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India's Unending Journey

Mark Tully

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Sir Mark Tully is one of the world's leading writers and broadcasters on India, and the presenter of the much loved radio programme 'Something Understood'. In this remarkable and timely work, he reveals the profound changes happening in India today, and brings the country alive in a way only he can do.

Through interviews and anecdotes, he journeys from the skyscrapers of Gurgaon to the religious riots in Ayodhya, from the calm of a university campus to farmers deep in the countryside. And he brings us all the colour, flavour and balance of this fascinating nation that is having such an impact on our world.

PRAISE FOR *INDIA'S UNENDING JOURNEY*

'The quintessential foreign correspondent, informed, even-handed and practically a native.'

The Times

'A labour of love, written by a man who has witnessed the worst of India and yet can still find hope and optimism, someone who sees beyond the disunity in diversity and finds a unique balance.'

India Today

'A warm and engaging guide.'

The London Paper

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INDIA'S UNENDING JOURNEY

FINDING BALANCE
IN A TIME OF CHANGE

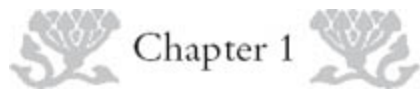


Mark Tully



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PURI: EXPLORING THE OPPOSITES

I WAS ASLEEP under my mosquito net in the BNR Hotel in Puri, a temple town on the east coast of India, when I was suddenly woken by loud explosions, sharp, ear-splitting cracks and the swoosh of rockets shooting up into the sky. It was still dark and my mind, befuddled by sleep, couldn't fathom what was happening. Then, from the loudspeakers of a nearby temple, shrill pre-recorded *bhajans*, or hymns, began blasting out at all and sundry. That's when I remembered that this was the festival of Kartik Purnima, which marks the full moon of the month of Kartik. It's considered an auspicious day for worshipping ancestors or praying for success in a business venture. I had been told that Hindus eager to indulge their insatiable appetite for festivals would start the celebrations before dawn, and so realised that the booms and bangs must be the sound of fireworks.

I had not intended to come to Puri at the time of a Hindu festival. Rather, I had come for a few days' holiday, and to wallow in nostalgia for my British Raj childhood. As a child, I had spent winter seaside holidays at the BNR, or Bengal Nagpur Railway's Hotel, in Puri with my parents and an ever-increasing number of brothers and sisters - I was second in line and by the time we left India there were six of us. My grandfather also used to join us for the holidays.

Lying in bed now, and trying unsuccessfully to ignore the fireworks and the *bhajans*, all my worries bubbled up in

my mind, as they usually do when I can't sleep. One of them was whether I would ever be able to write this book, which I had promised to my publishers. It was to be a book describing how nearly forty years of living in India had changed me and my outlook. I was worried that this would seem very arrogant, and one of the lessons I have learnt from India is to value humility. Others are to avoid thinking in black and white, to be suspicious of certainty, to search for the middle road and, in particular, to acknowledge that there are many ways to God. But it's so much easier to argue in black and white, to come down wholly on one side or another, and I worried that my book would be muddled and unconvincing.

I had finally run out of excuses for not starting to write, but I had no idea where to begin. Then suddenly it occurred to me: maybe the coincidence of being in Puri during Kartik Purnima meant that I should start the book here. India has taught me that coincidences are often significant, and this coincidence certainly appeared to symbolise the forces in my life that were driving me to write the book. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that the BNR Hotel stood for my very British upbringing, an upbringing that was designed to keep me apart from India, whereas the festival stood for my adult life, of which India has become an inseparable part.

Holidaying in the BNR hotel of my childhood was a very British affair. I don't remember any Indians drinking their early morning tea on the BNR Hotel's long, wide verandas, with their red concrete floors polished as bright as the toe-cap of a sergeant major's boot. My grandfather was fascinated by the colour of the white *sahibs* and *memsahibs* who arrived in the dining room for breakfast after a night on the Puri Express. He would embarrass my mother by loudly criticising some individual or another for being

'pasty-faced', adding that the poor unfortunate looked as though he 'spends too much time in the office, and doesn't ride and get out in the fresh air'. Of others, whose ruddy complexion may well have been the result of getting out and about, he would say, 'Look at him - red as a beetroot. He must be spending too much time in the bar.' We were all fascinated by a man who sat on the beach buried up to his neck in sand, in the belief that this would cure his rheumatism.

