

# The Social Responsibilities of Students

*By Dr. P. J. Thomas*

**T**HE social responsibilities of students in India are not the same as those of students in England or America ; because, we are here at a different stage of development and have altogether different problems to face. Ignoring these differences may lead us into sorry delusions which may cost us heavily.

## White Man's Burden

For the last fifty years, leading professors in our Universities, and persons shaping the policy of our Governments were men trained in England, chiefly at Oxford or Cambridge. Till World War I, the U. K. had been the dominant power, and this position was more or less maintained till world war II. The British youth at the older Universities, equipped themselves to enter Parliament or the civil services (Home or Indian) or the learned professions at home or abroad. A country rolling in prosperity and wanting to lead the world needed leaders in public life and for trusted positions in India and the Colonies. Therefore the Universities sought to train, not scholars nor researchers, but men of general ability, men who could establish wide contacts and influence public opinion. Hence the importance attached to the Union Society and sports clubs in these Universities. It was in these, and not so much in the class-rooms, that the "young Barbarians" obtained their training for ruling their Home country and the Empire. In such an environment, students had no special social responsibilities. If they had to learn social problems, it was largely for wooing the voter. Most people in England were 'gainfully' employed, and the kind of poverty familiar to us in India was unknown there. The slums in the East End of London needed some help, and under the lead of Arnold Toynbee, some University men took up social work there. But there were more competent agencies to cater to such needs. Thus students at Oxford and Cambridge lived in their homely colleges (colleges there are rather like good college hostels in India), in an environment of comfort and affluence, with almost ear-marked public or professional careers before them. Is it any wonder if they spent their holidays in Paris or the Riviera ?

This was the Oxford and Cambridge that I knew in the early twenties, when I was "Up" there. It was a wonderful place for Britishers and for their kinsmen from the Dominions. But to us students from poor India, it was no more than a grand experience, an opportunity to get away from our dreary Indian environment of poverty and misery. It was like a set of poor up-country villagers being allowed for a short time to stay in the king's palace, in very prosperous environment. Like them,

we had to come back to our poor homeland with its miserable hovels and famished people.

### **Coloured Englishman's Days**

But many came back with an intoxication—Can't we turn India into England? If only the foreigner was sent out, some thought, this could be done. They started agitation and largely to placate such people, the Britishers cleverly set up mock-parliaments here, called Legislative Assemblies, with Speakers, whips, lobby, mace-bearers, and the whole paraphernalia at Westminster. Others who took up Higher Education work here tried to conjure up in our colleges an artificial environment like that of Oxford and Cambridge, by starting Union Societies, Soccer Clubs, tutorials and what not. But the hollowness of this soon became patent in a land where poverty was the basic problem. These coloured Englishmen were like fish washed up to a hill by a storm. But now the storm is over, and the fish must come back to water, in order to live. When India was tied to the apron-strings of England, such delusions were inevitable and were tolerated. But now, the common man is awake and is demanding his rights long denied to him. The demand is most vehement in Kerala and the South; but it may soon be so all over.

### **The Real Problem Before the Country**

The real problem, then, is economic. We have a large population, but undeveloped resources. There is therefore unemployment, under-employment, poverty. We have to raise the productivity of our agriculture and handicrafts, by introducing improved technique; larger industries and trade are also required. Equitable distribution is most essential. Only thus can incomes and living standards be raised.

Whose job is this? When the foreigner was here, we used to put the burden on Government. Now that we are free, we must recognize that it is the people's job. But the older men are tired out, by the grim struggle for Freedom. The rising generation has to take it up. They are to inherit this freedom. This is definitely the work for the generation now in schools and colleges. They have to build up a prosperous India.

In Western countries and Japan, most young men equip themselves in their early teens to take up farming, industry or business. In this way economic prosperity has been built up and is being maintained. In this country boys enter school and college to pass examinations for getting Government jobs or other salaried posts. As the University Commission Report has put it, our villages have been drained of clever youths, and therefore agriculture and industry are relegated to illiterate persons with little knowledge of improved methods of production. The result is that India's national income remains at a low ebb and the living standards of the common people kept miserably poor.

## Chief Responsibilities of Students

This, then, is the most urgent social responsibility of students. Not to tackle it would be nothing short of disaster. The great majority of all those who enter school will have to equip themselves for productive occupations—agriculture, industry, trade. A few will have special bent for advanced research or medicine or law; but the great majority of the youths are best fitted for entering directly wealth-producing occupations. In America, most boys and girls at school practise such occupations even when they are at school; so they are able to enter life's struggle in their teens. In Denmark and many European countries most of the boys leave school at fourteen and take up agriculture or industry. Not that they neglect the cultural studies. They get excellent opportunities for this in evening classes and some of them subsequently spend a year or six months at a People's College where they specialize in some art or science. It is such people (not University men) that lead in these countries, in public life or in professional work.

