Chapter 4
FORSTER'S ESSAYS

This chapter on Forster's essays seeks to examine his literary, political, economic and social views on the Orient, its customs, rituals, festivals, personalities, religion and places.

In his essay, 'Galsworthy Lowes Dickinson', we come to know that Forster had become active in the international P.E.N. Club, an association established for authors dedicated to 'the freedom of literature and the friendship of the nation' in 1921. He joined in 1927. During his visit to India in October 11, 1912, he saw the most important sights of India. Also present were many officials and non-officials—English, Hindu and Mohammedan. His anxiety to learn, his intelligence and interest in the religion, readiness to enter into every point of view made him popular among Indians. Initially Indian art, religion and society were alien to him. Forster had visited the fort of Gwalior. About Chattarpur, he writes that it is a remote native state in Bundelkhand where monkeys played on the slope and the city lay below, loveliest in the early morning, when the spires of Jain temples pierced through the grey and white mists and tree looked as the cushions of clouds.
The Maharaja he met there was a fantastic figure, incompetent yet endearing. He was a lover of philosophy. At the evenings, religious plays as Birth of Krishna were enacted in his court. Forster also admired the place Mau, a lovely ruin on a lake with beautiful lotuses and the myriads of water cloud, the setting sun. About Jodhpur, he writes that men and women shared the same club, thus solving the racial question. We notice the description of a similar club in his novel *A Passage to India*. Few Indians were admitted to the Jodhpur Club, as it was reserved for the English. Forster was much impressed by the fortification of Jodhpur fort – a land of heroism. Forster thus came to realize that the main difference in civilization lies not between East and West but between India and the rest of the world. Also he visited Banaras, Calcutta, Madras and south India.

In another essay, ‘Two Cheers for Democracy’, Forster writes of his participation in a conference of Indian writers and the organizers were All India Centre of P.E.N. Club where Forster came into contact with Indians of different professions-doctors, lawyers, public servants, professors as well as businessmen. Different writers
favoured their languages as writers from India were in favour of Urdu or Hindi to be used as a common language. Writers from Bengal favoured Bengali and of South preferred English. Forster was impressed by the architecture of the town hall where the conference was held in Jaipur. 'The arches were hung with straw curtains, through which one could see the top of the trees and roofs of the Maharajah's palace in the sunshine. Above the arches high on the wall, ran a lattice and the shadowy figures of the ladies passed to the purdah galleries to watch their deliberations'. From his description, we notice that purdah system was prevalent during Forster's first visit to India. In conference their topic of discussion was literature as unifying force, about the future of Indian languages, the participants were confident that despite different languages, India was one. Forster realized the change in India while listening to the speech of Prime Minister of Jaipur, Sir Mirza Ismail about the atmosphere of solidarity in which all modern writers must function keeping in contact with the world.

During his second visit to India in October 1945, Forster noticed the increased interest of people in politics
as the economic and social problems had tended to be secondary. Economically, too India was backward, poverty and malnutrition persisted. Though there was increase in industrialization, yet it did not dominate the landscape as it did in the West. Along with the minarets of the mosque, one could also notice the chimneys of the cotton mills in Ahmedabad. India had not changed externally and this is called by some observers as 'the real India'.

Leaving the streets, when Forster went to the private houses, he observed some changes such as lifting of the purdah, the increasing importance of women mostly in Moslem cities as Lahore and Hyderabad where before women were kept in purdah. On his first visit he hardly saw any Indian woman but in 1945, saw ladies coming out of purdah in Moslem cities as Hyderabad except among the conservatives. This lifting of purdah may even extend to the villages changing the Indian social fabric. This shows Forster being hopeful that as in West, in India too women will have equal opportunities as men.

About dinners and eatables, Forster describes a buffet dinner. Long tables were loaded with Indian food labelled as 'vegetarian' and 'non-vegetarian'. For the
affluent, life was much easier in India than in England. Shops were full of tinned delicacies as butter, cheese also puddings. Regarding the cinema, Forster writes that since his last visit to India, a large film industry had developed. He also saw his first film, full of crude anti-Japanese propaganda and a Hindi film about Mughal Emperor Humayun. And this makes Forster sure of a future that lies ahead for the film industry.

About architecture, he describes a great university at Hyderabad on American pattern located far away from the city. It blends two styles of architecture in Hyderabad state-Mohammedan and the other derived from the Buddhist caves of Ajanṭa. In the field of engineering there were noticeable developments—the titanic steel bridge over Hoogli in Calcutta that connected the squalid railway station.