For me, holidays at Puri were part of a childhood designed to ensure that my siblings and I in no way 'went native'. The Indian servants considered essential by every European family were thought to pose a particular threat to their employers' children. In her book *Children of the Raj*, Vyvyen Brendon describes one *memsahib* who recommended the employment of English nannies to guard children against 'promiscuous intimacy with the native servants'. However, Rudyard Kipling's parents did not take that line and Kipling had an Indian *ayah* rather than an English nanny. He spoke to her and the other servants in Hindustani; in fact, he had to be reminded to speak English to his parents when he went into the dining room. When Kipling returned to India after his education in Britain he was surprised to find his Hindustani coming back, which was a great help to him as a journalist.

I was not so lucky. My childhood custodian was Nanny Oxborrow from England, and I remember being slapped by her when she found the driver teaching me to count in Hindustani. 'That's the servant's language, not yours!' she snapped. Years later, her zealous protection very nearly prevented my career in India from getting off the ground. When, in my twenties, I came up before a BBC Appointments Board to be interviewed for the post of Assistant Representative in the Delhi Office, one member said, 'You must remember a lot of the language from your childhood.' Perhaps because I was overawed by the

occasion I blurted out, 'Not really, but I can recite "Humpty Dumpty" and "Little Miss Muffet" in Hindustani.' (Much to Nanny's annoyance, Grandfather had taught us these nursery rhymes.) To this day I don't know why that didn't ruin my chances.

The only Indians I remember on the hotel's stretch of the beach during my childhood were the lifeguards. We all had our own bare-chested fisherman, with a number painted on his white pointed hat. Without these men to watch over us, the breakers crashing onto the beach and the undercurrent as they retreated would have made bathing far too dangerous. Just down the road from the BNR beach was Puri itself, a Hindu temple town throbbing with pilgrims. But I knew nothing of that - I never went there.

Now, as I lay listening to the fireworks explode, the celebration of Kartik Purnima seemed to represent the India I had been isolated from all those years ago. The press estimated that 500,000 people had gathered on the beach at Puri to bathe in the sea this year, yet, when I joined in the festivities later that day, there was no one in charge to tell the devotees who to worship or how to worship them, and there was no one to turn me away for being a foreigner and a Christian. Neither was there any line drawn between the sacred and the secular. Hawkers shouted their wares - candy floss, ice cream and Indian fast foods; plastic windmills and other toys; vermilion powder, coconuts and small clay lamps, as well as all the other accoutrements of Hindu worship - their cries competing with the bellowing of sacred conch shells and the mournful sound of women ululating as they remembered their ancestors.

A circle of women from a fishing village made no objection as I watched them pat little mounds of sand into shapes like temple towers. Beside the mounds, they placed small boats made from the stalks of banana trees, bearing

marigolds, betel leaves and sacred *doob* grass. After lighting the short sticks of incense that formed the boats' masts, the women bent double, huddled together and charged down the beach like a rigger scrum, their ululating tongues wagging furiously, to launch their boats on the sea. The boat symbolised the legend of seven brothers who had crossed the seas to trade and bring prosperity to their homeland. There was no hint here of the old tradition that Hindus who cross the 'black water', as the sea used to be called, become polluted or ritually impure. Women dressed in traditional black-and-red checked cotton saris, together with others in saris of more modern designs - an array of yellows, greens and pinks, scarlet spangled with gold, and purple spangled with silver - squatted on the beach alongside girls in equally colourful *shalwar kameez*, all delicately splashing their hair with sea water and washing their arms and shoulders. Behind them, young boys leapt over the breakers and bobbed up and down in the sea. One less bashful middle-aged woman rolled in the waves, expertly managing to keep herself covered with her drenched cotton sari despite the pull of the breakers. A senior police officer paddled in the shallow water. Although he did not venture into the deep, he still required the company of two life guards and a security escort to prevent him from being swept out to sea. Amidst all this activity, a barber quietly shaved the head of a young boy with a cut-throat razor to prepare him for his naming ceremony.

