

Journal  
of the  
Royal Army Medical Corps.

Original Communications.

THE EAST AND ITS WAYS: A STUDY OF THE IMPERSONAL.

BY COLONEL SIR ROBERT H. FIRTH, K.B.E., C.B.

THAT so many members of the Corps serve long in the East is the main justification for this article. Some time ago,<sup>1</sup> I published in this Journal two papers upon our Aryan brother. They dealt mainly with his religion and his philosophy. In these pages I propose to discuss other aspects of his life and outlook upon the world. I do not claim infallibility for my various inferences or deductions, and doubtless some of them are open to criticism, but, as the expression of thoughts and impressions formed in the course of service in the East, they may be of interest to others. If, at times, I appear severe upon the Oriental it must not be assumed that I lack sympathy with him; on the contrary, it is rather by our appreciation and correction of what seems to me to be his fundamental misfortune that I am hopeful of his future.

I.

To begin with, few Orientals have the distinction of a birthday as celebrated by ourselves. He or she is ushered into the world in a curiously impersonal manner, for the only special honour permitted is that of a birth-year, and from the moment of birth he or she is spoken of as a year old, and this same age continues till the beginning of the next calendar year which may occur only a few days later. When that day arrives he or she is credited with another year. There are obvious disadvantages in being considered from one's birth at least one year or possibly two older than one really is, but such is Oriental custom and it explains the well-known fact that few Orientals have an exact knowledge as to how old

<sup>1</sup> July and October, 1912.

## 2 *The East and its Ways: A Study of the Impersonal*

they are. The Oriental fares hardly better in the matter of marriage, for he is permitted no say in the affair; in fact, it is not his affair at all, but his parents'. His revenge for being thus sold out of what ought to be the better part of his life, he takes eventually on his own children. Probably, to most Orientals, his death is the most important act of his life, for then only can his personal existence be considered properly to begin. Particularly is this so if he happens to be a Chinaman, as by death, according to those people, he joins the great company of ancestors who to them are of more consequence than the living and certainly of more individual distinction. If he be as sentient, when dead, as many suppose then the defunct must feel that his earthly life has indeed ended well.

With the familiar landmarks of life, birth, marriage and death, obliterated in this manner, it is not surprising that many Orientals deem separate existence but the shadow of a shade, and that, to them, life presents itself as a totally different affair from what it seems to us. This is further accentuated by the circumstance that to many Orientals the real social unit is the family rather than the individual. From a maharajah on his *gaddi* to the coolie in his hovel it is the idea of kinship that knits the entire body politic together. The race is one great family and the family is a little kingdom. The one developed out of the other and finds everyday expression in *bhai* and *bhaiband*. This exaggerated concept of the family is but an aspect of the inordinate desire inherent in every Oriental for the perpetuation of the family line. Every infant is regarded merely in the light of a possible progenitor, with the result that a boy baby is already potentially a father, whereas a girl, if she marry at all, is bound to marry out of her own family into another and be relatively lost. The full force of this latter possibility is tempered by the practice of adoption whereby not infrequently a son-in-law or a stranger may for family reasons be adopted as a real son and even thus become the head of a family. This often happens when there are either only daughters or no children. There is a comic side to the practice, as since people are by no means averse to being adopted, the power of the head of a family to adopt anybody whom he will gives him more voice in the matter of what is really his unnatural offspring than he ever had in the selection of a more natural one. Further, a man adopting another to-day may unadopt him a few weeks later and replace him by somebody else. I never knew of this being done in India, but am informed that it is not rare in China and Japan. It suggests that social identity must be profoundly unimportant to those peoples, or it may be but a custom devised to afford some slight preparation in this world for a future transmigration of souls. It is to be hoped that there exists in those lands sufficient popular prejudice to interpose some limit to this mode of acquiring children. We Westerns are open to the reproach of a falling birth-rate, and both we and the Oriental respectively, perhaps for different reasons, should bear in mind that a trifling predilection for the real thing in sonships is vital, even to the continuance of the artificial

variety. Obviously, if one generation ever went in exclusively for adopting others as children, there would be no subsequent generation to adopt.

