

Ideas and Opinions

C S Yogananda



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Albert Einstein

Rupa & Co.

1979, pp.377, Price: Rs.150/-

The book under review contains a collection of Albert Einstein's general writings and has been around for many years now (first published in 1954). The first Indian edition by Rupa & Co. was brought out in 1979, the birth centenary year of Einstein.

My first encounter with the book (which also dates to 1979) began with the following quotation from a talk Einstein delivered to a group of children (p. 56):

“Bear in mind that the wonderful things you learn in your schools are the work of many generations, produced by enthusiastic effort and infinite labor in every country of the world. All this is put into your hands as your inheritance in order that you may receive it, honor it, add to it, and one day faithfully hand it on to your children. ... If you always keep that in mind you will find a meaning in life and work and acquire the right attitude toward other nations and ages.”

It left a lasting impression on me and heeding the advice of the *Taittiriya Upanishad* – “whenever you are in doubt see what the learned did and learn of them” – I have been dipping into the book over the years.

The articles are culled from various sources: Einstein's correspondence, interviews to newspapers and radio, speeches, responses to awards bestowed, etc. One wonders how Einstein found time to do such diverse things as – address a letter to a minister under Mussolini imploring them to spare the Italian men of learning the oath of loyalty to the Fascist system (p. 30); – reply to a young girl who had sent him a bulky manuscript (p. 56); – write an article ‘What is the Theory of Relativity?’ at the request of ‘The London Times’ (p. 227). The book is classified into five sections, Ideas and Opinions, On politics, government, and pacifism, On the Jewish people, On Germany, and Contributions to Science. The writings in the first and last section are of a different nature than the three middle sections which contain political writings of Einstein. Though the sources of articles are given, not knowing the context may make it hard to comprehend some of them, particularly in the three middle sections. Here is what Einstein says in one of his addresses (pp. 34-35) in 1954 which gives an idea of what motivated him to express his opinions:

“In a long life I have devoted all my faculties to reach a somewhat deeper insight into the structure of physical reality. Never have I made any systematic effort to ameliorate the lot of men, to fight injustice and suppression, and to improve the traditional forms of human relations. The only thing I did was this: in long intervals I have expressed an opinion on public issues whenever they appeared to me so bad and

unfortunate that silence would have made me feel guilty of complicity.”

While you may disagree with some of Einstein's opinions you cannot help appreciating his sincerity and the clarity of his thoughts. I have always wondered how Einstein viewed his letter to the President of USA urging him to strongly consider making the atom bomb after the tragedy that followed the dropping of the first bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Though he was deeply saddened he seems to be free of regret for his letter while for many persons involved in the making/delivering of the bomb their action haunted their conscience for the rest of their lives. The reason perhaps is that he had considered the situation in all its dimensions before he acted and had anticipated the tragedy that followed. In 'an article in a monthly magazine in November 1945 he observed (p. 118)

“The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one. One could say it has affected us quantitatively, not qualitatively. So long as there are sovereign nations possessing great power, war is inevitable ... That was true before the atomic bomb was made. What has been changed is the destructiveness of war”.

Einstein had very high regard for Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violence movement. In a radio interview for the UN in 1950 the concluding part of the interview bears out this fact (p. 163):

Question: United Nations Radio is broadcasting to all corners of the earth, in twenty-seven languages. Since this is a moment of great danger, what would you have us broadcast to the peoples of the world?

Answer: Taken on the whole, I believe that Gandhi's views were the most enlightened of all the political men in our time. We should strive to do things in his spirit ... not to use violence in fighting for our cause, but by non-participation in what we believe is evil.

While reading the third section, 'On the Jewish people', I could not help finding echoes of some of the statements made there concerning the Arab-Jew relation in the statements made by many Indian statesmen concerning India and Pakistan. A sample from a radio broadcast on Nov. 27, 1949 (p. 201):

“One of these ideals is peace, based on understanding and self-restraint, and not on violence. ... It may well be that we would have reached this ideal, had we been permitted to work out, undisturbed by others, our relations with our neighbours, for we want peace and we realize that our future development depends on peace.”

Einstein's ideas on supranational or world government seem somewhat naive and suffer from an oversimplification of the problem of international cooperation.

It looks like Einstein did not take women seriously. In a response to the women of America protesting against his visit to USA he says (p. 7)

“But are they not quite right, these watchful citizenesses? Why should one open one’s doors to a person who devours hard-boiled capitalists with as much appetite and gusto as the Cretan Minotaur in days gone devoured luscious Greek maidens, and on top of that is low-down enough to reject every sort of war, except the unavoidable war with one’s wife? Therefore give heed to your clever and patriotic womenfolk and remember that the Capitol of mighty Rome was once saved by the cackling of its faithful geese.”

(I wonder how the protesting American women reacted to this!) In a letter to a young girl,

“... It is clever, well observed, honest; it stands on its own feet upto a point, and yet it is so

typically feminine, by which I mean derivative and steeped in personal resentment.”

The last section consisting of Einstein’s general articles on science contains many gems, the high point to me being the ‘Notes on the origin of the General Theory of Relativity’ which should be read by anyone who wants to study GTR.

One drawback of the book is the small print. In fact, a volume containing just the articles of the last section, ‘Contributions to Science’, in bigger font would be of immense value to young students.

C S Yogananda, Department of Mathematics, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012, India.



I am now exclusively occupied with the problem of gravitation and hope, with the help of a local mathematician friend, to overcome all the difficulties. One thing is certain, however, that never in life have I been quite so tormented. A great respect for mathematics has been instilled within me, the subtler aspects of which, in my stupidity, I regarded until now as pure luxury. Against this problem the original problems of the theory of relativity is child’s play.

A Einstein to Arnold Sommerfeld
29 October 1912

The scientific theorist is not to be envied. For Nature, or more precisely experiment, is an inexorable and not very friendly judge of his work. It never says “Yes” to a theory. In the most favourable cases it says “Maybe”, and in the great majority of cases simply “No”. If an experiment agrees with a theory it means for the latter “Maybe”, and if it does not agree it means “No”. Probably every theory will someday experience its “No” – most theories, soon after conception.

A Einstein
1922

Take a gander through the book *Ideas and Opinions*, a collection of most of Einstein's written letters from his early years up until his death in 1955, and you'll find not just a brilliant thinker but also a passionate and outspoken social advocate (not to mention an incredibly well-spoken writer). But although he had much to say about the politics and economics of his day, his most profound knowledge and wisdom came from his words on living a meaningful life.