Observing this celebration of Kartik Purnima, where everyone was doing their own thing, I was again reminded that Hinduism is a pluralist religion. When I have spoken about this pluralism in the past, or recalled other lessons I have learnt from Hindu traditions, it has often been assumed that I have converted to Hinduism myself and that

I am suggesting others should convert too. This is not so: I remain a Christian. I agree with Mahatma Gandhi's advice to one of his closest disciples, Mirabehn, the daughter of an English Admiral, that she should not convert to Hinduism but try to be a better Christian. Anyhow, conversion to Hinduism is only allowed in certain sects because traditionally Hinduism is a way of life that people are born into.

However, I do believe that we should all listen to each other and learn from each other - and that includes those who do not adhere to any religion. In my opinion, no single religion has a monopoly on the truth or is without blemish, nor can any religious tradition survive if it remains static. Those who reject all criticism and are not open to developing their doctrines do a disservice to their own traditions, often ending up defending indefensible practices or outdated prohibitions. In the particular case of Hinduism, it is quite clear that the practice of untouchability is indefensible. While Kartik Purnima brought to mind my experiences of Hinduism's admirable tolerance of different doctrines and different philosophical schools, including atheism, I was also reminded in Puri that Hinduism can be exclusive.

Puri is one of the major pilgrimage centres in India because it is the legendary home of the god Jagganath, or Krishna. He is an incarnation of Vishnu, who, with Brahma and Shiva, is one of the Hindu Trinity. But Jagganath's great temple at Puri is not inclusive. Non-Hindus are not welcome to enter the temple precincts or to have a *darshan*, or sight, of the god. This meant that while I was in Puri, I had to stand on the roof of a dusty and apparently little-patronised library in order to peer into one of the forecourts of Jagannath's temple. Before the high conical tower under which Jagannath sits, there were two halls separated by courtyards with high walls, so I really couldn't see much from my roof-top perch. However, I knew from

reading that inside the courtyards and the halls there were lots of smaller shrines where pilgrims worshipped before going on to the ultimate *darshan*. A priest of another temple once told me that the gods in the minor shrines in temples were a little like secretaries and personal assistants sitting in the outer offices of government ministers: you had to gratify them before you could get admission to the great man.

The English word 'juggernaut' derives from the deity Jagannath's massive wooden chariot. Once a year the god comes out of the temple on his chariot, which is pulled by devotees to another temple at the far end of the wide avenue that runs through the centre of Puri. There, Jagannath enjoys 'a holiday for nine days'.

In the late nineteenth century, this Car Festival, as it is known, appears to have suffered from an acute form of a malaise that can all too easily afflict any religion: it was priest-ridden. In his book *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*, John Beames (the British official in charge of the district at that time) records that Brahmin priests, known as Pandas, used to fan out to all corners of north India in order to persuade pilgrims to come to Puri for the festival. Beames called them 'touters'. The Pandas were, he says, 'naturally' more successful with women. He describes the plight of those who fell for their sales talk:

It used to be a common sight to see a strong, stalwart Panda marching along the road, followed by a little troop of small, cowering Bengali women, each clad in her one scanty, clinging robe, her small wardrobe in a palm-leaf box on her head, with the lordly Panda's luggage on her shoulders. At night they put up at one of the chatties or lodging-houses which are found all along the road. Here his lordship reposes while his female flock buy his food and cook it, spread his couch, serve

his dinner, light his pipe, shampoo his limbs, and even if he so desires, minister to his lust.

When the women reached Puri, the temple priests fleeced them of what little money they had left after the ravages of the Pandas. As for the Pandas, they deserted their pilgrims and left them to find their own way home. What a miserable journey that was, according to Beames:

Far from their homes from which they have in many cases started surreptitiously, purloining their husbands' hoard of money, these wretched women have to tramp wearily back through the rain, for it is mostly for the Rath Jatra (Car Festival), in the rainy season, that they come. What with exposure, fatigue and hunger they die in great numbers by the roadside. Those whose youth and strength enable them to survive the journey are often too much afraid of their husbands' anger to return home, and end by swelling the number of prostitutes in Kolkata. '*Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum!*'

Beames was a scholar of Indian culture and languages, and so he is unlikely to have been as prejudiced as many British of his time. If his account is accurate, the Puri Car Festival of the nineteenth century was not an event that Hinduism could be proud of. But it can be proud of what is the world's largest religious gathering today - the Maha Kumbh Mela. It is, like Kartik Purnima, a bathing festival, and it is held every twelve years at Allahabad, where the two sacred rivers, the Ganga, as the Ganges is known in India, and the Yamuna, meet.