If a young Oriental belong to the lower or middle classes, he is usually set to learn a trade as soon as his schooling is over. Nine times out of ten it is the father's trade which he learns. To learn any other would be preposterous, for is he not the son of his father and heir therefore of the paternal skill? This inherited aptness is taken for granted, and any possible inheritance of abilities from the mother's side is ignored, while as for the youth's individual predilection regarding a choice of calling he has none. He becomes a *mistri* because his ancestors always have been carpenters. Here we see the element of caste and the custom whereby a man is born to his trade, not selected naturally because of his fitness for it. If our hypothetical youngster be born of bluer blood, or be filled with the same desires as if he were so descended, he becomes a student. With an application which is usually far in excess of that which his Western brother displays under similar circumstances, our young Oriental studies for the law or such subjects as will gain him a clerkship under a paternal Sirkar. As might be expected, many end by discovering in the Western knowledge which they study meanings and teachings quite inapplicable to the Eastern environment. The attainment of a proper perspective comes quickly to some with consequent increase of happiness and contentment, while to others the intellectual indigestion is fraught with many heart-burnings and years of doubting and disappointed hopes. Setting aside these difficulties as to the acquirement of a suitable training or calling and irrespective of his social status, it may be assumed that the young Oriental by this time has reached a period of life when his thoughts lightly turn to love and courtship. This is the period in our lives when the world within excludes the world without, and many of us do so with a reckless trust in our own self-sufficiency which is almost sublime. The thoughts we have never dared breathe to any one before find a tongue for her who seems destined to understand, and our personality sweeps forth in an uncontrollable rush. The most reticent becomes confiding, the most self-contained expands. For once all is possible, nothing lies beyond our reach, and as we talk, and she listens, whatever doubts may have marred our imaginings disappear before the smile of our chosen's appreciation. It is no overdrawn picture and yet one, doubtless, in greater or lesser degree, familiar to every reader. Often, during my service in the East, have I wondered how much such experiences fall ever to the Oriental young man. I may be wrong, but I doubt whether such blissful infatuation ever falls to his lot; if it does, then only illicitly. In the Western sense, he is never the dupe of his own desire and the willing victim of his self-illusion. He fails to feel that incitement to be what he would seem to be and to become what she deems becoming. Custom has so far fettered fancy that he has nothing to tell and has no wish to communicate his aspirations. While she—she needs no ears to hear, for she is not his love,

#### 4. *The East and its Ways: A Study of the Impersonal*

but only his wife, and never was anything else. The choice of a bride is not his, nor of a bridegroom hers, because marriage in the East is but a species of investment contracted by the existing family for the sake of the prospective one, the actual participants being only lay figures in the affair.

The practice of early marriage and the custom of having one's wife chosen for one by relatives, as prevails in the East, raises some interesting points from the aspect of evolution. The outcome of this choosing must be at the best nothing more than unobjectionable mediocrity, associated with a deadening influence upon that individuality of the chief actors which we deem to be of the very essence of marriage. If this be the immediate influence on the man and woman, the eventual effect on the race must be considerable because it is not simply an exposition of the impersonal state of things but it is a power toward bringing such a state of things about. A man who is tied to someone that remains toward him as a cipher must lack surroundings inciting to psychological growth, and the same is true of the woman, and neither are more favourably circumstanced because their forebears had been similarly circumscribed. The Western custom brings natural selection into play and by reason of psychical similarity determining the selection of mate there should result an increase in the personality of the race. In general terms, the Western custom results in like meeting with like, that is as to psychical attributes, but of course there are exceptions as it is well known that some connubial couples are often anything but twin souls. Mere physical attraction is another matter. Nature sanctions physical incongruities while she discountenances the psychical; moreover, the physical development of the human body would seem to have ceased to be an object with her, but rather all her care is directed to the evolution of the mind. In respect of amateness, the field of competition is thus transferred from matter to mind and advantageous psychical variations are seized upon and perpetuated with the same zeal as was directed formerly to physical variations. If opposites only were to fancy and wed one another such advantageous improvements would soon be lost or neutralized, and to prevent this Nature gives man a desire for resemblance, which desire he acts upon if given a free hand. I do not wish to imply that complete compatibility of temperament is to be desired, on the contrary, as it would defeat its own end and allow no room for variation. Further, any desire for conjugal resemblance between a mated couple makes for companionship and it is the apparent absence of companionship in Oriental couples which has always impressed me. Where custom requires a wife to follow dutifully in the wake of her husband whenever the two go out together gives small opportunity for intercourse by the way. Even in the privacy of the home the separation of the two seems to be no less marked. Such a semi-attached relationship cannot conduce to much mutual understanding, nor operate favourably toward the development of advantageous psychical

variations in the children and the expression of individuality. There is apparently no place in the Oriental social scheme for so particular a thing as the ego.

