CHAPTER I

INDIA & THE INDIANS

In thinking of India perhaps the first thing is to fix in one's mind that India is a country on a grand scale containing nearly one-fifth of the human race. Often called a sub-continent, and cut off from the rest of Asia by the great barrier of the Himalayas, it is in actual size as large as the whole of Europe without Russia, nearly eighteen times as large as Great Britain. Within India's wide borders were formerly many separate countries and kingdoms of which the inhabitants differed—and they still differ—from each other in race, language, and customs as much as, say, the Swedes from the Spaniards. Within her borders are to be found types of climate, of scenery, and of vegetation as varied as those of the continent of Europe. India has some of the mightiest mountains in the world; some of the greatest plains, stretching right across the north; some of the longest rivers; some of the driest desert. Yet the wettest place in the whole world is in Assam with an average rainfall of over 420 inches a year (as compared with under 26 inches in London). In parts of the south, there is moist tropical heat all the year round; in parts of the north, as in the hill country round Simla, the summer capital of the Government of India, snow lies thick on the ground for months at a time.

Nature is both far grander and far sterner than we know her in this country of ours. Earthquakes, cyclones, devastating floods, India has, and has ever had, her full share of all these, though each affects only a limited area at any one time. In 1934 and 1935 two disastrous earthquakes, one in the Province of Bihar and one on the North-West Frontier, involved the loss of many thousands of lives. As recently as October 1942 a cyclone in Bengal laid waste a large tract, killed over 10,000 people and 75,000 cattle. Houses fell as though made of paper; trees were uprooted and blown about like straws. But there are only a few areas liable to cyclones.

Over the greater part of the country the rainfall is normally brought by the south-west monsoon between the months of June and October, while at other times of the year there is scarcely any rain. A special character of the monsoon is its liability to 'fail'. In years gone by, before the building of railways and development of irrigation, whenever the monsoon failed, famine followed. Millions in India have died from famine, millions from disease sweeping the countryside.

When trying to visualise India one must learn to think in millions. Partly no doubt because scourges like famine, cholera, and plague have been controlled, and welfare services have been developing, the population has been increasing at a remarkable rate. In 1881 it was under 254 millions. In 1941 it had reached nearly 400 millions, more than three times the population of the United States. The 1941 Census shows that 50 millions have been added in the ten years since 1931. Several of the great Provinces of British India (Bengal, Madras, and the United Provinces) have a population larger than that of Great Britain, so that when one talks of Provinces, one must bear in mind that they are more like countries in themselves.

British India is made up of eleven of these Provinces, covering rather more than half (9/16) of the whole country, while rather less than half (7/16) is the territory of the Indian States, still governed to-day, as in the past, by Indian Princes. As will be seen from the map, the States are not concentrated either in the north or the south but are distributed over the length and breadth of India; and about a quarter of the entire population comes under their rule. This adds to the complexity of the political problem, for it is obvious that there can be no settlement for the government of India as a whole without taking into consideration the position of the States.

A further complexity arises from the diversity of the peoples of India in race, religion, and language. From prehistoric times, invaders of many races have come down through the passes of the north-west and have settled in the fertile plains. Roughly speaking

the peoples of the north may be regarded as the descendants of the early, so-called 'Aryan' invaders (who brought with them the religion and civilisation which has grown into Hinduism), and of the invaders of later centuries, Scythians, Turks, and Mongols. The peoples south of the Vindhya Mountains, where there was very much less penetration by invaders, still include the descendants of the more ancient inhabitants of the peninsula, known as the Dravidians. While adopting Hinduism, they retained their own languages and many of their own customs and institutions. Some of the aboriginal races fled into hiding in the hills and forests before successive invaders, and have continued there to live a tribal life, almost untouched by the changing civilisation of the centuries.

