, 'Progress towards what, and progress for whom,' it was considered to be peculiarly and ridiculously oriental to entertain such doubts about the absoluteness of progress. Of late, a voice has come to us bidding us to take count not only of the scientific perfection of the chariot but of the depth of the ditches lying across its path.

Lately I read a paragraph in the Nation — the American weekly which is more frank than prudent in its espousal of truth — discussing the bombing of the Mahsud villages in Afghanistan by some British airmen. The incident commented upon by this paper happened when 'one of the bombing planes made a forced landing in the middle of a Mahsud village,' and when 'the

airmen emerged unhurt from the wreckage only to face a committee of five or six old women, who had happened to escape the bombs, brandishing dangerous-looking knives.' The editor quotes from the London Times which runs thus:

'A delightful damsel took the airmen under her wing and led them to a cave close by, and a malik (chieftain) took up his position at the entrance, keeping off the crowd of forty who had gathered round, shouting and waving knives. Bombs were still being dropped from the air, so the crowd, envious of the security of the cave, pressed in stiflingly, and the airmen pushed their way out in the teeth of the hostile demonstration... They were fed and were visited by neighbouring maliks, who were most friendly, and by a mullah (priest), who was equally pleasant. Woman looked after the feeding arrangements, and supplies from Ladha and Razmak arrived safely... On the evening of the twenty-fourth they were escorted to Ladha, where they arrived at daybreak the next day. The escort disguised their captives as Mahsuds as a precaution against attack... It is significant that the airmen's defenders were first found in the younger generation of both sexes.'

In the above narrative the fact comes out strongly that the West has made wonderful progress. She has opened her path across the ethereal region of the earth; the explosive force of the bomb has developed its mechanical power of wholesale destruction to a degree that could be represented in the past only by the personal valour of a large number of men. But such enormous progress has made Man diminutive. He proudly imagines that he expresses himself when he displays the things that he produces and the power that he holds in his hands. The bigness of the results and the mechanical perfection of the apparatus hide from him the fact that the Man in him has been smothered.

When I was a child I had the freedom to make my own toys out of trifles and create my own games from imagination. In my happiness my playmates had their full share; in fact the complete enjoyment of my games depended upon their taking part in them. One day, in this paradise of our childhood, entered a temptation from the market world of the adult.

A toy bought from an English shop was given to one of our companions; it was perfect, it was big, wonderfully life-like. He became proud of the toy and less mindful of the game; he kept that expensive thing carefully away from us, glorying in his exclusive possession of it, feeling himself superior to his playmates whose toys were cheap. I am sure if he could we the modern language of history he would say that he was more civilized than ourselves to the extent of his owning that ridiculously perfect toy.

One thing he failed to realize in his excitement — a fact which at the moment seemed to him insignificant — that this temptation obscured something a great deal more perfect than his toy, the revelation of the perfect child. The toy merely expressed his wealth, but not the child's creative spirit; not the child's generous joy in his play, his open invitation to all who were his compeers to his play-world.

Those people who went to bomb the Mahsud villages measured their civilization by the perfect effectiveness of their instruments which were their latest scientific toys. So strongly do they realize the value of these things that they are ready to tax to the utmost limit of endurance their own people, as well as those others who may occasionally have the chance to taste in their own persons the deadly perfection of these machines. This tax does not merely, consist in money but in humanity. These people put the birth-rate of the toy against the death-rate of man; and they seem happy. Their science makes their prodigious success so utterly cheap on the material side, that they do not care to count the cost which their spirit has to bear.

On the other hand, those Mahsuds that protected the airmen — who had come to kill them — were primitively crude in their possession of life's toys. But they showed the utmost carefulness in proving the human truth through which they could express their personality. From the so-called Nordic point of view, the point of view of the would-be rulers of men, this was foolish.

According to a Mahsud, hospitality is a quality by which he is known as a man and therefore he cannot afford to miss his opportunity, even when dealing with someone who can be systematically relentless in enmity. From the practical point of view, the Mahsud pays for this very dearly, as we must always pay for that which we hold most valuable. It is the mission of civilization to set for us the right standard of valuation. The Mahsud may have many faults for which he should be held accountable; but that, which has imparted for him more value to hospitality than to revenge, may not be called progress, but is certainly civilization.

The ruthlessness, which at a time of crisis disdains to be too scrupulous in extirpating some cause of trouble, and uses its indiscriminate weapon against the guilty and the innocent, the combatant and the non-combatant, is certainly useful. Through such thoroughly unfeeling methods men prosper, they find what they consider desirable, they conquer their enemies — but there they stop, incomplete.

We can imagine some awful experiment in creation that began at the tail end and abruptly stopped when the stomach was finished. The creature's power of digestion is perfect, so it goes on growing stout, but the result is

not beautiful. At the beginning of the late war, when monstrosities of this description appeared in various forms, Western humanity shrank for a moment at the sight. But now she seems to admire them, for they are fondly added to other broods of ugliness in her nursery. Terrific movements, produced by such abnormalities of truncated life, may widen the path of what is called progress for those who want to be rulers of men, but certainly they do not belong to civilization.

Once there was an occasion for me to motor down to Calcutta from a place a hundred miles away. Something wrong with the mechanism made it necessary for us to have a repeated supply of water almost every half an hour. At the first village where we were compelled to stop, we asked the help of a man to find water for us. It proved quite a task for him, but when we offered him his reward, poor though he was, he refused to accept it. In fifteen other villages the same thing happened. In a hot country where travelers constantly need water, and where the water supply grows scanty in summer, the villagers consider it their duty to offer water to those who need it. They could easily make a business out of it, following the inexorable law of demand and supply. But the ideal which they consider to be their dharma has become one with their life. To ask them to sell it is like asking them to sell their life. They do not claim any personal merit for possessing it.

