

- Non-conformism can be the great catalyst for an Asia caught at the crossroads of tradition and modernism.

DEFENSE FOR THE NON-CONFORMIST

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We in Asia are forever being inflicted with long and tiresome lectures about the paramount need to liberate ourselves from the deadening grip of traditionalism, to develop the modern outlook, the free mind. The stress on this aspect of the problem of change and transition in Asia is justified on the plea that without the cultivation of a free mind progress is slow, spasmodic, mercurial, unrelated to economic and social needs.

There is much truth in this, but, generally speaking, those who seek to 'free' the minds of Asia are in fact only interested in replacing the tattered dogmas of the past with the more emphatic dogmas of present-day 'isms.' It is, therefore, imperative that we in Asia locate the essential ingredient of a free mind. Considering that we know so little about the mind it-

self, free or otherwise, what it conceals, its composition, its behavior patterns, we must proceed with caution.

What we are in the habit of casually describing as Asia is that region of our earth which embraces two-thirds of mankind and which is variously described as developed, developing, under-developed, backward; an area which was until recently divided and ruled, exploited, imposed upon by alien cultures. In our lands, without exception, several centuries are telescoped into the present. These facts of history, geography and social development unnecessarily distort the present-day thinking process, create psychological blockages to rationality of a kind which have yet to be tabulated, encourage the fusion of chauvinistic and sectarian notions as a defense against further 'alien' penetration

and rupture the sensitive channels along which cohabit and spawn.

Such is the reality. Small wonder, then, that our minds with which, and within which, we seek to build range over past and present, the spirit of uninhibited quest and free enquiry, must absorb the essence of the processes which have created estrangement between men, given superfluous wealth to some and grinding poverty to others, broken the back of one community to aid the growth of another, created chauvinism and false-patriotism to disguise the real motivations of men and movements, and let loose a flood of despair, cynicism, nihilism — the closed-in attitudes before which reason is swept away. Sifting the truth from this jungle of contradictory trends is a long and continuous process but the mind must be trained for this challenging task.

All over Asia we have been attempting some such intellectual break-through, but without much success. This largely is due to our failure to recognize the absolutely essential ingredient of

a free mind which will help it extend the frontiers of knowledge, to weaken the hold of superstition and dogma, and to neutralize the new falsehoods which seek to take their place. What is this essential ingredient which we ignore? It is non-conformism.

I would say this: utilize every opportunity to enshrine in the minds of the young and the old a deep respect for the non-conformist, the person who is not afraid to express his innermost thoughts, who puts even accepted truths to test, whose determined quest for greater understanding leads him on to truth.

Those who have developed the habit of seeing things only in shades of black and white, and who approve of this lazy and convenient analysis of world problems, will be horrified at the prospect of popularizing non-conformist attitudes. They will see in this an attempt to 'confuse' the mind, to destroy its 'dynamic,' and thereby to 'splinter' the ideological unity of political, economic and social trends. Perhaps, to some extent, they are right in their deductions; non-

conformism loosens the chains which bind the committed and demands a sustained and more thorough investigation of the ideas fed to us through various media. But is this not the only way in which we can enrich the thinking process in Asia and prevented it from being maimed by those who speak in the name of a variety of freedoms but who have little respect for the authentic free mind? The more one ponders on this, the more one is convinced that non-conformism can be the great catalyst for an Asia caught at the crossroads of tradition and modernism.

There are other people, less committed, suspicious of new stirrings, who might think that I am preaching the philosophy of the angry young men of our age. Far from it. Men become angry only when their ideas are scorned. They are the products of conformist and semi-conformist societies. What I have in view is a healthy, lively respect for non-conformism which, in most countries of the world, is repeatedly decried, insulted and quarantined. I firm-

the non-conformist provides a better building site for mature and sensitive thought than the conformist mind which resists new impulses, or accepts them grudgingly, hoping an opportunity will arise to throw them out again and outlaw them. We have seen this happen repeatedly at different levels of national life on our continent.

When we adopt this rational and scientific view of the conflict of minds in Asia, it soon becomes clear that it is the conformist mind which is the breeding ground of the violence and hatreds locked up in our structures of caste, community and nation. Indeed, when the conformist mind actively works towards revivalism, as a defence against the currents of new thought, we witness manifestations of what is commonly referred to as fascism. Only non-conformism establishes respect for the differences we see in others and thereby makes us truly civilized.

You will also perceive that one of the major achievements of the non-conformist mind, the free mind, could be a clearing of communi-

ly believe that the mind of cations between one mind and another. This is vital, for communication is the sensitive and fragile thread with which we can weave our attitudes, our desires, into a pattern of peace. Communication becomes real only when it is non-conformist.

If you should think I exaggerate to press a point, then recall the names of those remarkable men and women who have made lasting contributions to knowledge, understanding and peace. You will find a non-conformist in each of them — from the teachers of ancient times, who raised new gods in place of the old, right down to the dynamic men of our day whose thought and activity profoundly alter the course of human endeavor. Only when force is used to impose conformist, or, for that matter, non-conformist ideas, is wasteful violence and hatred generated.

Man's mind has to seek the fresh air, the contest of ideas, the fire of debate.

This is why I urge that respect for the differences we see in others must be en-

shrined in the mind of Asia if we plan to take those 'leaps' which will place us at the forefront of advancing Man. It will not be easy. Text books from primary school level will have to be re-written. The prejudices of teachers will have to overcome. Chauvinisms, major and minor, will have to be fought. And this would be but the beginning of a campaign to change our attitudes to the non-conformist, for the relapse back into the deadening grip of conformism could occur without warning unless the respect for the differences we see in others is deep-rooted, unassailable.

The cultivation of the free mind, which actively defends non-conformist views and ideas, is essential to Asia because on this continent small *elites* actually control the levers of power at national or regional level and can therefore be easily persuaded to suppress or inhibit trends which threaten their grips on others. In other words, the leaders of political, economic and social opinion in Asia often resort to the totalitarian remedy because there

is no sustained pressure to make them face the harder and more tedious alternatives. Free minds could build these pressures rapidly and make a deep impact on the summits of power in a continent like Asia where the broad millions are not chained by vested interests and where the desire is always strong to break free

from a dreary, misery-ridden past.

We have done practically nothing as yet to cultivate the free mind — or even to discuss the essential elements of it. Now is the time, as we push relentlessly forward to claim the fundamental right long denied to us. — *The Asia Magazine*.

MASTER RACE?

In no other country was there a higher rate of suicide. The very monotony of accepted faith and custom became to some few a veritable nightmare. Each youth planned his life step by step and, if he failed in an examination, he felt that all was over for him. A new idea once accepted went to the head like wine. It became an obsession which admitted of no contradiction. The idea of the superiority of their race and culture to the relatively irrational, inconsequent, and unorganized ways of foreigners — especially the English — was so much emphasized as to blind them to their limitations. — *Harold Gaod in Language in History*.