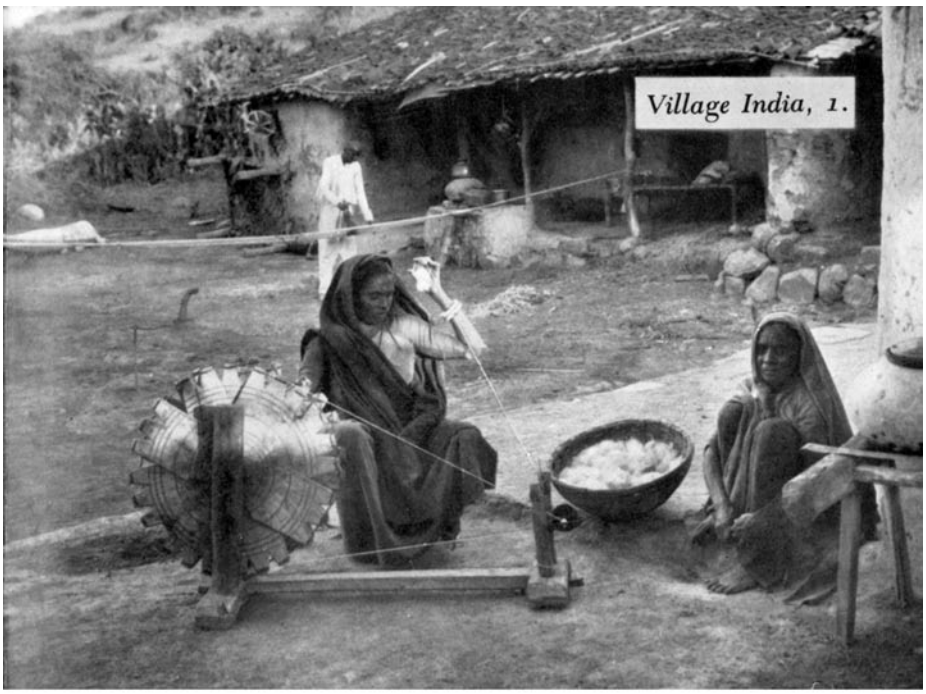
No country in the world shows so great a variety among its peoples as India. One could hardly find more striking physical contrasts than those between the men of some of the martial races of the Punjab, tall and splendidly proportioned, many of them magnificent specimens of humanity, and the quite short, much darker-skinned races of the south; or again, between the stocky Mongolian types of Assam and the north-east with flat faces, broad nostrils, and slanting eyes, and the Pathans of the North-West Frontier Province with their powerful physique and strongly marked features. Famous in Indian history are the Rajputs—the proudest and most ancient warrior race of Hindustan—whose chiefs still rule in the States of Rajputana to-day, and the annals of whose valour and chivalry challenge comparison with those of any country in the world; the Marathas are a fighting race of Western India of more humble origin who rose to great power in the eighteenth century. The Bengalis are distinct in racial type from the Madrasis, and so on.

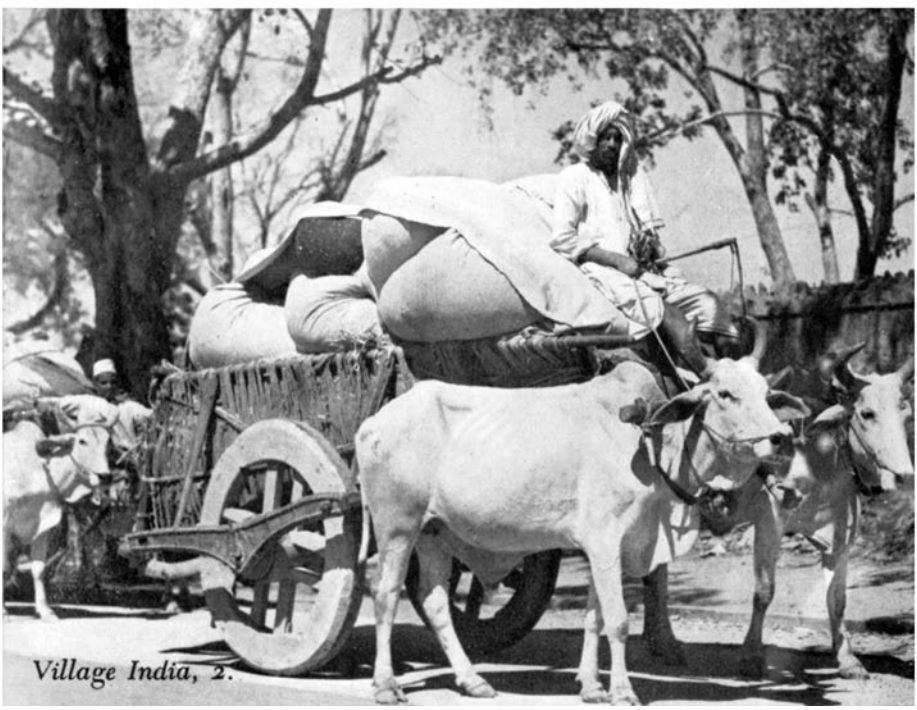
But many as are the differences between the peoples of the various Provinces and States in racial origin, language, customs, and dress, the majority are united by the bond of Hinduism. And Hinduism is not only a religion, it is an all-embracing social system which has no parallel in any other country. About two-