In 1989 when I attended my first Maha Kumbh Mela, I had been deeply impressed by the millions of pilgrims who thronged to Allahabad. Their strong faith reconfirmed my belief that Hinduism still had deep roots in India, for it clearly gave the pilgrims the courage and determination to

make long journeys in buses and trains filled beyond bursting point, to queue for hours and walk for miles before getting to the riverside, and then to ignore rumours that there might be a stampede on the most sacred bathing day. Nevertheless, when I wrote about the festival, to offset any impression that Hinduism faced no challenge from modern materialism, I found myself quoting a warning by R.C. Zaehner, the former Professor of Eastern religion and Ethics at Oxford: 'With the spread of Western education right down to the lowest strata of society and the progressive industrialization of the country the whole religious structure of Hinduism will be subjected to a severe strain; but such has been its genius for absorption and adaptation that it would be foolhardy to prophesy how it will confront this new and unprecedented crisis.'

Industrialisation has indeed spread rapidly in India since the 1980s, and now almost all Indians want their children to have a Western education and to be taught in English. Yet the Maha Kumbh Mela and - on a smaller scale - Kartik Purnima in Puri demonstrate that Hinduism is continuing to stand up well in the face of the crisis that Zaehner forecast, precisely because of its 'genius for absorption and adaptation'. In that, it is unlike Semitic religions for, as Zaehner has also written:

Hindus do not think of religious truth in dogmatic terms: dogmas cannot be eternal but only the transitory, distorting images of a truth that transcends not only them, but all verbal definition. For the passion for dogmatic certainty that has racked the religions of Semitic origin, from Judaism itself, through Christianity and Islam to the Marxism of our day, they feel nothing but shocked incomprehension.

It's that genius for absorption and adaptation, and in particular that 'shocked incomprehension' in the face of

dogmatic certainty, that I want to write about in this book. I would like to suggest that dogmatic certainty isn't just a trait of religion and philosophy, but can be characteristic of attitudes in politics, economics and society as a whole. In my own life time, the governing school of economics in the Western world has made a 180-degree swing, from the certainty that socialism is the ultimate and absolute truth to the conviction that market capitalism is the only guarantee of prosperity. Left-wing politicians, civil servants, nationalised industry employees and trade unions once espoused a socialism that came to dominate us in the West, and government became a vast vested interest. Now big business is dominating us because we have been led to believe in market economics with absolute certainty. In [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) I will be considering the limits of economics and looking at ways in which India can help us to redefine growth.

It's not just our economics but also our sexual mores that have swung by 180 degrees, from one form of certainty to another. As I will explain in more detail in [Chapter 2](#), I was educated in the fifties and so belong to the last generation brought up in the repressive Victorian tradition of sexual behaviour, taught to believe that any diversion from the strict Christian code of sexual morality was a heinous sin. Later in the twentieth century, however, we veered to the opposite extreme. Now sex has become a commodity.

In charting the course of *India's Unending Journey*, it is not my intention to offer startling religious or philosophical revelations, new directions or full-stops to old ways; there will be no green or red lights, but several ambers - perhaps not much more than warnings. All the same, attempting to observe those warnings has made a deep difference to my own thinking and, indeed, my life, and I sincerely believe them to be relevant to the Western world. As I believe that modern Western culture tends to ignore those warnings,

much of this book is a discussion of religion, politics, economics, business and sexual mores in the West. Nevertheless, I believe that these warnings are also relevant to India, which is in danger of ignoring its own traditions and rushing headlong into the adoption of modern Western culture. As this book is based on my personal experiences, I will be writing about the two Western cultures I know best - the British and the Irish. I realise that when it comes to religion, the position of America is very different.

