

1950

Common Sense from India

Archie J. Bahm

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Bahm, Archie J.. "Common Sense from India." *New Mexico Quarterly* 20, 1 (1950). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol20/iss1/20>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

... He would resist to the last any effort that threatened his position as a diagnostician, but he would respond readily to instruction in first aid and bonesetting, provided he could trust the instructor and could see results from the work."

The only criticism which might be leveled at this excellent piece of work is the small matter (but of emotional connotation and possible confusion in the Southwest) of retaining the Navaho translator's appellation of "Mexican" in referring to Spanish Americans and of "white people" in referring to Anglos.

Archie J. Bahm

COMMON SENSE FROM INDIA

WHEN THE western scholar seeks beyond the bed of spikes, rope tricks, and trances for the philosophical bases of India's outlook in the Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita, he may yet be misled, for most of those who sit on India's doorsteps are not good guides. A. Thangal Kunju Musaliar, business magnate of Travancore, writing in Malayalam, published in 1946 "the slim little volume bearing his name": *Man and the World. Practical Philosophy and Law of Nature*.^{*} The book was written to be read aloud in native village gatherings as a sermon to help the humble to find happiness. For the common man it is packed with common sense, drawn from innumerable sources, not the least of which is life itself. Western science and Eastern mysticism intermingle with charming simplicity, yet with noticeable absence of both Hindu excesses and American exact-

^{*} Translated from the Malayalam by S. Sathyavageswara Iyer. San Vicente Foundation, Inc., Santa Fe, 1949. (A note on the San Vicente Foundation was given in "The Editor's Corner," Winter 1949 issue.)

ness. Not once is there mention of Brahman, Nirvana, Yoga, nor once of a chemical formula, mathematical equation, or statistical graph.

No plot or theme, except the persistent one of how to find happiness, inhibits the reader who might wish to begin wherever the book happens to open. He can find exhortation on an endless array of homely topics, such as eating, sweating, bowel movements, sudden changes in atmospheric pressure, fresh air, pure water, games, rituals, pilgrimages, autosuggestion, and of everyday virtues such as early rising, systematic habits, self-reliance, thrift, decencies and proprieties, and retirement in comfort. Yet these are interwoven with remarks about man's destiny and cosmic significance. Man is depicted as endangered both by aggressive egoism and failure to rise fully to his potential heights: "In his vanity man imagines he can alter the face of things and make events to order." Yet there are "no limits to man's progress." Even though man's fate is destined by laws of eternal justice, power over his own happiness remains largely in his own hands. Divine doom and human hope, pantheism and humanism, brute facts and tender values appear together as naturally as common human experience demands. Both reincarnation and heaven-hell doctrines live together uncritically with each other; yet happiness is to be found not by running away from life but in attending efficiently to life's most ordinary needs—such as urination and gratitude.

Science is advancing by leaps and bounds. The relentless struggle for existence results in the deaths of thousands and the wanton waste of means of subsistence. For it is the immutable law of life that all things grow, reach their climax, and then die away—to resume their original state. . . . The days of the week, month and year are caused by the movements of the sun and earth, for if these did not move there would be no past and future. . . . Between his loss and his regaining of consciousness, man does not know anything of the elapsed time, no matter what its length, no matter if it was only a second's duration.

Westerners will approve the author's ability to make wide use of simple scientific knowledge for human improvement, though they may be appalled and irritated by his mistakes, even if trivial for moral purposes, as, for example, that "the sun burns as it travels owing to its tremendous speed."

The Western mind may never be able to understand how the spirit of India can be at once so diffuse and yet so integrated, so unsystematic and yet so unified, so spiritual and yet so practical. Musaliar makes multitudes of different philosophies—contradictory and incompatible to analytical minds—merge imperceptibly together, with no feeling of rough edges, unless the reader, already trained to detect and magnify, brings his intellectual slicing tools with him. Their naïve coherence may well represent a profounder wisdom than sophisticated analyses—may not be so naïve after all. Sweeping generalities illustrated by homely examples and intuitive appraisals of life not bound by the laws of "mere reason"—yet inherently reasonable to common sense—leave a feeling of depth and grandeur, of scientific holiness, of profound simplicity. S. Sathyavageswara Iyer of H. H. The Maharaja's University College, Trivandrum, translated the book into English. It may have lost in the process some of the charm of its original genius. Yet it remains an excellent table piece, an inspirational handbook, a steady source for those in a mood for meditation. And it has been beautifully designed by Merle Armitage and attractively printed by Progress-Bulletin under the supervision of M. A. Johnson.