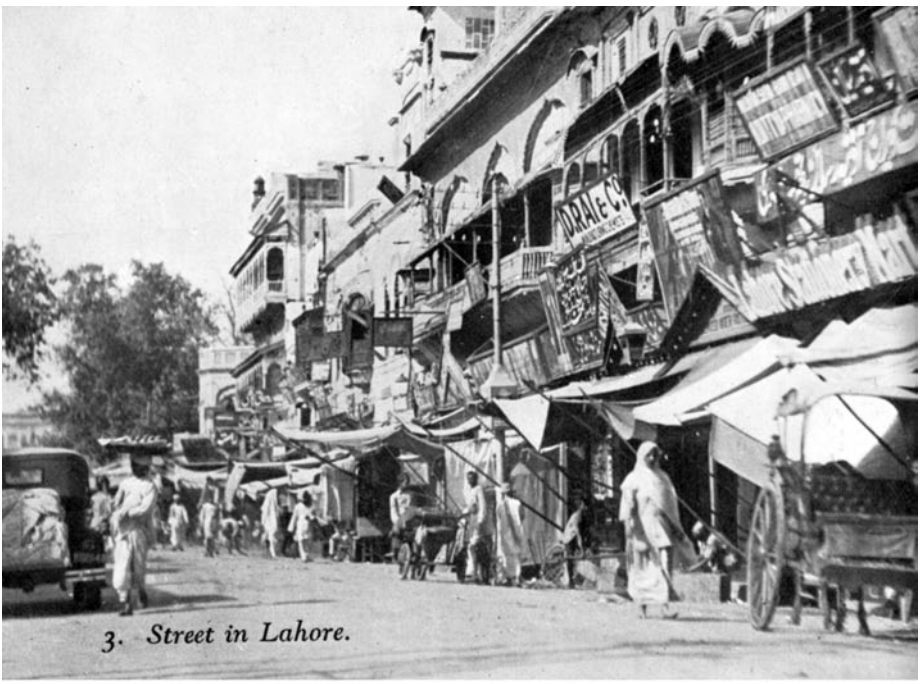
thirds of the entire population of India belong to the Hindu community. They form the majority in all the larger Provinces except Bengal and the Punjab, as well as in all the larger States except Kashmir.

The other great community is that of the Mohammedans, who form a quarter of the whole population (94½ millions). They are partly the descendants of the Turkish and Mongol invaders who poured over the passes into India at intervals from the eleventh century onwards, and partly of the peoples converted by them. To the former class belong the Pathans, who are closely allied to the Afghans, and to the latter the Mohammedans of Bengal, who are of a very different physical type. The Mohammedans are still mainly concentrated in the north of India, though for several centuries their rule and culture extended far into the south. To-day they form the bulk of the population in the North-West Frontier Province, in Sind, and in the State of Kashmir; and rather more than half the population of the great Provinces of Bengal and the Punjab. There are over 8 millions of them in the United Provinces, large numbers in Assam and Bihar, and a smaller proportion in Bombay and Madras. The great State of Hyderabad has a Mohammedan ruler but the majority of the population are Hindus.