In Britain and Ireland, the decline in the influence of Christianity has not meant that the passion of dogmatic certainty has diminished. Modernism was the secular counterpart to dogmatic Christianity. Modernism's dogma was rationalism and rationalism's offspring, science. Modernism regarded true knowledge as being universal and believed its validity could be proved with absolute certainty. Modernism held that we were capable of discovering truth, and established dogmas that were irrefutable. The seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes is regarded as the father of modernism. In his work *The Passion of the Western Mind*, the philosopher Richard Tarnas notes that Descartes was a mathematician and says, 'By applying such [mathematically] precise and painstaking reasoning to all questions of philosophy, and by accepting as true only those ideas that presented themselves to his reason as clear, distinct, and free from internal contradiction, Descartes established his means for the attainment of absolute certainty.'

Some might argue that the arrival of post-modernism has meant that the passion for dogmatic certainty and Descartes' method for discovering absolute certainty have gone out of the window. Post-modernists tell us we live in a world of uncertainty, in which it is accepted that nothing

final can be said, no view can go unchallenged and all dogmas are up for grabs. Yet I wonder just how deeply post-modernism has penetrated, how willing our allegedly post-modern society really is to absorb and adapt, and whether we are not actually still bound by certainties, even though they may not be the certainties of Semitic religions and Marxism that Zaehner spoke about, or even the mathematical methods of Descartes. At the very least, it seems to me that we still want to believe in absolute truths, even though, as post-modernism has suggested, those who claim to know those truths often use them to try to dominate us.

As I see it, one of the reasons for the decline in religious observation in Europe is an aggressive secularism that is as dogmatic as any religion and which has become the dominant philosophy of life in the West. The philosopher John Gray has pointed out a strange reversal that has taken place in modern life. In his foreword to *Straw Dogs*, he argues:

Today religious believers are more free thinking [than their Victorian predecessors]. Driven to the margins of a culture in which science claims authority over all of human knowledge they have to cultivate a capacity for doubt. In contrast, secular believers - held fast by the conventional wisdom of the time - are in the grip of unexamined dogmas.

Advocates of the conventional wisdom are not just dogmatic; they are also afraid of religion. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, spoke in an interview of the 'agenda of nervous secularists', which he said was creating 'hostility to religion'. The religions that the secularists fear are fundamentalist, yet ironically it is their own dogmatism that plays a major role in creating the dogmatism that they fear. The world got warning of this with the Iranian Islamic

revolution against the Shah, the darling of the West. The Iranian professor Ahmed Fardid coined the term 'West-toxication' for the poisoning and pollution that Iranians felt was afflicting them. Fearing what they saw as extreme materialism, many Iranians naturally took refuge in an extreme form of Islam.

In India today there is a corresponding battle between Westernised secularists and those following an extreme and dogmatic form of Hinduism, a form that is quite contrary to Hinduism's traditional dismissive attitude towards dogmatic certainty. As a result of this battle, anyone who speaks of Hinduism is likely to be accused by secularists of being a fundamentalist. A few years ago I made a film suggesting that Mahatma Gandhi had the answer to the current shouting match. The Mahatma said, 'My Hinduism teaches me to respect all religions.' He was assassinated because he insisted on Muslims being respected and fairly treated. Being quintessentially Indian, he advocated a middle way between a theocratic state and one that gave the impression of having no time for religion, which is what the word 'secular' has come to signify in the minds of so many. He advocated a state that was avowedly proud of being multi-religious and hoped India would 'live for this true picture in which every religion has its full and equal place'. But when I advocated that same view in my film, many of my secular friends accused me of supporting fundamentalist Hinduism. An article in one of India's national dailies went further, claiming that I had advocated a theocratic state, which was the last thing I intended, or that Gandhi would ever have wanted. Such is the nervousness of secularists in India.

We have become convinced that liberty is the supreme value in life, and so have lost sight of the other side of that coin: the fact that we are also social animals. The result is that the individual has become more important than society. We are forever hearing about rights, but we don't

hear much about duties. In *The Dignity of Difference*, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes of 'the collapse of moral language, the disappearance of "I ought", and its replacement by "I want", "I choose", "I feel".' We have to have something to want, something to choose, so we need perpetual change, perpetual so-called 'progress'. However, as Jonathan Sacks goes on to say:

Bad things happen when the pace of change exceeds our ability to change, and events move faster than our understanding. It is then that we feel the loss of control over our lives. Anxiety creates fear, fear leads to anger, anger breeds violence, and violence - when combined with weapons of mass destruction - becomes a deadly reality. The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope.

