Chapter XIII

The Formation of the Nation-Unit —
The Three Stages

THE THREE stages of development which have marked the mediaeval and modern evolution of the nation-type may be regarded as the natural process where a new form of unity has to be created out of complex conditions and heterogeneous materials by an external rather than an internal process. The external method tries always to mould the psychological condition of men into changed forms and habits under the pressure of circumstances and institutions rather than by the direct creation of a new psychological condition which would, on the contrary, develop freely and flexibly its own appropriate and serviceable social forms. In such a process there must be in the nature of things, first, some kind of looser yet sufficiently compelling order of society and common type of civilisation to serve as a framework or scaffolding within which the new edifice shall arise. Next, there must come naturally a period of stringent organisation directed towards unity and centrality of control and perhaps a general levelling and uniformity under that central direction. Last, if the new organism is not to fossilise and stereotype its life, if it is to be still a living and vigorous creation of Nature, there must come a period of free internal development as soon as the formation is assured and unity has become a mental and vital habit. This freer internal activity assured in its heart and at its basis by the formed needs, ideas and instincts of the community will no longer bring with it the peril of disorder, disruption or arrest of the secure growth and formation of the organism.

The form and principle of the first looser system must depend upon the past history and present conditions of the elements that have to be welded into the new unity. But it is
noticeable that both in Europe and Asia there was a common tendency, which we cannot trace to any close interchange of ideas and must therefore attribute to the operation of the same natural cause and necessity, towards the evolution of a social hierarchy based on a division according to four different social activities,—spiritual function, political domination and the double economic function of mercantile production and interchange and dependent labour or service. The spirit, form and equipoise worked out were very different in different parts of the world according to the bent of the community and its circumstances, but the initial principle was almost identical. The motive-force everywhere was the necessity of a large effective form of common social life marked by fixity of status through which individual and small communal interests might be brought under the yoke of a sufficient religious, political and economic unity and likeness. It is notable that Islamic civilisation, with its dominant principle of equality and brotherhood in the faith and its curious institution of a slavery which did not prevent the slave from rising even to the throne, was never able to evolve such a form of society and failed, in spite of its close contact with political and progressive Europe, to develop strong and living, well-organised and conscious nation-units even after the disruption of the empire of the Caliphs; it is only now under the pressure of modern ideas and conditions that this is being done.

But even where this preparatory stage was effectively brought into existence, the subsequent stages did not necessarily follow. The feudal period of Europe with its four orders of the clergy, the king and nobles, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has a sufficiently close resemblance to the Indian fourfold order of the sacerdotal, military and mercantile classes and the Shudras. The Indian system took its characteristic stamp from a different order of ideas more prominently religious and ethical than political, social or economic; but still, practically, the dominant function of the system was social and economic and there seems at first sight to be no reason why it should not have followed, with whatever differences of detail, the common evolution. Japan with its great feudal order under the spiritual
and secular headship of the Mikado and afterwards the double headship of the Mikado and the Shogun evolved one of the most vigorous and self-conscious nation-units the world has seen. China with its great learned class uniting in one the Brahmin and Kshatriya functions of spiritual and secular knowledge and executive rule and its Emperor and Son of Heaven for head and type of the national unity succeeded in becoming a united nation. The different result in India, apart from other causes, was due to the different evolution of the social order. Elsewhere that evolution turned in the direction of a secular organisation and headship; it created within the nation itself a clear political self-consciousness and, as a consequence, either the subordination of the sacerdotal class to the military and administrative or else their equality or even their fusion under a common spiritual and secular head. In mediaeval India, on the contrary, it turned towards the social dominance of the sacerdotal class and the substitution of a common spiritual for a common political consciousness as the basis of the national feeling. No lasting secular centre was evolved, no great imperial or kingly head which by its prestige, power, antiquity and claim to general reverence and obedience could over-balance or even merely balance this sacerdotal prestige and predominance and create a sense of political as well as spiritual and cultural oneness.