To be able to take a considerable amount of trouble in order to supply water to a passing stranger and yet never to claim merit or reward for it seems absurdly and negligibly simple compared with the capacity to produce an amazing number of things per minute. A millionaire tourist ready to corner the food market and grow rich by driving the whole world to the brink of starvation is sure to feel too superior to notice this simple thing while rushing through our villages at sixty miles an hour. For it is not aggressive like a telegraph pole that pokes our attention with its hugely long finger, or resounding like his own motor engine that shouts its discourtesy to the silent music of the spheres.

Yes, it is simple; but that simplicity is the product of centuries of culture; that simplicity is difficult of imitation. In a few years' time it might be possible for me to learn how to make holes in thousands of needles instantaneously by turning a wheel, but to be absolutely simple in one's hospitality to one's enemy or to a stranger requires generations of training. Simplicity takes no account of its own value, claims no wages, and therefore those who are enamoured of power do not realize that simplicity of spiritual expression is the highest product of civilization.

A process of disintegration can kill this rare fruit of a higher life, as a whole race of birds possessing some rare beauty can be made extinct, by the vulgar power of avarice which has civilized weapons. This fact was clearly proved to me when I found that the only place where a price was expected for the water given to us was when we reached a suburb of Calcutta, where life was richer, the water supply easier and more abundant, and where progress flowed in numerous channels in all directions.

We have heard from the scientist that an atom consists of a nucleus drawing its companions round it in a rhythm of dance and thus forms a perfect unit. A civilization remains healthy and strong as long as it contains in its centre some creative ideal that binds its members in a rhythm of relationship. It is a relationship which is beautiful and not merely utilitarian. When this creative ideal which is dharma gives place to some overmastering passion, then this civilization bursts into conflagration like a star that has lighted its own funeral pyre. From its modest moderation of light this civilization flares up into a blaze of the first magnitude, only for its boisterous brilliancy to end in violent extinction.

Western society, for some ages, had for its central motive force a great spiritual ideal and not merely an impetus to progress. It had its religious faith which was actively busy in bringing about reconciliation among the conflicting forces of society. What it held to be of immense value was the perfection of human relationship, to be obtained by controlling the egoistic instincts of man, and by giving him a philosophy of his fundamental unity.

In the course of the last two centuries, however, the West found access to Nature's storehouse of power, and ever since all its attention has irresistibly been drawn in that direction. Its inner ideal of civilization has thus been pushed aside by the love of power.

Man's ideal has for its field of activity the whole of human nature from its depth to its height. The light of this ideal is gentle because diffused; its life is subdued because all-embracing. It is serene because it is great; it is meek because it is comprehensive. But our passion is narrow; its limited field gives it an intensity of impulse. Such an aggressive force of greed has of late possessed the Western mind. This has happened within a very short period, and has created a sudden deluge of things smothering all time and space over the earth. All that was human is being broken into fragments.

In trying to maintain some semblance of unity among such a chaos of fractions, organizations are established for manufacturing, in a wholesale quantity, peace, or piety, or social welfare. But such organizations can never have the character of a perfect unity. Surely they are needed as we need our

drinking vessels, but more for the water than for ourselves. They are mere burdens by themselves as they are; and if we take pleasure in multiplying them indefinitely the result may be astoundingly clever, but crushingly fatal to life.

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I am sure you know that this soulless progeny of greed has already opened its elastic jaws wide over the fair limbs of your country, wider perhaps than in any other part of the world. I earnestly hope that you will develop some means to rescue her from her destination towards the hollow of its interior.

But the danger is not so much from the enemy who attacks, but from the defender who may betray. It fills my heart with a great feeling of dismay when, among your present generation of young men, I see signs of their succumbing to the depravity of fascination for an evil power which allures with its enormity. They go about seeking for civilization amongst the wilderness of sky-scrapers, in the shrieking headlines of news-journals, and the shouting vociferation of demagogues. They leave their own great prophets who had a far-seeing vision of truth, and roam in the dusk begging for the loan of light from some glow-worm which can only hold its niggardly lantern for the purpose of crawling towards its nearest dust.

They will learn the meaning of the world civilization when they come back home and truly understand what their great master, Lao-tze, wanted to teach when he said: Those who have virtue attend to their obligations; those who have no virtue attend to their claims. In this saying he has expressed in a few words what I have tried to explain in this paper. Progress which is not related to an inner ideal, but to an attraction which is external, seeks to satisfy our endless claims. But civilization which is an ideal gives us power and joy to fulfil our obligations.

About the stiffening of life and hardening of heart caused by the organization of power and production, he says with profound truth: The grass as well as the trees, while they live, are tender and supple; when they die they are rigid and dry. Thus the hard and the strong are the companions of death. The tender and the delicate are the companions of life. Therefore, he who in arms is strong will not conquer. The strong and the great stay below. The tender and the delicate stay above.

Our sage in India says, as I have quoted before: By the help of anti-dharma men prosper, they find what they desire, they conquer enemies, but they perish at the root. The wealth which is not welfare grows with a rapid vigour, but it carries within itself the seed of death. This wealth has been nourished in the West by the blood of men, and the harvest is ripening. The same

warning was also given centuries ago by your sage when he said: Things thrive and then grow old. This is called Un-Reason. Un-Reason soon ceases. Our living society, which should have dance in its steps, music in its voice, beauty in its limbs, which should have its metaphor in stars and flowers, maintaining its harmony with God's creation, becomes, under the tyranny of a prolific greed, like an overladen market-cart .jolting and creaking on the road that leads from things to the Nothing, tearing ugly ruts across the green life till it breaks down under the burden of its vulgarity on the wayside, reaching nowhere. For, this is called Un-Reason, as your teacher has said, and Un-Reason soon ceases.