Those who are dogmatic and certain that they are right don't feel vulnerable and have no desire to have conversations. They only want to convince.

Conversation is an integral part of the Indian tradition that has influenced me. Every evening, with the cows safely home and a cloud of pungent smoke from cow-dung stoves lingering over the village, men would sit on their *charpoys*, or string cots, and talk over local and national issues. Over the years I often joined in these discussions and was subjected to severe cross-questioning about the BBC reports they had heard on their transistor radios. Even now, in small towns every tea shop has a copy of a newspaper and customers linger long after drinking the last drop of the milky sweet liquid in their cup to discuss the news. In Delhi, when two strangers find themselves waiting for the

same bus it is not long before they get into conversation. In government offices it often seems as though conversation is the only activity!

This love of conversation has its down side. Because Indians talk to each other so much, the bush telegraph remains a very effective media for spreading rumours, and rumours can be a powerful weapon in the hands of troublemakers. When I worked for the BBC I was sometimes a victim of the bush telegraph myself. I suppose it's a backhanded tribute to the corporation that our reputation for reliability led rumourmongers to authenticate their false information by claiming to have heard it on the BBC. For example, on the first day of Indira Gandhi's Emergency in 1975, when it was still uncertain whether all her cabinet would endorse the constitutional coup that suspended democracy, a rumour was spread that I had broadcast reports of the resignation of a senior minister and the house arrest of other members of the government. After the Emergency was over, the Information Minister at that time, Inder Gujral, told me that the rumour reached Indira Gandhi's inner circle. Apparently, Gujral was ordered to 'send for Mark Tully, pull down his trousers, give him a few lashes, and send him to jail'. Fortunately, he declined the task, saying it was the Home Minister's job to imprison people, not his, and called for the monitoring reports of the BBC's broadcasts. He found that they contained no reference to ministerial resignations and happily my backside was not bruised.

The Indian Nobel Prize-winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, a former Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, has demonstrated how wide, deep and relevant India's tradition of conversation and questioning is in his collection of essays called *The Argumentative Indian*. In his preface he speaks of 'India's long argumentative history' and explains:

Discussions and arguments are critically important for democracy and public reasoning. They are central to the practice of secularism and for even-handed treatment of adherents of different religious faiths (including those who have no religious beliefs). Going beyond these basic structural priorities, the argumentative tradition, if used with deliberation and commitment, can also be extremely important in resisting social inequalities and in removing poverty and deprivation. Voice is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice.

But in the modern Western tradition voices are all too often drowned out by the din of constant conflict – conflict that is frequently engineered by the media. Whether it be in politics, economics, religion, or any other sphere of human activity, the bandying of certainties frequently passes for discussion, and shouting from opposite corners is considered the way to conduct an argument. In India, too, the media, which takes its cue from the West, seems to think its role is to promote aggression not discussion, and conflict not conversation. One regular verbal punch-up on television is a show called *The Big Fight*. I am forever asking my friends in Indian television why, whenever there is a national religious dispute, they put members of the extremist factions into the ring to fight over it, instead of giving viewers the opportunity to hear a reasoned debate. To make matters worse, the programme's presenters often allow the extremists to claim that they speak for the entire Hindu or Muslim community, which all electoral results so far show to be untrue.

I believe that the Indian tradition of argument and discussion provides a way forward between the rock of dogmatic modernism and the hard stone of post-modernism. This was confirmed for me by my conversations with Chaturvedi Badrinath. Badri, as he is always known, had the good fortune to be a senior civil servant in the

Southern State of Tamil Nadu at the height of the movement that destroyed the Brahmin domination there. As Badri was a Brahmin himself, the politicians discriminated against him by not giving him any work to do. But the politicians couldn't take away his right to an office and a stenographer, so he spent much of his career happily pursuing his personal interest in Indian philosophy, and had someone to type out his thoughts. During our many discussions on that philosophy, it was he who gave me the clue to navigating the path between modernism and post-modernism.