## II.

I well recall my first tour of duty in the East and my efforts to grasp the language, manners, customs and mentality of the people around. To me, they seemed to see everything topsy-turvy and their world appeared to be a curious antithesis of my own. To write backwards, read backwards, and even speak backwards seemed but the elements of this contrariety. The inversion extended deeper than mere modes of expression and involved the very matter of thought. Private ideas of my own found no home among them and methods which struck me as unnatural appeared to be their birthright. And yet, in spite of all their eccentricities, I recognized that they were men and human beings of no mean order. Gradually, I perceived in the Oriental point of view a new importance, for, if the Oriental's mind-picture of the world be placed side by side with our own, the two aspects in combination will yield results beyond what either alone can afford. I used to think and am inclined to think now that the East is only half civilized, but in the sense of what might have been, not of what is and, in expressing this opinion, I say half-civilized, not in comparison with ourselves but with the eventual possibilities of humanity. I doubt whether either the Western or the Eastern system is perfect enough in all things to serve as a standard for the other. The light of truth has reached the Western and the Eastern races through the medium of their own mental crystallization, and this has prolonged it in opposite ways, so that the rays that are light to the eyes of the one produce only darkness to those of the other. I have known intimately many Orientals of all social grades and the great impression left on me has been that, in politeness, delicacy and self-restraint they have no equal, and that in these and some other respects the Oriental civilization is the equal of our own. And yet there is a difference, and the real difference lies not in the externals or the polish but in the substance polished.

Take the case of social intercourse. In a land where, at the threshold of a home or room, one begins by removing one's shoes and not by taking off one's hat, the hint is definite that humanity is to be approached by the reverse way. The hint is confirmed when one attempts to reach the mind of the occupant, for thoughts have to be arranged in reverse order from that to which we are accustomed and the same is true of the speech itself. The further one goes the more obscure the whole situation becomes and one seeks for some means by which to re-orientate. We cannot explain the facts on a theory that the Oriental is a case of partially arrested development. It is true that, from the Western standpoint, the Eastern civilization seems suddenly to have come to end, but, looked at closely,

## 6 *The East and its Ways: A Study of the Impersonal*

there is much to suggest that it has fully run its course and that we are face to face with a completed race-life. The intellectual machine is not broken, it has run down and development has ceased owing to an intrinsic inability to go on. No matter what Oriental race be taken, we find it frequently rich in the superficial amenities with which we link our idea of civilization. The situation can be likened aptly to some stunted tree that, finding itself prevented or unable to grow, hastens the more luxuriantly to put forth flowers, the intermediate processes being omitted or jumped. The curious and almost universal faculty for imitation which characterizes all the peoples of the East supports the analogy, and what they have grafted bodily upon their ancestral tree has resulted in frequent luxurious and incongruous growth. But like grafts generally, the alien shoots have not been much modified by the sap of the foster-parent stem, neither has the tree in its turn been affected by them. In some cases, the grafts have grown to be great branches but the trunk has remained as the trunk of a sapling. In other words, the nations have grown to man's estate but keeping the mind of their childhood. The net result of all this has been that the Eastern civilization has become little more than a mechanical mixture of social elements, for, in spite of the variety of ingredients thrown into the pot, owing to fusing power being wanting no real combination has resulted. Possibly, this explains the curious incapability to evolve anything new or original which characterizes the East; indeed, the tendency to spontaneous variation seems to have been exhausted and the Eastern races, as they grew old young, have remained much the same ever since. What they were centuries ago, they are, at bottom, to-day; so much so is this the case that, if we were to take away the Western influences of the last fifty years, each Oriental might almost be his own great-grandfather. Certain traits undoubtedly distinguished the Oriental peoples in the past, but these same traits have gradually been their undoing and the most stagnating influence upon their career has been the quality of impersonality.

This quality of impersonality, or negation of a place or part for the ego, has been recognized already as a dominant note in the Oriental social scheme, it is present in every Oriental language and in many of the Eastern religions. The characteristic is curious as a fact and not uninteresting as a factor, for what it signifies in respect of Eastern peoples may not be without a lesson or help to ourselves, for it lies at the bottom of that silence of those who think, called unbelief, and the petulant cry of those who do not think, called socialism. If the ego be but the passing shadow of the material brain and individuality a delusion of the mind, then what remains to man as a motive potent enough to rouse endeavour? If we take away the stimulus of individuality then action is paralysed; if we destroy the force of promptings of personal advantage then socialism is not only justified but becomes an axiom of life and the community becomes the unit. That the Oriental, saturated with his numbing imper-

