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GENERAL MEANING OF E. M. FORSTER'S
A PASSAGE TO INDIA

The question that the Indians discuss in Chapter 2 — "Is it possible for the Indians to be friends with the English?" — is the focal point of the plot of *A Passage to India*. Can East meet West on a plane where each not only tolerates but also appreciates the other? In a larger sense Forster asks if universal understanding is possible. (It should be pointed out that this novel does not really suggest an affirmative answer to that question.) He then proceeds to introduce characters from the major factions in India and to show their interactions. As he traces the interplay, he keeps before the reader symbols that show forces above and beyond the reach of most men's grasp. The sky and a hint of arches beyond it are prominent examples. To show that not only are there heights which only the most perceptive minds can comprehend, but also depths, he shows especially sensitive people finding beauty — and God — in the lowest of creatures, the jackal and the wasp. Within this framework he treats of three of the great religions, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism.

Islam is shown in a decadent state revealing in past glory. The Westernized Moslem finds it hard to maintain his belief. His festivals are empty ceremonies in which the participants bicker about inconsequential matters. Aziz, whom Forster chooses to represent Islam, professes to scepticism about the precepts of his religion; his poetry is devoted to flamboyant exploits of the past. All he appears to have left is sadness because of the decline of Islam, and contempt for the Hindus. The phrase that Mrs. Moore uses to describe Christianity, "little talkative Christianity," seems to be Forster's view of that religion. He chooses to use many biblical allusions, often in an ironic manner, which point up what Christianity professes, but does not practice. The religion of the English in India takes second place to affairs of state and does not enter into the practical aspect of their lives; it is merely a conviction. The events of the story lead the reader step by step to a consideration of Hinduism. Professor Godbole, its main exponent, is pictured as a man of peace, a man of wisdom, who refuses to become enmeshed in the petty quarrels of men. The short climactic section at the end of the novel shows Hinduism in action. The religious zeal of the participants in the festival causes them at

least to suspend momentarily, if not to disregard entirely, any self-seeking for position as leader, even though the rajah is near death. The adoration of the god is so intense that when the sick and aged rajah is brought to the ceremony, he is scarcely noticed.

The ceremony includes ecstasy, merriment, and solemnity, suggesting that religion should embody the whole of life. The biblical passage "God is love" has an error in spelling, but none in practice. The Hindus' faces are mild and serene, because "religion is a living force to the Hindus," and among its tenets, one of the most important is the "peace that passeth understanding." But Hinduism too has its imperfections; Forster points out that in Mau, though there is no strife between Moslem and Hindu, there is between Brahmin and non-Brahmin.

The key phrases in regard to the characters are "the understanding heart." Aziz, warmhearted and impulsive, possesses understanding, but his volatility reduces its effectiveness; Adela is cold, honest, and reserved. Mrs. Moore has both kindness and an innate understanding of people at the beginning of the novel, but the kindness at least does not withstand her experience in the caves, and understanding without kindness is of no use to her. Fielding is the key figure who develops with the novel. He not only crosses racial and national lines, but he responds as though they did not exist. He professes atheism, but by the end of the novel he has at least become personally aware of spiritual influences: puzzled by the pleasing change in his wife after the encounter with Hinduism, he is intrigued by whatever it is that the Hindus seem "to have found." Professor Godbole is not so much a character as a "carrier" for an ideology that suggests at least a theoretical answer to the question Forster poses at the beginning of the book, "Can the Indian be friends with the English?" There is a historical aspect to this novel as well as a religious one. Forster's premise seems to be that no nation can subjugate another without inflicting wounds that leave deep scars. No nation can be of service so long as the ruling nation holds itself superior and aloof. The book is not a strictly historical account, of course, because Forster is more concerned with social relationships than he is with history. But he does indicate the spirit of rebellion that is beginning to build in India and shows the English losing their grip on the government. The last few paragraphs of the novel seem almost prophetic of Indian independence, which took place Twenty-two years later.

Courtesy: Web Source, DDCE, Utkal University