Badri stressed the importance of the Sanskrit word *neti*. He pointed out that in the Hindu scriptures known as the *Upanishads* it is suggested that the Sanskrit expression *neti, neti* needs to be added after any definitive description. He translates *neti* as 'it is not this alone.' To me, the word implies that we should not go to extremes, that we can reach conclusions but we should not claim our definition is absolute or final; the door for discussion must remain open but there can be sufficient grounds for taking positions. Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'I claim to have no infallible guidance or inspiration'. At the same time he insisted, 'I want the windows of my house to be open to the winds blowing from all corners of the world, but I don't want to be blown off my feet.'

I come back to my friend Badri for an explanation of what I have come to believe should be the aim of all this discussion. He has written:

The question is one of knowing the true place of everything in the scheme of human life. To value too greatly or too little a particular human attribute in its relation to the rest is to disintegrate the natural wholeness of human personality. To value the material over the spiritual, or the spiritual over the material, the transient over the eternal, or the eternal over the

transient, the body over the mind, or the mind over the body, the individual over the society or the society over the individual, the self over the other or the other over the self, is to create conflicts both within ourselves and with the rest of the world.

And so, to me, the Indian tradition has come to imply that in everything in life we should seek to be balanced, and that the quest for that balance never ends. We are like tightrope-walkers; we have to concentrate on our balance all the time.

One of the most crucial balancing acts we have to perform is between fate and free will - between acknowledging that capabilities and opportunities are given to us and exercising our free will to make the best of them. I was simply acknowledging the workings of fate when I accepted that Puri would be the place to start this book. But I also acknowledge that it has required will-power to write it. The modern cult of individualism, and the belief that competition provides the driving force for progress - that without competition we would all sink into self-satisfied sloth - makes fate appear to be a dangerous word. Anyone who speaks of fate is almost bound to be called a fatalist, to be accused of being like the man described in M.E. Hare's limerick:

Said a philosopher - suddenly - "Damn
It's born in upon me I am
An engine that moves
In pre-destinate grooves
I'm not even a bus, but a tram."

It is particularly dangerous to speak of fate in the context of Indian culture, which is so often accused of fatalism. But that morning in the BNR hotel in Puri is by no means the only time I have been aware of fate playing a role in my life. Indeed, fate plays a role from the very beginning of all

our lives because we don't choose our parents; we don't even choose to be born. If we exaggerate the role of free will in our lives we become either arrogant, attributing all our achievements to our own efforts and abilities, or depressed, attributing all our apparent failures to our weakness.

What I have learnt from India might be summed up in that old-fashioned word, 'humility'. Acknowledging the role of fate in our lives; accepting that our knowledge will always be limited; seeking to discuss rather than to dogmatise; appreciating that we need always to be examining ourselves if we are to maintain the desired balance - all these acts surely require humility. Humility, like fate, is a dangerous word in times when success is the prevalent religion and celebrities are its gods. Discussing *India's Unending Journey* with a friend, I mentioned that, all things considered, it was probably a book about humility. She replied, 'That will certainly be counter-cultural!' The copy of the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* that I bought as a theology student many years ago (and still have) seems to me to describe humility in a way that should offset any fears that I am necessarily talking about a denial of self-esteem. The dictionary says that humility represses 'inordinate ambition and self-esteem without allowing man to fall into the opposite error of exaggerated or hypocritical self-abjection'. In other words, it's a matter of balance. It would be hypocritical of me, and lacking in humility, to say that I have got that balance right in my own life; I can only say that living in India has taught me to be aware of the need to try to get it right.

One of the most moving acknowledgements of the value of humility I have ever read was written by Oscar Wilde, a poet and playwright who was anything but humble before he was found guilty and jailed on a charge of

homosexuality. A letter written from jail to the man with whom he had had the homosexual relationship was later published under the title *De Profundis* (Latin for 'from the depths'). In it, Wilde writes of humility being 'hidden away in his nature', but now being:

... the last thing left in me and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting point for a fresh development. It has come to me right out of myself, so I know that it has come at the proper time. It could not have come before, nor later. Had anyone told me of it, I would have rejected it. Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it. As I found it, I want to keep it.

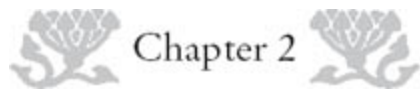
Humility came to Oscar Wilde; he did not take credit for discovering it.