## Learn by Working

We in India have no such facilities; nor has our Government thought seriously about this matter. It is hoped that the Secondary Education Commission, now working, will go into this question fully, so that the great majority of our boys will get some technical training at school, without neglecting cultural subjects. In the meantime what our boys can do is to take advantage of all opportunities, while at school or college, to get trained in some occupation which is to their liking. One practical way of doing this is to work at least one day in the week and all the vacations at a farm or in some industry or at a business place. This is commonly done by American students, even of well-to-do families. Facilities for this can be provided here also, if we have the will. This will not only give our young men some practical experience in work, but will also enable them to relieve their parents of at least part of the burden of supporting them. Of course, this is not for the book-worms, who are meant to become researchers or writers of learned books. Perhaps they get scholarships. I am speaking of the men with brawn and with some bent for practical work. These are the real asset of the nation. If they start work early and are given help for it, they may in their time become captains of industry, and add to the nation's wealth. Those failing at examinations may even be greater assets, provided they are trained according to their real bent. But instead, they go to tutorial colleges and are made to pass the examinations after many years' wasted labour. The many tutorial colleges working today are therefore helping their pupils to miss their real vocations. Those who might have become captains of industry are helped to become disgruntled clerks. What a mischief!

## Be Pioneers

The importance of thus equipping youth to take up such a responsibility cannot be over-estimated. It is not merely to benefit them, but to benefit the nation. Such pioneers pave the way for the common man. With one technically advanced agriculturist or one successful manufacturer in a locality, large numbers of common people around them can easily take up improved agricultural or industrial work. Thus the whole local community is raised to higher incomes and better living standards. Such are the pioneers we now need all over India. These pioneers must come out of school and college.

## A Practical Suggestion

In Universities where provision is made for Agriculture in the Intermediate course (Andhra, Annamalai, Travancore), it is possible for students taking this subject to obtain a practical training in it, by keeping a well-run farm and by associating in this work practical farmers who have made a success of farming. I know one college where this is quite practicable—St. Thomas College, Palai. Similarly, it would be advantageous to have Mechanical Engineering as an optional subject. The late Fr. Honore was keen on this and at his instance, this was done at the Madras University. St. Joseph's college was affiliated for this subject in the intermediate course. I do not know what has happened since. It may at least be possible to maintain at every college a workshop equipped with lathes and other machine tools, so that boys with a natural bent for mechanical work may get practice there. It may also enable college authorities to get made there at minimum cost, furniture, scientific apparatus and other knickknack required for the college. In Travancore where starting colleges has become a business—the only thriving business—where a larger numbers of boys and girls than anywhere else go to college, aiming at a degree, this idea may not take. But it would be a disaster, if it does not take, I venture to say.

## Duties to the Poor and Needy

Next, there are the social responsibilities of students to the poorer brethren around them. India is full of poverty, sickness and misery. There are large numbers who are incapacitated to work either by physical deformities or by other handicaps. In advanced Western countries the State makes provision for this. But in India such provision is meagre, and we all have a heavier responsibility here regarding those who are in distress. Therefore, students have to start such work, even at school. Youth is the time of idealism, and there is no more deserving field for such idealism than the sick and cripple and those in misery on any ground. It is gratifying to note that students of many colleges are conducting social service organizations to help the poor and needy. It is hoped that our colleges will take the lead in such activities.