The struggle between the Church and the monarchical State is one of the most important and vital features of the history of Europe. Had that conflict ended in an opposite result, the whole future of humanity would have been in jeopardy. As it was, the Church was obliged to renounce its claim to independence and dominance over the temporal power. Even in the nations which remained Catholic, a real independence and dominance of the temporal authority was successfully vindicated; for the King of France exercised a control over the Gallican Church and clergy which rendered all effective interference of the Pope in French affairs impossible. In Spain, in spite of the close alliance between Pope and King and the theoretical admission of the former's complete spiritual authority, it was really the temporal head who decided the ecclesiastical policy and commanded the
terrors of the Inquisition. In Italy, the immediate presence of the spiritual head of Catholicism in Rome was a great moral obstacle to the development of a politically united nation; the passionate determination of the liberated Italian people to establish its King in Rome was really a symbol of the law that a self-conscious and politically organised nation can have only one supreme and central authority admitted in its midst and that must be the secular power. The nation which has reached or is reaching this stage must either separate the religious and spiritual claim from its common secular and political life by individualising religion or else it must unite the two by the alliance of the State and the Church to uphold the single authority of the temporal head or combine the spiritual and temporal headship in one authority as was done in Japan and China and in England of the Reformation. Even in India the people which first developed some national self-consciousness not of a predominantly spiritual character were the Rajputs, especially of Mewar, to whom the Raja was in every way the head of society and of the nation; and the peoples which having achieved national self-consciousness came nearest to achieving also organised political unity were the Sikhs for whom Guru Govind Singh deliberately devised a common secular and spiritual centre in the Khalsa, and the Mahrattas who not only established a secular head, representative of the conscious nation, but so secularised themselves that, as it were, the whole people indiscriminately, Brahmin and Shudra, became for a time potentially a people of soldiers, politicians and administrators.

In other words, the institution of a fixed social hierarchy, while it seems to have been a necessary stage for the first tendencies of national formation, needed to modify itself and prepare its own dissolution if the later stages were to be rendered possible. An instrument good for a certain work and set of conditions, if it is still retained when other work has to be done and conditions change, becomes necessarily an obstacle. The direction needed was a change from the spiritual authority of one class and the political authority of another to a centralisation of the common life of the evolving nation under a secular rather than
a religious head or, if the religious tendency in the people be too strong to separate things spiritual and temporal, under a national head who shall be the fountain of authority in both departments. Especially was it necessary for the creation of a political self-consciousness, without which no separate nation-unit can be successfully formed, that the sentiments, activities, instruments proper to its creation should for a time take the lead and all others stand behind and support them. A Church or a dominant sacerdotal caste remaining within its own function cannot form the organised political unity of a nation; for it is governed by other than political and administrative considerations and cannot be expected to subordinate to them its own characteristic feelings and interests. It can only be otherwise if the religious caste or sacerdotal class become also as in Tibet the actually ruling political class of the country. In India, the dominance of a caste governed by sacerdotal, religious and partly by spiritual interests and considerations, a caste which dominated thought and society and determined the principles of the national life but did not actually rule and administer, has always stood in the way of the development followed by the more secular-minded European and Mongolian peoples. It is only now after the advent of European civilisation when the Brahmin caste has not only lost the best part of its exclusive hold on the national life but has largely secularised itself, that political and secular considerations have come into the forefront, a pervading political self-consciousness has been awakened and the organised unity of the nation, as distinct from a spiritual and cultural oneness, made possible in fact and not only as an unshaped subconscious tendency.

