CHAPTER V

CHRISTIANITY IN THE DISINTEGRATION OF INDIA

(*a*) The Primeval Forest of Religions

IN speaking of primeval forests, one must not think of our woods at home. This vast, shapeless, grey-green mass has nothing to do with the homeliness and beauty, nor with the romanticism of even our loneliest forests. Laboriously the traveller follows the winding path. The sky is overcast. He can see only a few yards on each side, everything else being veiled in luxuriously growing creepers and tendrils. The sultriness and the smell of decay are stifling. If a detour has to be made round some fallen forest giant, a path is painfully hewn out. Hacking and wrestling through dense undergrowth he falls into holes covered with foliage. Spiders' webs cling to his damp skin, flies of all kinds are everywhere. He has an uneasy feeling that snakes are near—snakes that sometimes hang from the trees and are almost indistinguishable from dead branches.

Suddenly, in this chaos, comes a blaze of tropical vegetation in the loveliest and most vivid colours. Here stands a tree lit with brilliant scarlet candles, there one even finds a fruit-tree, covered with magnificent, luscious fruit. The rhinoceros-bird croaks and grumbles dismally ; the cockatoos scream discordantly, their garish or simple white and yellow plumage gleaming from afar. Tender and monotonous, like the sound of a gentle gong, comes the cry of the bird of Paradise, whose plumage is unsurpassable in the delicacy and brilliance of its colouring.

All this exuberant life is a constant struggle for existence, in which all beauty and fruitfulness is continuously being destroyed by the inescapable stranglehold of creeping plants ; and yet in which all the contrasts are preserved in endlessly indeterminate confusion.

This picture of the jungle in New Guinea always recurs to the mind when one attempts a survey of the multiformity of

religious life in India. It is just as disconnected, as vast, and in its exuberant abundance, as rich in unresolved contrasts as the primeval forest.

There one sees primitive field magic, painted pots to turn aside the evil eye, great clay figures portraying a warrior on an elephant or a horse, as guardians of the fields. As the warrior is sometimes presented with a new steed and the old one is left lying on one side, they look like the broken toys of some giant's children. A Pariah sacrifices a goat on a miserable tripod, and strives to propitiate the evil spirits with gifts of rice, lemons, bananas, nuts and strong drink.

In the mountains of the Telegu country we take part in an idol festival, which is held every two years and attended by thousands of people. At the edge of a wide field stands a shrine, hardly as high as a man, and inside it the small, inartistic figure of a fire goddess. This is her festival day, and early in the morning before sunrise, a path has been laid down, 6½ feet wide and about 16 feet long, made of glowing wood, and leading to the shrine.

At sunrise the procession of priests approaches at a slow dancing pace, accompanied by the provocative rhythmical beating of drums. The crowd swarms round it with eager cries, pelting it with fruit, fowls and doves. Then the procession halts in front of the fiery path. The priests are sprinkled with water, place the offerings, piled high on great trays, on their heads, and with bare feet and mincing steps, without any hurry, they pass over the glowing embers, lay down their gifts, and return the way they came, repeating this a second and even a third time. Then the crowd surges up to receive the consecrated gifts from the shrine and a tremendous sacrificial feast begins. All over the wide field many hundreds of goats, sheep and fowl are sacrificed ; all facing the goddess, they are killed with a powerful blow from an axe that severs the head from the rump. Then the crowd disperses, or swarms into the town of huts and booths to the annual country fair.

We stand among the reverent crowd taking part in the evening sacrifice in the famous temple of Chidambaram. A bell sounds, the four-toned temple chime (made in Germany) begins, and music is heard in the background. A sacrifice is

being offered in front of the shrine, the door of which is encircled with a wreath of lights, burning with a golden-red flame. Garlands are hung round the god, flowers are strewed, rose-water is sprinkled and camphor burned in a slender candlestick. Everything is performed with rapid, gracefully swaying gestures, the gleaming bodies of the assistant Brahmins, with white loincloths and a narrow white band across the upper part of the body, providing a unique picture. In front of them stands the staring crowd, Brahmins and other people of high caste, beggars and pilgrims in fantastic garb, women, and widows in white *saris*, all deep in murmured prayers.

In the temple of Madura we stand in front of an open hall, in which a Brahmin priest is repeating ancient, holy, melancholy sentences to a reverently listening audience ; and a few steps further on, worshippers are prostrate on the ground before the huge, grisly, black figure of Ganesh, the god with the elephant's head and wide protruding eyes. In an alcove a Brahmin is sacrificing by an unshaded light. He is burning flowers, and a woman stands watching beside him ; he gives her some of the ashes with which she streaks her forehead. Not far from this scene of delicate worship we pass the holy water, a pool into which runs all the fluid which has been poured over the gods. Whoever bathes in it is purified from all his sins. A great rat jumps out as we pass. Far off from all the bustle of the worship of the crowd, a solitary penitent immerses himself in the depths of ancient India's mystic wisdom. What an immense wealth of forms !

In it all there is a never-ending, never-decided battle of contrasts. The country where the consequence of philosophical thought has been driven to the limits of reflection is at the same time the country of the most exuberant imagination. Here, where the incomparableness of the divine has been most exactly worked out, the doctrine that nothing in the world can represent the Everlasting One, stand temples which bear in their high towers thousands of idols. Here, where the knowledge of the inevitable and unfailing consequences of good and evil action has penetrated widely among the people in the conception of Karma, the decisive difference between good and evil is passionately denied. One finds a profound symbolism of complete resignation.

