Chapter II

The Imperfection of Past Aggregates

The whole process of Nature depends on a balancing and a constant tendency to harmony between two poles of life, the individual whom the whole or aggregate nourishes and the whole or aggregate which the individual helps to constitute. Human life forms no exception to the rule. Therefore the perfection of human life must involve the elaboration of an as yet unaccomplished harmony between these two poles of our existence, the individual and the social aggregate. The perfect society will be that which most entirely favours the perfection of the individual; the perfection of the individual will be incomplete if it does not help towards the perfect state of the social aggregate to which he belongs and eventually to that of the largest possible human aggregate, the whole of a united humanity.

For the gradual process of Nature introduces a complication which prevents the individual from standing in a pure and direct relation to the totality of mankind. Between himself and this too immense whole there erect themselves partly as aids, partly as barriers to the final unity the lesser aggregates which it has been necessary to form in the progressive stages of human culture. For the obstacles of space, the difficulties of organisation and the limitations of the human heart and brain have necessitated the formation first of small, then of larger and yet larger aggregates so that he may be gradually trained by a progressive approach till he is ready for the final universality. The family, the commune, the clan or tribe, the class, the city state or congeries of tribes, the nation, the empire are so many stages in this progress and constant enlargement. If the smaller aggregates were destroyed as soon as the larger are successfully formed, this graduation would result in no complexity; but Nature does not follow this course. She seldom destroys entirely the types she has once made or only destroys that for which there is no longer any utility;
the rest she keeps in order to serve her need or her passion for variety, richness, multiformity and only effaces the dividing lines or modifies the characteristics and relations sufficiently to allow of the larger unity she is creating. Therefore at every step humanity is confronted with various problems which arise not only from the difficulty of accord between the interests of the individual and those of the immediate aggregate, the community, but between the need and interests of the smaller integralities and the growth of that larger whole which is to ensphere them all.

History has preserved for us scattered instances of this travail, instances of failure and success which are full of instruction. We see the struggle towards the aggregation of tribes among the Semitic nations, Jew and Arab, surmounted in the one after a scission into two kingdoms which remained a permanent source of weakness to the Jewish nation, overcome only temporarily in the other by the sudden unifying force of Islam. We see the failure of clan life to combine into an organised national existence in the Celtic races, a failure entire in Ireland and Scotland and only surmounted through the crushing out of clan life by a foreign rule and culture, overcome only at the last moment in Wales. We see the failure of the city states and small regional peoples to fuse themselves in the history of Greece, the signal success of a similar struggle of Nature in the development of Roman Italy. The whole past of India for the last two thousand years and more has been the attempt, unavailing in spite of many approximations to success, to overcome the centrifugal tendency of an extraordinary number and variety of disparate elements, the family, the commune, the clan, the caste, the small regional state or people, the large linguistic unit, the religious community, the nation within the nation. We may perhaps say that here Nature tried an experiment of unparalleled complexity and potential richness, accumulating all possible difficulties in order to arrive at the most opulent result. But in the end the problem proved insoluble or, at least, was not solved and Nature had to resort to her usual *deus ex machina* denouement, the instrumentality of a foreign rule.

But even when the nation is sufficiently organised,—the
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largest unit yet successfully developed by Nature, — entire unity is not always achieved. If no other elements of discord remain, yet the conflict of classes is always possible. And the phenomenon leads us to another rule of this gradual development of Nature in human life which we shall find of very considerable importance when we come to the question of a realisable human unity. The perfection of the individual in a perfected society or eventually in a perfected humanity — understanding perfection always in a relative and progressive sense — is the inevitable aim of Nature. But the progress of all the individuals in a society does not proceed pari passu, with an equal and equable march. Some advance, others remain stationary — absolutely or relatively, — others fall back. Consequently the emergence of a dominant class is inevitable within the aggregate itself, just as in the constant clash between the aggregates the emergence of dominant nations is inevitable. That class will predominate which develops most perfectly the type Nature needs at the time for her progress or, it may be, for her retrogression. If she demands power and strength of character, a dominant aristocracy emerges; if knowledge and science, a dominant literary or savant class; if practical ability, ingenuity, economy and efficient organisation, a dominant bourgeoisie or Vaishya class, usually with the lawyer at the head; if diffusion rather than concentration of general well-being and a close organisation of toil, then even the domination of an artisan class is not impossible.

But this phenomenon, whether of dominant classes or dominant nations, can never be more than a temporary necessity; for the final aim of Nature in human life cannot be the exploitation of the many by the few or even of the few by the many, can never be the perfection of some at the cost of the abject submergence and ignorant subjection of the bulk of humanity; these can only be transient devices. Therefore we see that such dominations bear always in them the seed of their own destruction. They must pass either by the ejection or destruction of the exploiting element or else by a fusion and equalisation. We see in Europe and America that the dominant Brahmin and the dominant Kshatriya have been either abolished or are on the point of subsidence into
equality with the general mass. Two rigidly separate classes alone remain, the dominant propertied class and the labourer, and all the most significant movements of the day have for their purpose the abolition of this last superiority. In this persistent tendency, Europe has obeyed one great law of Nature’s progressive march, her trend towards a final equality. Absolute equality is surely neither intended nor possible, just as absolute uniformity is both impossible and utterly undesirable; but a fundamental equality which will render the play of true superiority and difference inoffensive, is essential to any conceivable perfectibility of the human race.

Therefore, the perfect counsel for a dominant minority is always to recognise in good time the right hour for its abdication and for the imparting of its ideals, qualities, culture, experience to the rest of the aggregate or to as much of it as is prepared for that progress. Where this is done, the social aggregate advances normally and without disruption or serious wound or malady; otherwise a disordered progress is imposed upon it, for Nature will not suffer human egoism to baffle for ever her fixed intention and necessity. Where the dominant classes successfully avoid her demand upon them, the worst of destinies is likely to overtake the social aggregate,—as in India where the final refusal of the Brahmin and other privileged classes to call up the bulk of the nation as far as possible to their level, their fixing of an unbridgeable gulf of superiority between themselves and the rest of society, has been a main cause of eventual decline and degeneracy. For where her aims are frustrated, Nature inevitably withdraws her force from the offending unit till she has brought in and used other and external means to reduce the obstacle to a nullity.

But even if the unity within is made as perfect as social, administrative and cultural machinery can make it, the question of the individual still remains. For these social units or aggregates are not like the human body in which the component cells are capable of no separate life apart from the aggregate. The human individual tends to exist in himself and to exceed the limits of the family, the clan, the class, the nation; and even,
that self-sufficiency on one side, that universality on the other
are the essential elements of his perfection. Therefore, just as the
systems of social aggregation which depend on the domination
of a class or classes over others must change or dissolve, so
the social aggregates which stand in the way of this perfection
of the individual and seek to coerce him within their limited
mould and into the rigidity of a narrow culture or petty class or
national interest, must find their term and their day of change
or destruction under the irresistible impulsion of progressing
Nature.