Chapter II.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

After the disintegration of the Mogul Empire since the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the British gradually filled in the political vacuum and finally consolidated themselves after the battle of Kirkee in 1818. The English regime gave to the people the rule of law and order and in course of time induced, among them, an unprecedented sense of the security of person and property. The British Administration in India passed from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858. Queen Victoria in her historic Declaration of 1858 assured the Indian people freedom of worship and non-interference in social and cultural pursuits, which along with many practical demonstrations of the British intentions towards this country, created a new atmosphere, in which people freed from doubts, fears and uncertainties of their material existence heaved a sigh of relief and gradually occupied themselves in something higher and worthwhile than the procurement of their daily bread and the preservation of their personal safety. When poet Dalpatram wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century, 'No one now dare hold even a she-goat by the ear against her will', he was probably exaggerating the truth of what the masses at large truly felt and experienced. The same poet, referring to the old rulers, likened them to the 'robbers, who looted their own subjects', and added that 'surrounded by wolves like these, the people could not think of learning or of arts or anything good'. By contrast, he found that 'the British regime is so good that the evil-doers were punished and the rest were happy'. No wonder then that the much harassed dumb masses hailed the British as their deliverer.

Poet Dalpatram's contemporary, poet Narmad, often described as a firebrand and a fiery petrel, for all his love of the land and Hinduism, more than once referred to the beneficient aspect of the British rule, even after the recantation of his former beliefs in the Western types of reform. He asked pointedly whether there was any Hindu or Mahomedan power during the previous six hundred and odd years which gave to the people of all communities happiness that was alike or equal to that given by the English under Queen Victoria, and answered his own question by saying that 'the regime was certainly good'.

This feeling of being in safe hands is reiterated on different occasions in a variety of ways by these two poets, Dalpatram and Narmad, who, in Gujarat, were the first to give expression to the new poetic impulses and also to the altered psychological outlook of the people. The memory of the frequent raids and depredations by the Marathas in the past haunted the people's memory like a nightmare. In the regime of the Peshwas, no rich citizen of the capital of Gujarat dared to put on decent clothes for fear of being reported to the Peshwa's Deputy and there were instances of day-light robberies, there being none to arrest those robbers, since the Peshwa's Deputy himself was believed to be in league with them and claimed one-fourth of the loot. There was a significant improvement in the situation, as Narmad noted when people harassed by the Mahomedans and the Marathas began to move about with a sense of security. It is, therefore, not surprising that the people's first impression of the British regime should find expression in hyperboles but shorn of all hyperboles and rhetoric, the fact, however, seems to be clear that the new British regime, whatever its limitations, had conferred upon the masses at large an unprecedented sense of security, which

1. 'Dharmaavichar', p. 10.
2. 'Narma-gadya', p. 64.
enabled them to devote themselves to their work in an atmosphere of peace. Enlightened men then moved about everywhere, like men with a mission, inspired by the highest of ideals and patriotism, in the varied fields of life and literature, and in less than half a century put the whole country on her legs again. A new era of enlightened co-operation between the ancient East and modern West had begun. In another few years, India came politically to its own, but even that great historical event did not mark the end of that co-operative effort, for it was more than ever realized that isolation, however splendid, was an anachronism in the context of the modern world, which was already conceived as 'one entire family' by the ancient Indian seers, the validity of whose vision was unexpectedly corroborated by the scientific advances of the West. As Dr. A.S. Aitken, Vice-Chancellor of the Birmingham University, puts it, 'The British rule in India grew as a result of trade in goods and ended as a result of traffic in ideas. There is no reason why the traffic in goods should not continue as opportunity offered, but there is every reason why the traffic in ideas should be maintained, for India has much to give as well as to receive'.

1. Vide, Convocation Address to the University of Bombay, 'The Times of India' 5-2-1957.