

**Reread** Richard Lannoy's *The Speaking Tree*, published in 1971, has been acclaimed as a major contemporary overview of India. Here, after the country's celebration of half a century's independence, Lannoy revisits his book, itself over twenty-five years in age.

## In the Shade of The Speaking Tree

*The Speaking Tree* by Richard Lannoy (OUP 1971)

This book has now been in print for a quarter of a century, no more than a few faint rings on the rim of a tree with roots reaching down into remotest antiquity. I like to think of my own very modest labours in these archaic terms, even though my book is not much more than the garnering of a few leaves from those venerable and capacious boughs we call Indian Culture. Such a venture, ten years in the making, is probably best thought of as yet another contribution to the Western construction of a *myth* – the myth of India, or the India of the Imagination – rather than the ‘study of Indian culture and society’ it purports to be. So vast and exceedingly complex a theme is surely beyond the powers of any single author to describe and analyse, and can therefore be no more than, at most, an elegant simplification gilded with the foil of one man's Western imagination. A myth is, to greater or lesser degree, the product of unitary vision. The India-construct in this book ignores the huge plurality of differences and details of a multiple sub-continent and strives toward a unified whole. In so doing, I am only too well aware, I distort reality for the sake of the myth – and the book's readability. The greatest compliment ever paid to me about *The Speaking Tree* was made by a very high official indeed in the Indian Prime Minister's office, personal adviser to Indira Gandhi – and I mention both the remark and the context, a party in New Delhi some time ago, because it so exactly sums up the intention of the book:

‘We have a lot in common, Mr Lannoy. Your book shows *how it all fits together*. That's what I'm trying to do here in my job.’

Throughout my life, and long before I went to India, I have been concerned with finding ways to sustain a pervasive sense of the unity of all things. All my peak experiences, my best moments, my occasional – all too brief – moments of inspiration as visual and

literary artist have been characterised by a fleeting sense of totality, of oneness, of diversity coalescing into a unified whole. As innumerable visitors will testify, despite all the frustrations and hassles that living conditions in India inevitably entail, this country, above all others, possesses in its culture, its human sensibility, its religions and its diversity of peoples and ethnicities, a genius for generating an atmosphere of the oneness of all things. Beneath the surface of extreme diversity, and millennia-old acceptance of that diversity, and then making from it a positive pluralism, a deeply compelling sense of unity underlying literally *everything* prevails. Indeed, it is the supreme central intuition of the Indian peoples. Unfortunately, due to the sheer difficulty we have in coming up with the right words to describe and define this focal intuition, non-Indians resort to that tattered and abused word ‘spirituality’, but it is quite inadequate.

This profound feeling for life as *unity in diversity* is all-encompassing. Spirituality is but a mere portion of the whole, whereas this Indian holism is just as likely to be found in the peasant, the man or woman in the learned professions, the businessman, the politician, or the pushy young man in the software industry as among priests, monks, holy men and holy women. It is there in the Westernised chattering classes and, though deeply embedded in sentimental vulgarity, it can still be seen in the burgeoning *nouveau-riche*.

My purview in *The Speaking Tree* included all this, and will be in this article also. The question is whether it was valid, all those years ago, and to what extent it still is; where it is not, then what exactly has changed in the intervening years. I wish I could give adequate answers, but I can only outline my personal angle on these matters to the best of my ability, bearing in mind that I have not spent very much time in India since I wrote the book. However, I have thought a great deal about the matter in retrospect and while I cannot

photos Richard Lannoy



vouch for the accuracy of my more recent and fleeting impressions of India nowadays, I am quite clear about the changes in my own perspective towards India.

Let me first explain how my book came into being. I went to India first in 1953 as a freelance photo-journalist, spending seven years in and out of the country, travelling very extensively and making picture stories for magazines on a multitude of different subjects. I also made a tour of Indian industrial and development projects from which came *India's New Horizons*, a photo survey published in all ten major Indian regional languages. But my first international book of photographs, *India*, a large volume reproduced by the old photogravure process, focussed mainly on people, as has all my main photographic coverage in India, its most considerable effort a book on Benares (*Varanasi*) to be published in about eighteen months' time. Because my job as a photo-journalist compelled me to probe and investigate every nook and cranny of life that I could reach, I met an extraordinary range of people in every walk of life in a variety of regions as different from each other as the nations of Europe. Through this process of experiential learning, abetted by an exceptionally perceptive and observant Indian wife, I came to know India, although over a shorter time-span and with considerably less resources, rather in the same way as the BBC's correspondent Mark Tully. A senior Indian MP, having often recommended my *India* as a general introduction to India, suggested that I write a book that would communicate some of my understanding of its people. So I began a narrative book with the title ‘Anonymous in India’ which simply related my most interesting experiences and

impressions. No sooner had I embarked on this than I found there were many instances where I had to interrupt the narrative in order to explain details of Indian life and culture which the reader unfamiliar with the subject would first need to understand. So I began to write five introductory chapters. These eventually became the five parts of the closely-analysed material I was to call *The Speaking Tree*. The narrative, alas, never got written.

I have often been asked how I could possibly select the five broad themes of a book on so diverse a subject – but this was the easiest thing of all to do! I simply had to remember all the topics that got people hot under the collar in the many conversations I held over the years with both Indians and non-Indians. And Indians themselves have a favourite word for describing their own efforts to understand their own culture: *baffling*. At the time of writing, my work coincided with the post-Independence emergence of classical anthropological and sociological analysis of Indian society of exceptionally high standard and intellectual brilliance. From these disciplines I learnt how it was possible, through microscopically precise analysis of social structures and human behaviour, to identify the ‘deep structure’ underlying collective and individual motivation. The great breakthrough and landmark in this, by far the most dynamic and exciting area of Indian studies in the fifties and sixties, was the monumental study on the caste system, *Homo Hierarchicus*, by the French sociologist Louis Dumont. One could compare the impact of this book with the work, world-wide in scope, by Mircea Eliade in the field of comparative religion.

Now this kind of structural analysis (the term ‘Structuralism’ was the name given to the cutting-edge