What I have learnt in India seems to me relevant not only for our personal lives but also for humans as a species. If we had properly cared for balance in the first place, we would not have put nature as seriously out of balance as it is now. If we had been more humble, we would not have treated nature as inferior to us, as a resource for us to use. We would have realised sooner how dependent we are upon it. We must remember that we neither created the system that sustains us, nor do we sustain it.

It may seem contradictory to speak of humility and then write a book in which my own life features. Certainly I have never thought of writing an autobiography because I do not want to give the impression that my life is particularly important. But for the last ten years I have been presenting the Radio Four Programme *Something Understood*. The title is taken from the last line of George Herbert's poem 'Prayer'. In the programme we discuss the boundaries of our understanding and how certain we can be in life. As a result of *Something Understood*, I have been invited to

speak in many different parts of Britain. The reaction of these audiences, the conversations and correspondence I have had with listeners, and the many conversations I have had with my colleagues, who contribute so much to *Something Understood* - particularly my producer for the last ten years, Eley McAinsh - have led me to believe that there is an interest in the ideas discussed in this book. So much of what is written about the way we live our lives is in the third person, and I often want to ask how the ideas put forward have affected the author's life and how they fit into his or her own experience. By writing in the first person, I hope to answer that question and perhaps make my arguments more authentic. It would have felt wrong to me to write in any other way, since I advocate learning from personal experience.

I start with my schooldays because it was at school that I learnt much of what I later had to unlearn in India. I came to believe there was only one way, that life was all about winning and that academic ability was the only index of intelligence. Humility was not a virtue that was encouraged.



MARLBOROUGH: AN EDUCATION IN ABSOLUTES

I WAS EDUCATED at Marlborough College, a traditional British public school. I returned there recently with Richard Wilkinson, a good friend who shared a study with me in my last year. I had come back to Marlborough with Richard to discuss the impact that the school had made on me. Although I had gone on to Cambridge and then to theological college, I felt sure that I had been most profoundly shaped by my school days. I also wanted Richard to help me determine whether I was justified in looking back on Marlborough in the way I did. Not only had he been very close to me during my time there, but he had ended his teaching career at Marlborough, having earlier been the headmaster of two other schools. Although he had retired from teaching full-time, he still kept in touch with Marlborough by teaching at the summer school there.

Now, the two of us stood in the spacious courtyard, or quadrangle, that lies at the heart of the school. At the far end of the courtyard stands an imposing early eighteenth-century mansion, which was built for the Duke of Somerset and later converted into a coaching inn for passengers travelling from London to Bath. The college then turned this magnificent building into a boarding house for boys and it became known as 'C House'. At the other end of the courtyard, near the gates, stands the college's other notable building, the chapel. Tall, thin and long enough to accommodate nearly nine hundred worshippers, the chapel

is an inspiring example of high Victorian Gothic architecture. When I was a boy at Marlborough, we were obliged to go to chapel every day, where we regularly got down on our knees and confessed our sins in the words of the Anglican Prayer Book, begging God 'to have mercy upon us miserable offenders'.

Opposite the chapel is one of the less impressive buildings surrounding the courtyard, a late Victorian block of classrooms. Richard recalled how a scripture teacher had strutted up and down one of those classrooms, with his thumbs in the waistcoat of his tweed suit, bawling at the boys, 'I don't understand all this rot about Christian humility. I'm not humble and I don't have to be. I'm Colonel Harling and I'm a damn fine fellow!'

Marlborough was founded in 1843 for the education of the sons of the clergy, but, in spite of its ecclesiastical origins, it did little to convince me personally that the best way to live life was to 'humble myself in the sight of the Lord', or to be confident that 'He shall lift you up' (James 4.10). Rather, it taught me that life was all about striving to be 'a damn fine fellow' and lifting myself up without help from anyone else. Preposterous though Colonel Harling seems to me now, to my mind he truly represented the ethos of my school years at Marlborough, an ethos in which humility seemed to have little or no place. Success was what counted, and the only successes that really seemed to matter were those that were athletic or academic. What's more, our successes were ascribed entirely to our own efforts. The gifts we had been given at birth, the circumstances of our lives, and the advantages of our earlier education were not taken into account when our achievements were considered.

In spite of its religious tradition, Marlborough also seemed to be a place where learning was confined to the dictates of reason. I didn't come to understand until much later in life what imagination and other forms of perception