At one service, vessels with burning camphor were carried between rows of natives, and each held his hand spread out over the flame. As camphor burns away completely, no ash being left, so, at the beginning of the service, the five senses (the fingers) are surrendered in whole and complete resignation to the divine. In the same country there are temples in which representations of perverse sexuality are displayed before the public eye. The people among whom asceticism is valued more than anywhere else in the world have in every coffee-house on the highway the picture of Krishna with the shepherdess, which is laden for the Indian, though not for us, with sultry sensuality. Here, where the high song of conjugal fidelity is sung, prostitution in the temples continues unabated.

One frequently sees on the walls images which are the expression of reverence for the cow, and sometimes motoring is made a misery, because the chauffeur is all too anxious to avoid even disturbing these animals when they stand in the middle of the street. Yet at the same time, cruelty to animals is nowhere so heartrending. In some Hindu districts, for example, the goats have the lower part of their forelegs bound tightly to the top part, so that they stumble along on their knee-joints instead of on their feet, this being done just to prevent them from straying.

The country in which the tenderest hymns of love to God are sung, songs that speak of what it means to ' have joy in the Lord,' and ' to leave all care, as children do—the Mother will care,' ' He has turned into worship all that I do,' is at the same time the land where men are most deeply despised. In a railway accident it happened that a man working on the line fell under the train, and lay writhing in agony. Forty people stood and watched him, but none of them dared to touch the unfortunate man. Comrades of his own caste, who would not be rendered unclean by touching him, had to be fetched from a distance.

All that was great in the religious and ethical knowledge of India has been submerged beneath the all-embracing creeping parasite of this primeval forest of religions. The clear knowledge of man's responsibility towards the gods, the duty of sacrifice and gratitude which the Aryans brought with them ; the striving for the ultimate, which lies behind the diversity

of the manifestations and conceptions of the gods ; the determined recourse to what is completely different ; the mild wisdom of Buddha, and the proclamation of the One Lord, to whom man need only submit himself in love, to find in Him mercy and redemption—all this has been destroyed, or wantons in an endless, never-decided struggle with the lowest, yes, and the most terrifying forms of religious error.

The life-form which supports this tenacious, diverse life and preserves it in its indeterminateness is *caste*. This is the unique class system into which the peoples of India have grouped themselves. It is the unit of life in which the Indian exists, and which so lays its stamp on his whole existence that he cannot really live without it. A man is born into a certain caste—and there are said to be between 2,000 and 3,000 of them. It is the living-space given to him. If he loses caste, as a citizen he is dead, and generally he has no possibility of belonging to any other caste, within the framework of Hinduism. Caste not only determines a man's rank, and keeps him strictly apart from other castes by strict endogamy, forbidding him to eat with members of another caste, but in the majority of cases it also determines his profession. The possibility of economic existence depends on adherence to caste. It binds each member in a tradition peculiar to itself of law, custom and convention. Inheritance and marriage rights, the dress and the habit of daily life, prohibitions in eating, the honour paid to the deceased, and religious observance, everything is mapped out for the Hindu at his birth, inevitably and irrevocably.

Deep as the trenches of separation are which the caste system has made and inexorably defends between peoples and sections of peoples in India, the law that sets a fixed boundary round every human life, from the Brahmin to the Pariah, is equally strict, and determines the composition of the Indian world. Indian thought has given to caste a religious consecration and foundation. Caste is the fate of every man, the fruit and result of an earlier existence, and life in it is the path he must tread. At the same time it preserves religious diversity, for each man has his own Karma, the result of his actions in earlier existences, and the corresponding religious duties and potentialities, which naturally are as varied as the Karma itself. From this point

of view, not only the problem of social righteousness but also the variety of religious life seems to be solved. This is the reason why all religious manifestations, from the most primitive demon-worship to the loftiest mysticism, stand side by side, irresolute, like the confusion of vegetation in the primeval forest.

Only once was fire laid to the forest. The torch came from the north-west with the disciples of the prophet of Mecca. Demolished temples and broken idols testify to the power of the devastating flame brought by Islam. The huge buildings of Saracen art in northern India speak eloquently of the exuberance of the cultural creative will which could achieve great things. Yet, just as after a forest fire the vigorous new growth wins back all too soon the ground it had lost, so Hinduism continued to flourish in Islam, with demon-worship and magic. The outward division has remained. Mohammedanism has inherited so much from the Bible, that it has never been able to feel quite comfortable about Hindu idol-worship. Hinduism, which can 'tolerantly' assimilate even the teaching of Mohammed, cannot forget the disregard of the sacredness of the cow. The clashes which are an annual occurrence tell clearly of mutual hostility, which cannot be resolved. While we were in the neighbourhood of Delhi, there was a Mohammedan rising in which a Hindu doctor and the eleven patients in his house were burned alive.

The contrasts do not merely remain, the fire is smouldering farther. On the west coast of Southern India we saw a home for Moslem converts. From fifty to seventy-five people are kept there for a stay of three weeks, to be circumcized and to receive some very simple instruction. Most of them are people without caste who hope to improve their position by going over to Islam. After the course, they receive their journey money and, if they want it, a small measure of support in beginning their new life. The money is taken from the mission tax of three to six pi (a quarter to half a farthing) which Mohammedan merchants levy on every purchase. Thus the Mohammedan minority is increased. It constitutes 78 millions of the total population of 353 millions, and during the last decade has increased by 13 per cent., the whole population having risen by 16·6 per cent.[1]

[1] *Directory of Christian Missions*, Nagpur, 1935, p. 30.