

ASIA AND EUROPE

January 8, 1931

EVERYTHING changes continually, I said in my last letter. What is history, indeed, but a record of change! And if there had been very few changes in the past, there would have been little of history to write.

The history we learn in school or college is usually not up to much. I do not know very much about others, but about myself I know that I learnt very little in school. I learnt a little - very little - of the history of India, and a little of the history of England. And even the history of India that I learnt was largely wrong or distorted and written by people who looked down upon our country. Of the history of other countries I had the vaguest knowledge. It was only after I left college that I read some real history. Fortunately, my visits to prison have given me a chance of improving my knowledge.

I have written to you in some of my earlier letters about the ancient civilization of India, about the Dravidians and the coming of the Aryans. I have not written much about the days before the Aryans, because I do not know much about them. But it will interest you to know that within the last few years the remains of a very ancient civilization have been discovered in India. There are in the north-west of India round about a place called Mohen-jo Daro. People have dug out these remains of perhaps 5000 years ago and have even discovered mummies, similar to those of old Egypt. Imagine! all this was thousands of years ago, long before the Aryans came. Europe must then have been a wilderness.

To-day Europe is strong and powerful, and its people consider themselves the most civilized and cultured in the world. They look down upon Asia and her peoples, and come and grab everything they can get from the countries of Asia. How times have changed ! Let us have a good look at Europe and Asia. Open an atlas and see little Europe sticking on to the great Asiatic Continent. It seems to be just a little extension of it. When you read history you will find that for long periods and stretches of time been no more. The people of the younger civilization of Greece came and destroyed it. The old civilization of Egypt, after a splendid history lasting for thousands of years, vanished and left no trace behind it, except the great Pyramids and the Sphinx, and the ruins of great temples and mummies and the like. Of course Egypt, the country, is still there and the river Nile flows through it as of old, and men and women live in it as in other countries. But there is no connecting link between these modern

people and the old civilization of their country.

Iraq and Persia - how many empires have flourished there and followed each other into oblivion ! Babylonia and Assyria and Chaldea, to mention the oldest only. And the great cities of Babylon and Nineveh. The Old Testament in the Bible is full of the record of these people. Later, in this land of ancient history, other empires flourished, and then ceased to flourish. Here was Baghdad, the magic city of the *Arabian Night*. But empires come and empires go, and the biggest and proudest of kings and emperors strut on the world's stage for a brief while only. But civilizations endure. In Iraq and Persia, however, the old civilization went utterly, even as the old civilization of Egypt.

Greece in her ancient days was great indeed, and people read even now of her glory with wonder. We stand awed and wonderstruck before the beauty of her marble statuary, and read the fragments of her old literature that have come down to us with reverence and amazement. It is said, and rightly, that modern Europe is in some ways the child of ancient Greece, so

much has Europe been influenced by Greek thought and Greek ways. But the glory that was Greece, where is it now? For ages past, the old civilization has been no more, and other ways have taken its place, and Greece to-day is but a petty country in the south-east of Europe.

Egypt, Knossos, Iraq, and Greece - they have all gone. Their old civilizations, even as Babylon and Nineveh, have ceased to exist. What, then, of the two other ancients in this company of old civilizations? What of China and India? As in other countries, they too have had empire after empire. There have been invasions and destructions and loot on a vast scale. Dynasties of kings have ruled for hundreds of years and then been replaced by others. All this has happened in India and China, as elsewhere. But nowhere else, apart from India and China, has there been a real continuity of civilization. In spite of all the changes and battles and invasions, the thread of the ancient civilizations has continued to run on in both these countries. It is true that both of them have fallen greatly from their old estate, and that the ancient cultures are covered up with a heap of dust, and sometimes filth, which the long ages have accumulated. But still they endure and the old Indian civilization is the basis of Indian life even to-day. New conditions have arisen in the world now; and the coming of the steamship and the railway and the great factory has changed the face of the world. It may be, it is indeed probable, that they will change as they are already changing, the face of India also. But it is interesting and rather wonderful to think of this long range and continuity of Indian culture and civilization, right from the dawn of history, through long ages, down to us. In a sense, we in India are the heirs of these thousands of years. We are in the direct line, it may be, with the ancients, who came down through the north-western mountain passes into the smiling plains of what was to be known as Brahmavarta and Aryavarta and Bhāratavarsha and Hindustan. Can you not see them trekking down the mountain passes into the unknown land below? Brave and full of the spirit of adventure, they dared to go ahead without fear of the consequences. If death came, they did not mind, they met it laughing. But they loved life and knew that the only way to enjoy life was to be fearless, and not to worry about defeat and disaster. For defeat and disaster have a way of keeping away from those who are not afraid. Think of them, those distant ancestors of ours, marching on and on, and suddenly reaching the banks of the noble Ganga flowing majestically down to the sea. How the sight must have filled them with joy! And is it any wonder that they bowed down to her and praised her in their rich and melodious language!

It is indeed wonderful to think that we are the heirs of all these ages. But let us not become conceited, for if we are the heirs of the ages, we are the heirs of both the good and the bad. And there is a great deal of evil in our present inheritance in India, a great deal that has kept us down in the world, and reduced our noble country to great poverty, and made her a plaything in the hands of others. But have we not decided that this must no longer continue?