

Airborne

From "In Persia"

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As the aircraft began to climb, the intimacy between the world and our five senses grew faint, till it narrowed to only one – our sight – but it was too hazy for comfort. All evidence of this certain yet diverse earth we absorb daily, now faded; a three-dimensional reality became a two-dimensional picture. Creativity is manifest in varied structures seen in the totality of space and time. As these distinctions become obscure, creation turns out to be annihilation. Just then, our earth appeared to me in that light of extinction. Her identity vanished, her constant demands on the imagination ceased. In a similar state, when a man sets out to drop fiery weapons from an aeroplane, he becomes unspeakably ruthless. His cruel arm does not hesitate in doubt. He is absolutely certain of his enemy's guilt

– for they are so remote from him. Men have an innate tenderness for the natural world. When the reality of this world becomes unreal, his affection withers. The advice given in the *Gita* is comparable to this airplane – it removed Arjuna's compassionate mind to a distant world; from its pinnacle it became impossible to perceive who lived and who died. Men have many such theoretical aeroplanes to conceal reality in their armoury – in Imperialism, in theories of sociology, in religions. The blows that fall from those heights come pleasantly wrapped with one consolation: *Na hanyatey, hanyamanye sharirey* (The body can be slain but the the soul is indestructible).¹

The British maintain an airbase in Baghdad. The resident Christian priest told me they were currently bombing a village of a Sheikh. The dead, old and young alike, were receiving these blows from the misty heights of the British Empire. It was easy to kill them – Imperialism made their humanity indistinct. Christ had acknowledged these men too as children of his Father, but to the *padre*, Christ, his children were unreal. It was impossible to recognise them from the soaring aircraft of Imperialism, so all over the Empire today Christ received fatal wounds. Moreover, from an aeroplane it was easy to bomb the desert dwellers. There was no fear of retaliation; and the dead and injured appeared as mere statistics. People who can be killed thoughtlessly have never been alive in the minds of their killers. This is the reason why men and women ignorant of Western ways of destruction are slowly becoming a blur to these masters of war.²

Translated by Debjani Sengupta.

NOTES

1. A quote from *The Bhagvadgita* (Chapter 2, verse 20) when Krishna advises Arjuna to participate in war, fighting against kin and family.
2. Tagore visited Iran in April 1932, when he was seventy, at the invitation of the Shah. It was his second aeroplane journey and the longest. This essay, "*Parosshey*", records his thoughts on that long flight as well as his myriad impressions of the stopovers, and his final destination. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. X, The Birth Centenary edition).