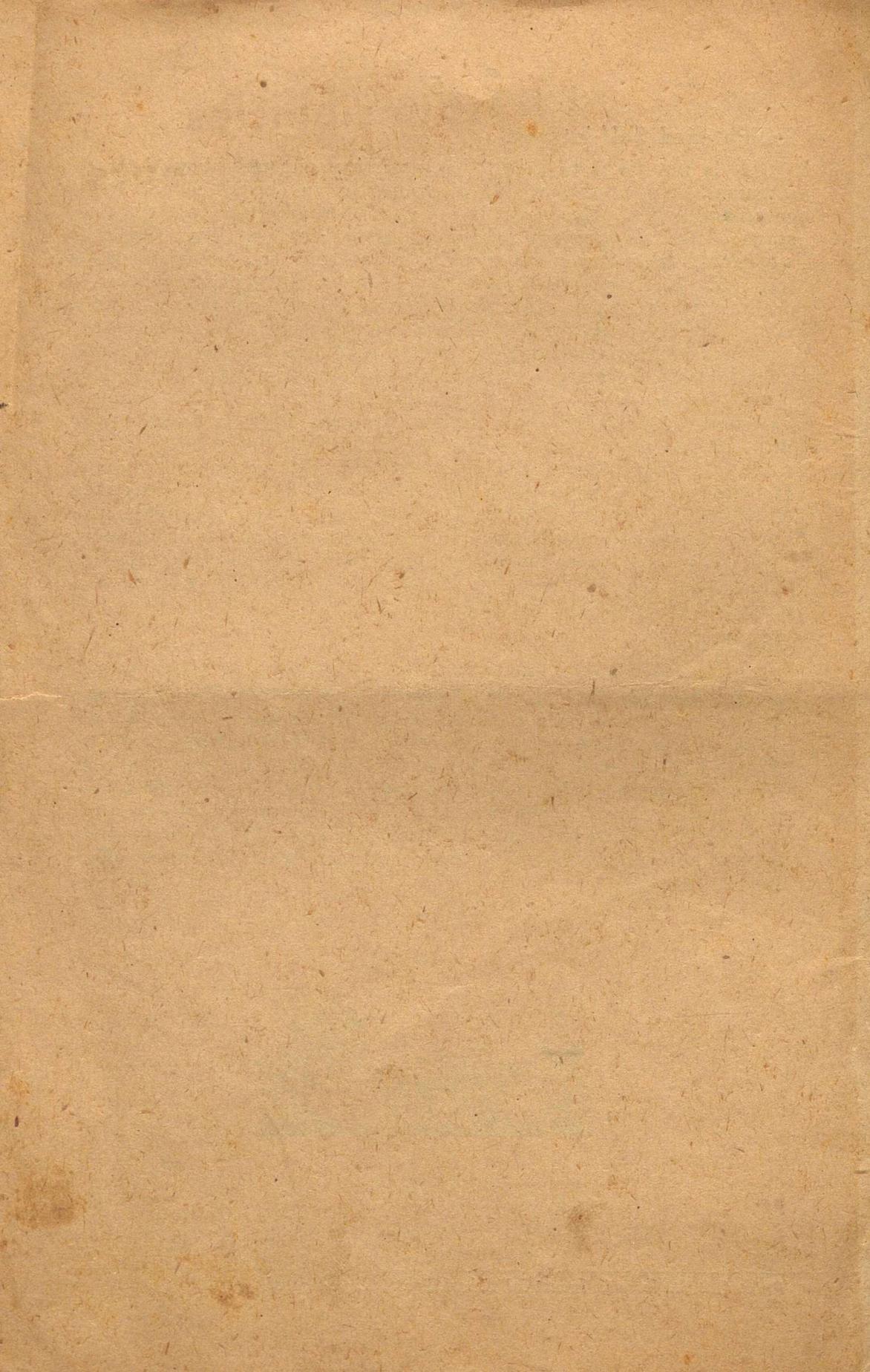
## Enlightened Self-interest

It is not right to think that assisting our neighbour is pure altruism. No doubt, we do it primarily in obedience to God's commandments. Even so, it is well to remember that at this stage of India's progress, this is our self-interest also, because we cannot have peace or security unless our neighbour is also well off. Even physically, it cannot be a pleasant thing for a prosperous man to live in a poverty-stricken neighbourhood. This is not merely a matter of sentiment; it is essential for our health. But more material than this, people who live in hovels will not long tolerate to see a few living in mansions in their neighbourhood. Times were when this caused no trouble. But nemesis has been in pursuit; Communism brought it to a head. Any way, it was neglect of our Divine Master's behests that has led us to this sorry plight. Let us repent our ways, and make amends. It is for youths, boys and girls, to follow a better way—the way of life laid down by Christ. If we strictly follow this way, the hovels can be converted into little mansions and all can be happy. This way has to be learnt at school and college; and like all things that matter, this way too has to be learnt by doing. We have talked enough. To action, now.

## Conclusion

Thus, the social responsibilities of students in India to-day are far heavier than those of their compeers in more advanced countries. This should not discourage us; instead it should buck us up to noble, even heroic, endeavour. This is a rare privilege given to the present generation in this country. Let us hope that our young people will take advantage of this opportunity to become really great. We must all work hard to improve the economic well-being of ourselves and our brethren around; this may help us to pursue always our common spiritual goal the more effectively.





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