

Western Secularism or Dogmatic Hinduism: Mark Tully's Quest of Moderation

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Abstract: One of the most credible journalists who has travelled extensively to almost all the parts of this vast country and acquired in the process native understanding of all the facets of Indian life was attracted to India at a very young age when he felt he had developed a fondness for the people of India and their culture. He noticed that this society has been going on unruffled and unperturbed by historical catastrophes, overthrows of kingdoms, and falls of empires. It regenerates itself after every destruction and this power of constant regeneration will sustain it in future also. Tully keeps equal distance from the fundamentalist and the radical revolutionist. He states that one of the lessons he has learnt from India is to value humility, avoid thinking in black and white, to search for the middle road and to acknowledge that there are many ways to God. This paper examines the causes that made Tully what he is and the impact of his moderate views on his journalism.

Keywords: middle-path, balance, equilibrium, acceptance, ascetic, hedonist, liberality, extravagance.

Sir Mark Tully is more of a media legend than an individual for most Indians living in the length and width of the sub-continent. His incisive and in-depth reportage as the BBC correspondent has had a particular fascination for generations of Indians. His almost native understanding of all the facets of Indian life has earned him great credibility with the ordinary people of this country and given him a unique insight into Indian life rarely found in foreign correspondents. By his honest and humane coverage he has often annoyed the state and central governments. As a result of this he was expelled from India during the 'Emergency' declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975. During his tenure in the BBC the people of India trusted its broadcasts more than any other national or international broadcasting agency. Tully has been living in India and feels at home in this country so much so that he appears more Indian than many other Indians. Thus, he can see India as an outsider and as an insider. He has picked up Hindi and speaks this language quite fluently. He can write with authenticity on Indian society, religion, culture, and politics. He has been awarded honours such as Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan. He loves India for the spirit of moderation, balance, equilibrium and acceptance not only in its religions and philosophies but also in the psyche of the common man here.

Mark Tully is in constant search of a middle path as, for him, goodness consists in the mean between two extremes. It is moderation between deficiency and excess. Aristotle's doctrine of the golden mean is not only an intellectual conviction for him; it is the very stuff his disposition is made up of. Moderation is the very fabric his reason and intuition, his mind and heart, his intellect and emotion are woven into. For Aristotle all human virtues are in the middle of two extremes; for example courage is a mean between foolhardiness and cowardice, modesty is a mean between bashfulness and staidness, liberality is a mean between extravagance and avarice. Mark Tully is not led to the middle path by logic or philosophy. His mental makeup leads him to the middle path naturally and unobtrusively as he instinctively hates all sorts of extremes. He argues that what matters is the truth as people see it, not the truth itself. Whenever he expresses an opinion or makes a statement he is careful to mention with equal force the opposite view also. This is his way of reaching a comprehensive and moderate conclusion, of recognizing the partial truth in both rationalism and mysticism. In fact Tully does not waver between two extremes; he intuitively finds the middle space and sticks to it. He can observe the partial truth of the two extreme standpoints from his middle space and makes a complete view by choosing them both. For him the truth of the body and the truth of the soul are of equal importance which neither the ascetic nor the hedonist can fully comprehend. He is a spiritualist and a materialist both. He is guided by reason and intuition at the same time. Regarding the future of mankind he is neither cynical nor unduly optimistic. On the one hand he doesn't approve of a stagnant society and on the other he doesn't like sudden, violent social upheavals overthrowing the whole old order. He hates regimentation and anarchy both. He is neither wholly for doubt nor entirely for the doctrine. He keeps equal distance from the fundamentalist and the radical revolutionist. He does not claim to have captured the truth; he reaches out to it gropingly.

It is natural for a man of his temperament to have distaste for political eruptions and social upheavals. He looks askance at JP's call of total revolution in 1975 and writes, "I have always believed in evolution rather revolution and JP had certainly not spelt out what he would do with India once he'd swept Indira away" (India in Slow Motion, 217). Psychology and philosophy tell us that the world is the projection of the self. We project our own likes, dislikes, fears, and wishes to the outside reality howsoever objective we may try to be. Being a lover of the golden mean and moderation Tully finds the same moderation, balance, harmony, and equilibrium in Indian society and admires it for all these qualities. Since, by disposition he is averse to violent social and political shake ups' he has developed a fondness for the people of India and their culture as he feels that this society has been going on unruffled and unperturbed by historical catastrophes, overthrows of kingdoms, and falls of empires. It regenerates itself after every destruction and this power of constant regeneration will sustain it in future also. The only thing that has robbed it of this pristine vitality is the British colonial rule in Tully's opinion.