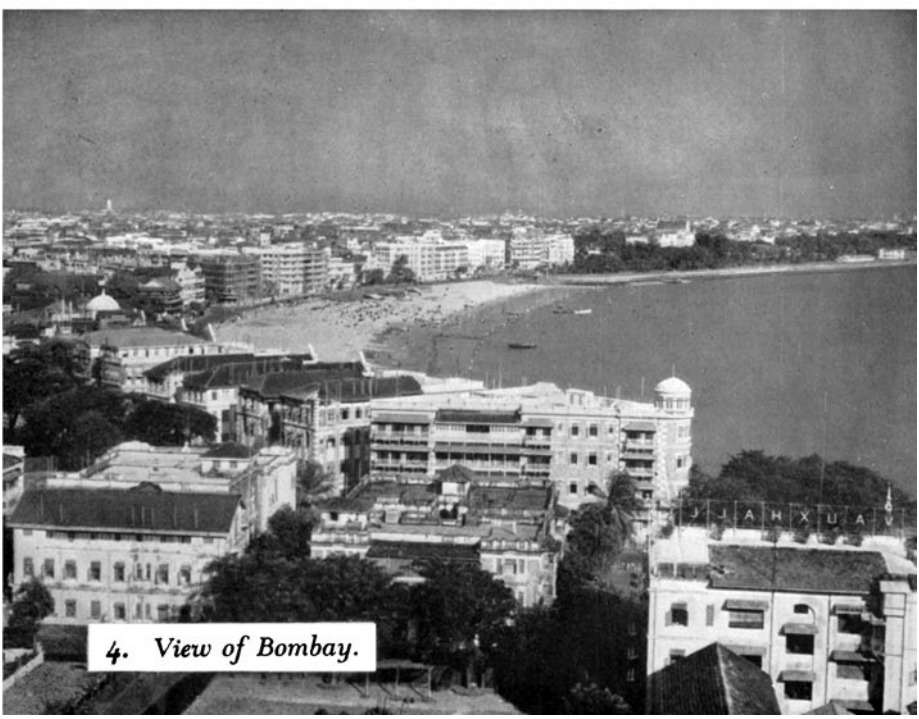
Compared with the Hindus and Mohammedans the minority communities are very small, but some of them have an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. Such a minority are the Sikhs, about 6 millions, concentrated almost entirely in the Province of the Punjab and the adjoining Punjab States. The Sikhs left Hinduism in the sixteenth century and later became organised on a political and military basis. They have no caste, do not worship idols, do not cut their hair, and do not smoke. Under their great leader Ranjit Singh, they became the founders of an important kingdom in the north, and remained the dominant power in the Punjab until its annexation in 1849. The principles and doctrines of their faith are recorded in their holy book called the Granth Sahib, which is kept in the Golden Temple at Amritsar,







3. Street in Lahore.



4. View of Bombay.

their headquarters. They are still a strongly organised community of martial race and tradition, determined not to be dominated in their home province either by the Mohammedan majority or by the Hindu section of the population.

There are now more than 7 million Christians in India, widely distributed, but mainly to be found in the Province of Madras and the southern States of Travancore and Cochin. A small number, known as Syrian Christians, are descendants of settlers from Syria in the fifth century A.D., but the great majority are the converts of the last eighty years and their descendants. Nearly half of them are Roman Catholics. In Travancore Christians form no less than a third of the population.

Then there are the Parsis, a very small but by no means unimportant community, who live chiefly in Bombay. As their name indicates they came from Persia. They were followers of Zoroaster fleeing from persecution who found refuge on the hospitable shores of India. Although there are little more than 100,000 of them, they include a number of the most successful men in commerce, industry, and public life, and are noted for their great charities. Parsi ladies have long been among the most advanced and best educated of Indian women.

At the other end of the scale several millions of the aboriginal tribes still follow their primitive forms of worship, though in recent years many have been received into the fold of Hinduism or have become converts to Christianity. Of Buddhists in India there are very few (since Burma was separated from India by the Act of 1935), except among the hill people round Darjeeling.

And of Europeans there are in the whole country, according to the Census of 1941, only 135,000, of whom nearly half are British troops. There are just about the same number of Anglo-Indians, the community of mixed European and Indian stock, many of whom have been domiciled in India for generations.