As far paintings and sculpture, he refers to Bengal as the centre of painting. Tagore’s ‘Shantineketan’ was a cultural and humanistic university, famous as a 'Home of Peace'. In Calcutta, he observed in the folk art of Bengal, a beautiful collection of dolls in the villages. And also the famous Calcutta painter Jamini Roy was from the village.
Though a Hindu, he made pictures on Christian themes and his 'The Last Supper' was famous.

We note the great Muslim personalities of Urdu poet Iqbal and Forster's intimate friend Syed Ross Masood mentioned in the same essay. Giving details of Iqbal, Forster writes about him as an orthodox Muslim, a well-educated man who wrote both prose and poetry mostly in Urdu and occasionally in Persian. Regarding his philosophy, Forster observes that he was a fighter believing in the self to carry on the struggle, not just searching for fact or reality. He therefore co-ordinated the principle of strength and of the self with mysticism. Iqbal disapproves pantheism that he found in India and criticizes the Muslim teachers who have infected Islam with it. For Forster, Iqbal was a great genius and eminent literary figure of the modern India. His poems followed the orthodox pattern but the contents were refreshingly modern. For example, Froster notes that in one of his poem Iqbal projects man addressing God asserting that man too, is an accomplished artist:

Thou did'st create night but I made the lamp
Thou did'st create clay but I made the cup
Thou did'st create deserts, mountains, forest
I produced the orchards, gardens and the groves.
And It is I who made the glass out of stone
It is I who turned poison into an antidote!.

About Ross Masood, his most intimate Indian friend, Foster writes that he had known him since 1907 and had visited India because of him. He was so different that he could not be considered an ordinary person Forster says:

It was he who woke me out of my suburban and academic life, showed new horizons and a new civilization and helped me towards the understanding of a continent. He made everything real and existing.

India did not seem attractive and interesting to Forster until he had met Masood. His friendship made everything exciting. Forster was impressed by his personality to the extent that he dedicated his novel A Passage to India to him because without his help and cooperation it would not have been written. Commenting on the main traits of Ross's personality, Forster writes that he was aesthetic living by his emotions, generous, hospitable
and also a great patron of art. His interests were—reading
good books, collecting information about coins and
engravings. Poetry and plays equally appealed to him and
he loved Alfred de Musset’s poetry and watched Tolstoy’s
plays in London. His behaviour was equally good towards
English. In return, they too, were attracted by his charm
and personality. But at the same, Masood hated the ruling
race for the treatment towards Indians.

Forster reflects Masood’s thoughts on the ruling
race—Britishers:

As for your damned countrymen,
I pity the poor fellows from
the bottom of my heart and give
them all the help I can.³

Masood wanted to drive them out of India. Inspite of
hatred, he admired the good qualities inherent in them. It
is for this reason that he had a number of English friends.
His life-long friendship with Sir Theodore and Lady
Morison had coloured his outlook. Such thoughts and
views of Masood appear to be reflected in A Passage to
India in Aziz’s hatred towards the ruling race and in his
friendship with Fielding and Mrs. Moore. Regarding his
services towards his country India, his religion Islam and his language Urdu, Forster writes that his service gained him love and admiration by men and women who though differed in creed, sex and language, yet praised his greatness of heart and mind.

Forster's praise of Islam is to the fore in his essay 'Abinger Harvest', Islam that opposes idolatry like Christianity. In this part of the essay 'Salute of the Orient', Forster says that, 'though Islam insists on mysticism it never leads to the abandonment of personality. The self is precious because God, who created it is Himself is a personality'. 'Equality before God proclaimed by Christianity lies at the root of Islam. God was never incarnate and left no cradles, coarse, handkerchiefs or nails on earth to simulate and complicate devotion' Forster during his visit to India had been to mosque in the company of his Muslim friends. We find a moving description of the mosque in his essay 'Abinger Harvest'. He had seen mosque for the first at Woking. It appeared to him indeterminate. And he has given beautiful description of this Moslem architecture that 'the Caaba, the worship of saints, the Mecca position, do not succeed in obscuring
the central truth: That there is no God but God, and that
even Mohammed is but the Prophet of God and this is
expressed in Moslem architecture. We find in this essay
the mosque describing itself.