The second stage of the development of the nation-unit has been, then, the modification of the social structure so as to make room for a powerful and visible centre of political and administrative unity. This stage is necessarily attended by a strong tendency to the abrogation of even such liberties as a fixed social hierarchy provides and the concentration of power in the hands, usually, of a dominant if not always an absolute monarchical government. By modern democratic ideas kingship is only
tolerated either as an inoperative figure-head or a servant of the State life or a convenient centre of the executive administration, it is no longer indispensable as a real control; but the historical importance of a powerful kingship in the evolution of the nation-type, as it actually developed in mediaeval times, cannot be exaggerated. Even in liberty-loving, insular and individualistic England, the Plantagenets and Tudors were the real and active nucleus round which the nation grew into firm form and into adult strength; and in Continental countries the part played by the Capets and their successors in France, by the House of Castile in Spain and by the Romanoffs and their predecessors in Russia is still more prominent. In the last of these instances, one might almost say that without the Ivans, Peters and Catherines there would have been no Russia. And even in modern times, the almost mediaeval role played by the Hohenzollerns in the unification and growth of Germany was watched with an uneasy astonishment by the democratic peoples to whom such a phenomenon was no longer intelligible and seemed hardly to be serious. But we may note also the same phenomenon in the first period of formation of the new nations of the Balkans. The seeking for a king to centralise and assist their growth, despite all the strange comedies and tragedies which have accompanied it, becomes perfectly intelligible as a manifestation of the sense of the old necessity, not so truly necessary now  

1 Now replaced by the spiritual-political headship of an almost semi-divine Leader in a Führer who incarnates in himself, as it were, the personality of the race.

2 It should be noted that even the democratic idealism of the modern mind in China has been obliged to crystallise itself round the “leader”, a Sun Yat Sen or Chiang Kai Shek and the force of inspiration has depended on the power of this living centre.
and shaping national life at the most critical stage of its growth which explains the tendency common in the East and not altogether absent from the history of the West to invest it with an almost sacred character; it explains also the passionate loyalty with which great national dynasties or their successors have been served even in the moment of their degeneration and downfall.

But this movement of national development, however salutary in its peculiar role, is almost fatally attended with that suppression of the internal liberties of the people which makes the modern mind so naturally though unscientifically harsh in its judgment of the old monarchical absolutism and its tendencies. For always this is a movement of concentration, stringency, uniformity, strong control and one-pointed direction; to universalise one law, one rule, one central authority is the need it has to meet, and therefore its spirit must be to enforce and centralise authority, to narrow or quite suppress liberty and free variation. In England the period of the New Monarchy from Edward IV to Elizabeth, in France the great Bourbon period from Henry IV to Louis XIV, in Spain the epoch which extends from Ferdinand to Philip II, in Russia the rule of Peter the Great and Catherine were the time in which these nations reached their maturity, formed fully and confirmed their spirit and attained to a robust organisation. And all these were periods of absolutism or of movement to absolutism and a certain foundation of uniformity or attempt to found it. This absolutism clothed already in its more primitive garb the reviving idea of the State and its right to impose its will on the life and thought and conscience of the people so as to make it one single, undivided, perfectly efficient and perfectly directed mind and body.\(^3\)

It is from this point of view that we shall most intelligently understand the attempt of the Tudors and the Stuarts to impose both monarchical authority and religious uniformity on the people and seize the real sense of the religious wars in France, the Catholic monarchical rule in Spain with its atrocious method of

\(^3\) Now illustrated with an astonishing completeness in Russia, Germany and Italy — the totalitarian idea.
the Inquisition and the oppressive will of the absolute Czars in Russia to impose also an absolute national Church. The effort failed in England because after Elizabeth it no longer answered to any genuine need; for the nation was already well-formed, strong and secure against disruption from without. Elsewhere it succeeded both in Protestant and Catholic countries, or in the rare cases as in Poland where this movement could not take place or failed, the result was disastrous. Certainly, it was everywhere an outrage on the human soul, but it was not merely due to any natural wickedness of the rulers; it was an inevitable stage in the formation of the nation-unit by political and mechanical means. If it left England the sole country in Europe where liberty could progress by natural gradations, that was due, no doubt, largely to the strong qualities of the people but still more to its fortunate history and insular circumstances.