The languages of India are as varied as her peoples. The number is often given as over 200, but actually there are only about twelve main languages. Sanskrit, the language of the Aryans, is the

parent of the modern languages of Northern and Central India (just as Latin is of French, Spanish, and Italian). By far the most widely spoken is Hindi, which in its various forms is understood over a very large area, while Urdu, which is closely related to it, is the common language or *lingua franca* for Mohammedans all over India. Urdu is really largely Hindi written in a Persian script. Both are often commonly referred to as Hindustani. Tamil and Telugu, the chief Dravidian languages of the south, have no relation at all to Hindi and the Indo-Aryan languages of the north.

Thus it is that the teaching of English in the secondary schools (it has never been taught in the primary schools) has had a remarkable effect in promoting the unity of the whole country. It has brought together the educated classes of different regions and enabled them to exchange thoughts and ideas. It has been one of the most powerful influences in welding India together and in creating the Indian 'nation'. During the last few years there has been a great campaign in favour of adopting Hindi as a universal language to be made compulsory in all schools, but it is meeting with much opposition both from Mohammedans, and from the speakers of the Dravidian tongues for whose children it would mean a special burden. India will always need a language for use in her relations with the outer world, and English remains the obvious language for this purpose.

Another bond which unites the great masses of the people of India, whether Hindu or Mohammedan, Sikh or Christian, is the fact that they are countryfolk, peasants getting their living from the soil. They live in countless villages, and towns are few and far between. From time immemorial the life of the people has been based on the village community. Independent units, self-contained and self-governing, they persisted through the centuries little changed by wars and the succession of different rulers. The village was complete in itself and was left to manage its own affairs through its council (*panchayat*) provided that it paid the land-tax demanded by the governing power. It was only with the building of roads

and railways bringing contact with the outside world that times began to change, and the isolation of the village to break down. It is still the social unit, an orderly community respecting the authority of its headman, often with its own artisans, weaver and potter, blacksmith and carpenter, and its village servants. But with the ever-growing population the pressure on the land has become very great, and the peasant often gets from it no more than the barest subsistence. He accepts this as in the nature of things and does not complain, but the dire poverty of the masses of rural India is perhaps the greatest of all problems facing governments in India, whether British or Indian.

Artisans and labourers are no longer tied to the villages of their birth, but can seek employment further afield, and the new Census of 1941 shows a decided growth in the population of the towns corresponding with the new growth of industry. In 1931 there were only 11 per cent of the whole population classified as town-dwellers, and fewer than forty towns in the whole of India had more than 100,000 inhabitants. In ten years another twenty-three towns have passed the 100,000 mark.

India's two great cities, Calcutta and Bombay, both busy centres of shipping, of commerce, and of industry, have grown larger still. The population of Calcutta, second city of the British Empire, has reached 2 millions. It has fine streets and shops, parks, monuments, and public buildings, to which the poorer quarters of the town with their narrow, untidy lanes and squalid dwellings offer a sharp contrast, though they have been considerably improved of recent years. The same is true of Bombay, which is more tropical in setting, but cooled by breezes from the sea. Its harbour is one of the finest in Asia, and the city is thronged by many different types both from the East and from the West. The two next largest towns—Madras and Hyderabad (Deccan)—are only half the size of Bombay. Hyderabad is the fourth city of India and far the largest town of the Indian States.

In the towns all over India, although houses of more than two stories are the exception, the poor live crowded up in dark and

ill-ventilated rooms. Yet, in spite of overcrowding, town-dwellers have certain advantages over the peasants in the villages. They have a clean water supply and sanitation provided. They are within easy reach of hospitals and health services, and of good schools for the children, besides other amenities of town life.

And this brings us to another of the great divisions among the peoples of India—the division between the educated and uneducated. The masses of the peasantry are still illiterate. Over the whole country only about a fifth of the men and a twentieth of the women can read and write in any language. But education has been long organised and has made rapid progress in recent years; the Indian universities produce men and women of highly trained intellect and ability, fully abreast of modern theories in economics and politics and the latest developments of science.

India is indeed a land of contrasts in every phase of life. Therein lies the origin of many of her troubles and of much of her enthralling interest. And in spite of all her variety and diversity there is an underlying unity between her peoples. More and more they are becoming conscious of the common inheritance which binds them together and which distinguishes them from all other peoples of the world.