'I was built', 'in the first place at Medina,
where I was a courtyard. Attached to the
Prophet's house, I was the area to which
he proceeded when he would worship
God, and where his companions joined
him, summoned for this purpose by a cry. I
contained no ornament or shrine, nor was
one part of me more holy than another.
Near me was a well for ablution; in me
was fallen tree, whereon the Prophet
stood to preach; My inmates prayed
northwards at first, but turned south
afterwards, their aspiration being Mecca.
Before long I was built at Mecca also, but
you should not think of Mecca if you
understand me, because there, contrary to
my spirit, I enclosed a sacred object and
became a shrine. Dismiss the Caaba with
its illusion of a terrestrial goal. Recall the courtyard of Medina, construct upon its wall a tower for the crier, raise a pulpit upon its fallen tree, contrive from its well a lavatory or tank, in particular the side that indicates the direction for prayer. Then you will see me as I am today at Cairo, Mosque of Ibn Touloun.\(^5\)

Equality before God lies at the core of Islam and mosque is a courtyard for the faithful to worship. But since earlier times, mosque was a place of worship which surprised especially the Westerners as it was against the human tendency to think one place holier and pure. As times proceeds, the original design of mosque in India was influenced by Hindu art and architecture. For example a mosque built by Akbar, the great Mughal Emperor in Agra in 1560 looks like a temple or Church. People perfumed the mosque with rose water or scent. Regarding the faith of Muslim, Forster says it is pure because unlike Christians they carry no such illusion that God is inside the Church. Forster had also read the account of a
Tunisian who visited Cairo in the thirteenth century where he found mosque of Amr covered with dust. He writes:

'Nevertheless', 'I experienced in it a soft and soothing influence without there being anything to look upon which was sufficient to account for it. Then I learned that this is a secret influence left there from the fact that the companions of the Prophet stood in its court while it was building.\(^6\)

We find great personalities of Mughal Emperor Babur and the great Indian poet Tagore mentioned in the same essay. Forster was most interested to know about India's glorious past. And his interest led him to study about Mughal history of India and he describes his favourite Mughal emperor Babur in this essay. Forster writes that Babur was a descendant from Tamburlane and Gengis Khan, had inherited Ferghana and conquered Samarkand at an early age. But he soon lost both of these. Later he annexed Kabul entering the Indian sub-continent and thus laid the foundation of Great Mughal Empire extending from the centre of Asia to the Nerbudda in the centre of India. Babur will be remembered for one strange incident that
when his son Humayun fell ill at Agra, Babur offered himself as sacrifice and saved his life.

Forster was much influenced by Tagore’s poetry and he writes about him in ‘Abinger Harvest’ that he was a good writer and his ‘Chitra’ became so popular that it was enacted by the villagers in India. Also his play ‘Gitanjali’ earned great fame. Tagore though an Indian turned to general ideas more readily as his English friends. His poetry stands out for its charm and tenderness. Tagore was modern and adventurous.

Forster describes a wedding ceremony in a Muslim family in ‘Abinger Harvest’ part IV ‘Advanced India’. Their house lay close to his English friend so he could observe it from close quarters. Forster provides a brilliant description and the arrangement made for the guests. It was attended by people of various religions and races i.e. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, English and they varied in social standings. Forster also notices some ladies of the family in purdah. After the arrival of Moulvi (religious head) the marriage ceremony began along with the recitation of verses from the Koran. The bride and groom sat together on a sofa. After the Nikah ceremony, people dispersed to
perform their evening prayers, facing towards Mecca. Forster was moved to see Muslim faith that they do not forget to offer their regular prayer amidst ceremonies. Forster also observes during the ceremony, the Indian hostess offering ‘pan’ (betel leaves) to their guests at the end of the dinner. This tradition of Muslims is recorded in his novel *A Passage to India*, where Aziz was offered pan by his Muslim friend after dinner.

In the Hill of Devi, along with the mention of his friend Syed Ross Masood, Forster writes in his letters of September 26, 1921 about the loveliest place in India—the Taj Mahal and the attraction of this place made him visit it twice. He writes:

> After nine years, I revisited the Taj... The first time it looked hideous and hard, but we drove down again one evening and... I have never seen the vision lovelier. I went up the minaret and saw all the magnificent buildings glowing beneath me. The country steaming beneath a dim red and grey sky and just I thought nothing could be more beautiful... a muezzin with a most glorious voice gave the evening call to
prayer from a mosque. 'There is no God but God! I do like Islam, though I have had to come through Hinduism to discover it.'

Thus we note Forster's views on the Orient reflected in his essays. His contacts in India, a closer glance over its customs, religions, habits, journey to different places made him think and express his personal views gained through experiences in India. Therefore these essays stand out as a document containing his views. Some of these reappear in his novel *A Passage to India*. The places he visited, the personalities he met and the rituals to which he had been accompanied served as the foundation for his fruitful and mature writing. Like his novel *A Passage to India* some of the Forster's essays deals with the Oriental life that was the main source of attraction and inspiration to Forster and represent a fascinating aspect of Western literary Orientalism.
REFERENCES


5. Ibid, pp. 263, 264.