sonality has not reached this state is at least suggestive that individuality is a fact. However that may be, most certainly to all races of men there has come the realization of self and of individual identity; doubtless the degree in which they have felt its force has differed much. Still, it is there, and in some cases it has proved to be an ever present undesirable double. And yet, how many of us are prepared to forego our own self? Close upon the heels of the existing consciousness of self treads the shadowing doubt of its hereafter. We are consoled by the thought, that mind should be capable of annihilation is as inconceivable as that matter should cease to be. What prophets preached in the past, so modern science teaches to-day. Satisfied then on this point, we can say that for the Western the personal consciousness of which he is aware is bounded by two twilights or impersonal states; the one the infantile existence, which precedes his boyish discovery of self, and the other the gloom that grows with years. To the Oriental life is all twilight, and to him with the present unconsciousness of the babe exists the belief in a coming unconsciousness for the man. The known truth of the one seems to carry with it the warranty for the other. It is difficult to believe that we are wrong and that the East is right. Its seeming wisdom supports rather the precociousness of what is destined never to go far, and that the Easterns are still in that childish state of development before self-consciousness has spoiled the sweet simplicity of youth. An impersonal race seems never to have fully grown up.

### III.

From the preceding considerations it would seem that the dissimilarity between the Western and the Eastern attitude of mind depends upon something beyond the effect of mere environment. The clue to the dissimilarity is the part which the principle of individuality plays in the drama of evolution or, put in other words, individuality bears the same relation to the development of mind that the differentiation of species by spontaneous variation bears to the evolution of organic life. What spontaneous variation is to the material organism, so individuality in the guise of imagination is apparently to the mental. Spontaneous variation is constantly urging the animal or plant to make new ventures which are restrained or kept in bounds by environment and the operation of the law of survival of the fittest; in a similar way, imagination is ever urging man's mind on to other concepts, while common sense or the average sense of the community is as steadily keeping it in restraint. The surviving products in the one case are species of animals or plants, and, in the other, individualities. It may be asked, what do I mean by individuality? I mean that group of ideas, thoughts and aspirations which go to make up our separate identity, and by virtue of which we recognize ourselves as ourselves and as something distinct from our neighbours. Individuality,

personality, and the sense of self are only aspects of one and the same thing which we call the soul, according as to whether we regard it from an intrinsic, an altruistic or an egoistic point of view. Now man as he develops mentally becomes more and more distinct from his neighbour, and this inevitable differentiation implies that the man shall be sensible of it. Further, the necessary attribute of mental action is consciousness, and not to be conscious of one's self is not to be, while the effect of that self upon the consciousness of others is personality.

Reflection indicates that the cause of this mentality is imagination or the image-making faculty which plays so large a part, as creator of the world within. It is this faculty which is the source of all that is new in thought and the great mainspring of psychical advance, reason being the balance wheel duly comparing what we imagine with what we know and giving us answers in terms of the here and now, which we call the actual. No matter what branch of thought we examine, it is imagination that has been and is the moving spirit. The actual is really nothing but the local, for it does not mark the limits of the possible, and it is to imagination that we owe visions of the possible. It is imagination which has been spinning and weaving all the fabrics of human thought; from the most concrete of inventions to the most abstract of conceptions the same force reveals itself. History tells the same story, for it has been imagination and not the power of observation which has been the cause of mind evolution. Many savages can reason absolutely but they break down before problems a little out of their beaten path, and all because their forefathers had not the power to imagine something beyond what they actually saw. The very essence of imagination lies in its ability to change a man's environment for him and, for this reason, man is free as nothing else in the world is free. What has been true of individuals has been true of races, and it is the most imaginative races who have played the greatest part in the world's advance.

If imagination be the impulse of which increase in individuality is the first fruit then the East is unimaginative. Such is precisely what the peoples of the East are. All who have been brought in contact with them have observed it. Their matter-of-fact way of looking at things is distressing. I remember well travelling through some remarkably grand and picturesque parts of India and, on appealing to some Indians with me as to their appreciation of what they saw, I was impressed with the complete lack of response on their part to any of the stimuli which were acting upon my own mind. Their speech shows the same prosaic character, for their languages are paralleled by their whole life. Certainly, originality is not the strong point of the East and the numbing force of impersonality is the cause. The question presents itself, this may be true of the past and perhaps of the present, but is it going to be so always? I think not. So forcible now is the attack of Western civilization upon the centres of Eastern trade that the mentality of the peoples is



undergoing a series of shocks, and these shocks are depolarizing the constituent elements which make up their civilization. The Altaic races are responding more quickly perhaps to Western stimuli than are the Indo-Aryan peoples. But, throughout the East, there is slowly evolving a reaction against the impersonal and little by little we should see among all those peoples more individualism. It is to be hoped so, because under no scheme of progress can it be shown that impersonality is man's earthly goal. The present condition of the Eastern masses is the witness, for if they continue in their present state they are not of those who will survive. Unless their newly imported ideas really take root, their Nirvana will indeed be realized as the shroud of those whose day was but a dawn and of those whose lands were only the lands of the day's beginning.