Tully writes that forty years of living in India has changed him and his outlook. He states that one of the lessons he has learnt from India is to value humility, avoid thinking in black and white, to be suspicious of certainties, to search for the middle road and to acknowledge that there are many ways to God. Explaining his idea of humility he writes-

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. (India's Unending Journey, 18).

He realizes the importance of acknowledging the role of fate in our lives. Humility follows our belief that we live in a world full of uncertainties and our knowledge will always remain incomplete and partial. Tully believes that Hindus don't think of religious truth in dogmatic terms. The passion for dogmatic certainty has racked the religions of Semitic origin-Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Making fun of the Marxist certainty Tully says that the Western economists have made a 180 degree swing- from the certainty of Marxism as the absolute truth to market economy as the final answer to all questions. This is how, according to Tully, certainty leads us astray. Tully states-

"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" (Unending Journey, 11).

As India, in Tully's opinion, is always seeking balance there is a battle going on between "Western 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" (12).

As the greatest antidote to violence is conversation Tully writes, "Conversation is the integral part of the Indian tradition that has influenced me" (Unending Journey, 13). He finds that in India everybody, from a small village to the metropolis of Delhi, is engaged in conversation. Even two strangers waiting for a bus do not take long to get into conversation. Sometimes it appears to him that in government offices conversation is "the only activity going on". Admiring this habit Tully goes on to say that those who are dogmatic and certain that they are right don't feel vulnerable and have no desire to have conversation. Such people have no spirit of give and take. They only want to convince. Since, as human beings, incomplete creatures as we are, we are always groping in the dark, never finding the final answer Tully suggests everybody to keep in mind the Upanishadic phrase *netineti* i.e. it is not this alone. Tully interprets this word-

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 (16).

The Indian tradition has come to imply balance in all our physical and mental activities for Tully. This search for balance never ends as we are all like tight rope walkers. He advocates balancing between fate and free will because 'we don't chose our parents, we don't even chose to be born.' Keeping balance between fate and free will he says he has learnt in India is 'relevant not only for our personal life but also for humans as a species.' This search for balance which he learnt in India had an unsettling effect on him and many of his Christian beliefs were undermined in the process. Referring to certain modifications in his religious beliefs Tully says he 'could not understand how, if Jesus was right in saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me," that way was not always clear and that truth not certain' (Unending Journey, 33). Tully writes that these religious certainties began to be suspected by scientists in 1950s. Since in Indian religious texts and popular beliefs no statement is an absolute and all statements are *neti- neti* religion

is never in danger. He writes, “It was India that truly opened my mind, that led me to value experience as well as reason, and that taught me the experience of God is so widespread I need not fear the death of religion. But above all it was India that taught me to see my failures and achievements in context, to value humility, to suspect certainties and to seek for the middle path” (38).

Tully’s experiences in India forced him to reconsider the faith he had been taught early in life because he couldn’t ignore what was so obvious to him in this country; the existence of many ways to God. He returned to his Christian belief with his faith strengthened. In India the truth came home to him that for thousands of years in different cultures and climates people had experienced God, though they had described their experiences differently. It was then that he saw ‘a universal God made far more sense rationally than one who limited his activities to Christians’ (Unending Journey, 70). The truth dawns upon him that people have to be humble enough about their religion ‘to recognize that it will never be certain; there has to be an element of questioning and doubt’ (71).