The monarchical State in this evolution crushed or subordinated the religious liberties of men and made a subservient or conciliated ecclesiastical order the priest of its divine right, Religion the handmaid of a secular throne. It destroyed the liberties of the aristocracy and left it its privileges, and these even were allowed only that it might support and buttress the power of the king. After using the bourgeoisie against the nobles, it destroyed, where it could, its real and living civic liberties and permitted only some outward forms and its parts of special right and privilege. As for the people, they had no liberties to be destroyed. Thus the monarchical State concentrated in its own activities the whole national life. The Church served it with its moral influence, the nobles with their military traditions and ability, the bourgeoisie with the talent or chicane of its lawyers and the literary genius or administrative power of its scholars, thinkers and men of inborn business capacity; the people gave taxes and served with their blood the personal and national ambitions of the monarchy. But all this powerful structure and closely-knit order of things was doomed by its very triumph and predestined to come down either with a crash or by a more or less unwilling gradual abdication before new necessities and agencies. It was tolerated and supported so long as the nation felt consciously or
subconsciously its need and justification; once that was fulfilled and ceased, there came inevitably the old questioning which, now grown fully self-conscious, could no longer be suppressed or permanently resisted. By changing the old order into a mere simulacrum the monarchy had destroyed its own base. The sacerdotal authority of the Church, once questioned on spiritual grounds, could not be long maintained by temporal means, by the sword and the law; the aristocracy keeping its privileges but losing its real functions became odious and questionable to the classes below it; the bourgeoisie conscious of its talent, irritated by its social and political inferiority, awakened by the voice of its thinkers, led the movement of revolt and appealed to the help of the populace; the masses — dumb, oppressed, suffering — rose with this new support which had been denied to them before and overturned the whole social hierarchy. Hence the collapse of the old world and the birth of a new age.

We have already seen the inner justification of this great revolutionary movement. The nation-unit is not formed and does not exist merely for the sake of existing; its purpose is to provide a larger mould of human aggregation in which the race, and not only classes and individuals, may move towards its full human development. So long as the labour of formation continues, this larger development may be held back and authority and order be accepted as the first consideration, but not when the aggregate is sure of its existence and feels the need of an inner expansion. Then the old bonds have to be burst; the means of formation have to be discarded as obstacles to growth. Liberty then becomes the watchword of the race. The ecclesiastical order which suppressed liberty of thought and new ethical and social development, has to be dispossessed of its despotic authority, so that man may be mentally and spiritually free. The monopolies and privileges of the king and aristocracy have to be destroyed, so that all may take their share of the national power, prosperity and activity. Finally, bourgeois capitalism has to be induced or forced to consent to an economic order in which suffering, poverty and exploitation shall be eliminated and the wealth of the community be more equally shared by all who help to create
it. In all directions, men have to come into their own, realise the
dignity and freedom of the manhood within them and give play
to their utmost capacity.

For liberty is insufficient, justice also is necessary and be-
comes a pressing demand; the cry for equality arises. Certainly,
absolute equality is non-existent in this world; but the word was
aimed against the unjust and unnecessary inequalities of the old
social order. Under a just social order, there must be an equal
opportunity, an equal training for all to develop their faculties
and to use them, and, so far as may be, an equal share in the
advantages of the aggregate life as the right of all who contribute
to the existence, vigour and development of that life by the use
of their capacities. As we have noted, this need might have taken
the form of an ideal of free cooperation guided and helped by a
wise and liberal central authority expressing the common will,
but it has actually reverted to the old notion of an absolute
and efficient State — no longer monarchical, ecclesiastical, aris-
tocratic but secular, democratic and socialistic — with liberty
sacrificed to the need of equality and aggregate efficiency. The
psychological causes of this reversion we shall not now consider.
Perhaps liberty and equality, liberty and authority, liberty and
organised efficiency can never be quite satisfactorily reconciled
so long as man individual and aggregate lives by egoism, so long
as he cannot undergo a great spiritual and psychological change
and rise beyond mere communal association to that third ideal
which some vague inner sense made the revolutionary thinkers
of France add to their watchwords of liberty and equality, — the
greatest of all the three, though till now only an empty word on
man’s lips, the ideal of fraternity or, less sentimentally and more
truly expressed, an inner oneness. That no mechanism social,
political, religious has ever created or can create; it must take
birth in the soul and rise from hidden and divine depths within.