In his book *India’s Unending Journey* Tully emphatically and repeatedly asserts the liberality and pluralism of the Indian mind and admires the religion that such a mind has developed. Hinduism suits the agnostic traits of his theological concerns. Now, he does not feel threatened when his beliefs are challenged because India has taught him the ‘uncertainty of certainty’ and he is convinced that science, theology, philosophy or any other discipline do not have the final answers to questions about the meaning of life and the existence of God. It comes as a pleasant surprise to him that even the Anglicans in South India have united with the Methodists and some other Protestant Churches to form the Church of South India. He writes ‘These unions were based on a compromise reached through the Indian tradition of dialogue and discussion, of listening and learning from each other...’ (Unending Journey, 42). Showing the contrast between the Indian and the English mind-set, Tully states that Anglicans and Methodists in England have still not come together. Tully writes how Hindus and Sikhs visit Christian churches in India and not only accept but expect and demand the consecrated wafer as everyone who visits their temples and Gurudwaras is offered *Prasad*. Tully says, “Hinduism doesn’t have a monopoly of pluralism. It is part of the general Indian tradition of questioning, discussion, dissent, and indeed scepticism that Amartya Sen describes in his book *The Argumentative Indian*” (46). Tully thinks that pluralism is an indication of humility. It is an acknowledgement that nobody has a complete and final answer, that what one knows may seem right but there are many other points of view. Tully believes that doctrine has to develop in the light of new knowledge and the changing social norms. If the doctrine is not in accordance with reason it ‘deteriorates into obscurantism’. However Tully differentiates the Indian attitude of compromise from undiluted skepticism by saying, “So I need to remember that the Indian tradition does not say there is no truth, no ultimate reality. What it does say is that the ultimate reality cannot be fully and finally defined—there is always that *neti, neti*. And we have to keep on searching in order to get closer and closer to it” (98-99). In the religions of Semitic origin all doctrine is ‘set in stone’. Far from it, Hinduism, in Tully’s view, is a process, it is ongoing, and so in theory it can readily accept change. A process is never finality. It is always changing, renewing, and regenerating itself. He finds the same Indian spirit of constant regeneration in the Sikh religious shrine, the Golden Temple which was stormed by the Indian army in 1984 and consequently considerable damage to the *Akal Takht* had taken place. He writes, “But India has a great capacity for absorbing catastrophe, and the Golden Temple has since regained its sanctity, as any sensitive visitor will discover” (52). The Golden Temple is the most evocative sacred place in India for Mark Tully as he experiences a particular serenity there. Describing the calm, soul elevating atmosphere of the place Tully writes, “Pilgrims form an orderly queue – a rare occurrence in India- to cross the causeway to the Golden Temple itself. Inside, there is none of the pushing, shoving and incessant chatter that are a common feature of many other Indian shrines” (59).

Tully finds the roots of most, if not all, deficiencies and ills of modern Indian society in the colonial hangover of the British Imperialism. British colonialism has brought poverty, slavery, lack of self confidence and self respect, dependence, habit of mimicry, feeling of inferiority, social and political apathy, and many other evils that afflict Indian society today. Real power is still in the hands of Indian elite who have inherited it from their British masters and not in the hands of the people. Because the Indian elite have not recovered from their colonial hangover they have failed to develop the ideology, the attitude, and the institutions ‘which would change the poor from subjects to partners in the government of India’. Consequently, in Tully’s opinion, ‘people the poor have elected have ruled— not represented— them’. Tully thinks that colonialism is not only political imperialism it is also cultural and mental imperialism. He states in his first book on Indian society *No Full Stops in India*— “Colonialism teaches the native elite it creates to admire— all too often to ape— the ways of their foreign rulers. That habit of mind has survived in independent India” (3). Tully blames the former British rulers for undermining the religion and language of India. He writes, “The best way to destroy a people’s culture and identity is to undermine its religion and its language. We, the British, did that as India’s

rulers and we continue to do that as part of the dominant culture of the world now” (4). Even for communalism and fundamentalism which have come to occupy a large space in modern India Tully blames the West. People in the West have consigned ‘religion to the rubbish bin’ and the modern Indian secularists follow this example for they regard religious people as communal. Such secularism inevitably “degenerates into disrespect for religion”. Tully thinks it wrong to “disturb the religious beliefs of those who have no hope of any other comfort, which is exactly what we have taught and are still teaching the Indian elite to do”. As a backlash to it, Tully thinks, Hindu fundamentalism is rising. Tully says that Mahatma Gandhi knew the dangers of ridiculing rather than reforming religion and therefore he campaigned tirelessly against the excesses of his own religion. On the other hand the Indian elite who dominate modern India ‘believe that all that’s good comes from outside’. Naturally they have a ‘hatred of their own experience’ and ‘desire to efface it’. They need to show far greater respect to India’s past. Tully is very strongly in favour of keeping intact the genius of Indian civilization.

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