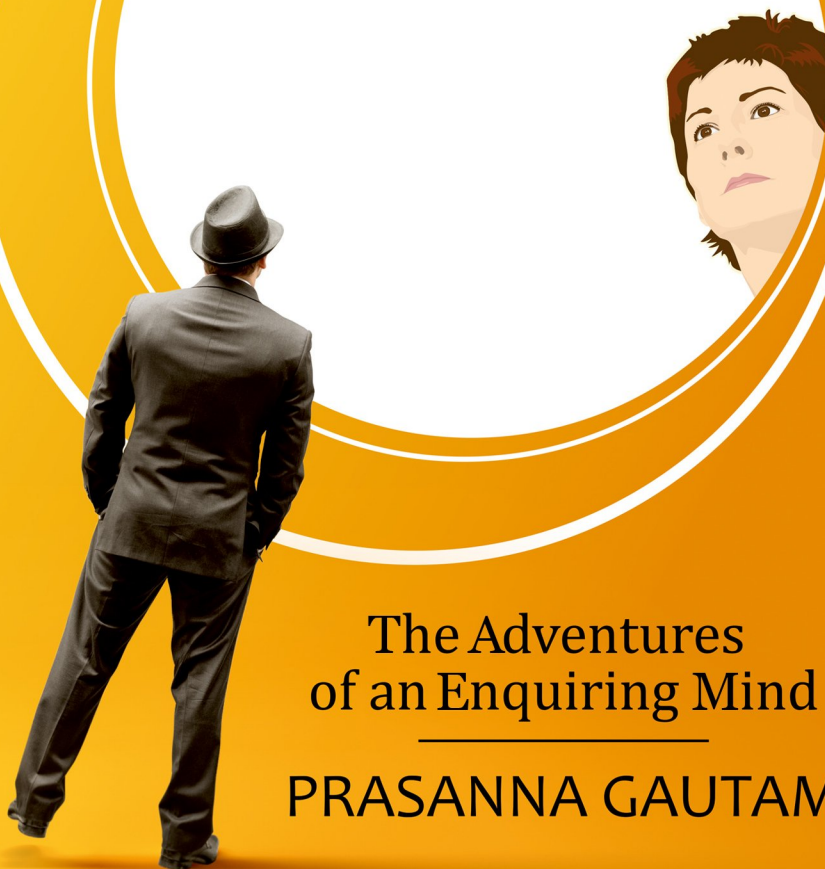


# REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY VALUES, BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOURS



The Adventures  
of an Enquiring Mind

PRASANNA GAUTAM

# Reflections on Contemporary Values, Beliefs and Behaviours



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of an Enquiring Mind*

Prasanna Gautam

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Reflections on Contemporary Values, Beliefs and Behaviours:  
The Adventures of an Enquiring Mind

By Prasanna Gautam

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To the readers who:

Are prepared to think, to feel, to understand  
Not afraid to change when wrong, and  
For what is right, to take a stand.

As inspired by the immortal poet Robert Burns:

Then let us pray  
That come it may  
(as come it will for a' that)  
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth,  
Shall bear the gree, an' a' that.  
For a' that, an' a' that.  
It's coming yet for a' that.'  
That Man to Man world o'er,  
Shall brothers be for a' that.

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## PREFACE

### WHY THIS BOOK?

This is a book of reflections on common issues which have profoundly affected us. It is also an attempt to discern the real from the unreal, and the right from the wrong. I was prompted to pursue this by the realisation that what I thought was knowledge was a ladder instead on which to descend further into the depths of ignorance. Unlike Socrates who said of his pupils, "I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think", I could only pose questions in my essays, hoping to encourage each of us to find their answers.

Our tradition has been to define a thing by what it is not, and not by stating what it is in reality. As an example, I can confess that I worked all my life to save lives, not knowing what 'life' really was. For 40 years, I have been a health worker without really knowing what 'health' is. Once I asked a friend of mine to tell me what 'life' was. He promptly replied, "It is the opposite of death." "And what is death?" I asked. He replied, "The opposite of life". I merely followed the norms as they were laid out to me and did not dwell on their validity.

This is also a book of observations on commonplace things; some well-known, others less so. Why do we do things the way we do? How far can we be objective and neutral, keeping our emotions in check, when we give our opinions on the work done by others, or interpret what we see, hear or read? I have shared my experiences too in some cases, not to make this a memoir or an autobiographical presentation, but to frankly admit my wrongdoings; not to seek an apology but write in the hope that some readers may be able to relate to similar incidents in their lives and think about them.

I have begun to feel very uncomfortable when I see the total trust in the eyes of my young granddaughter when she listens to me trying to respond to her queries. I have become acutely aware that I make all kinds of assumptions while trying to put forward my views. I try to make things as simple as I possibly can, assuming that she would not understand the

complicated issues if I were to go into detail. I sometimes show impatience when the ‘why’ to everything I explain gets followed by yet another avalanche of ‘why.’ I become the wise guy and tell her that she is too young to understand the answers to some simple questions for which I have no true answers. This nips in the bud the curiosity which, if properly encouraged, could have perhaps led to great discoveries. Her inquiries then cease. Am I not doing the same as my parents did to me and which their parents might have done to them? Am I not restricting a young and inquisitive mind from developing its full potential of analytical and logical attributes?

How far back can we trace the origins of the majority of notions, thoughts and beliefs which have influenced us in becoming what we are? We hear many kinds of profound statements every day, most of which have been repeated over generations. I repeated the same things to my children and am trying to repeat them to their children. This is clearly not appropriate for modern times. Civilisation has become an amalgam of different cultures as has never been seen before. There does not appear to be any fundamental divide between the Eastern and Western ways of life any more. Modern youths in the West seem to be as ignorant of their heritage as are those in the East. Have the sublime philosophical traditions of thought of the past ceased to be relevant in modern times? The ubiquitous internet, pop music, cell phones, social media and cheap travel have become the major determinants of our behaviour; all of these have shrunk the world as never before. But we are stuck doing what we have always done. Is this right?

Old taboos are now adopted as natural and normal. New religious groups are being established at a faster rate than ever. It is not difficult to observe that this situation has presented an excuse for religious fundamentalists to justify their actions by propagating half-truths and falsehoods. They seek to recruit a faithful following for enormous self-gain to the detriment of many. This is facilitated by modern means of communication which have also become incredibly fast and effective in disseminating crime, violence and hatred globally.

This is the time, therefore, at which it is extremely important to clearly establish the truth about anything as early as possible, lest a false concept or blatant lie dig deep. Surely it is the right time for us all to ask, “Which is the right way forward, which would benefit us all?”

There are several fables which are meant to show us the right way. Books like Panchatantra and Aesop's Fables are well known; we tell their stories to our children and grandchildren for their amusement, little realising that these may have tremendous impact on the juvenile mind. Another similar guide is an acclaimed book called *Hitopadesha*, in Sanskrit, which can be translated as the 'beneficial discourses'.<sup>1</sup> This book is full of fables to teach five foolish princes the art of statecraft. In one of these stories, one of the princes asks, "Which is the right way to go?" The tutor answers, "On the path traversed by great men." Does this mean that we should follow the tradition set out by our great men and ancestors? Is this appropriate for contemporary society? Or, does this mean that our history, i.e. past events, should be our guide? How can we go about it? The following account may show us a way.

There is a poem composed by an unknown poet who expressed his inadequacy in describing his emotions and the beauty of his beloved. He began by stating that his heart did not have a mouth to speak, the mouth did not have eyes to see, the eyes had no mouth to utter the words and that his pen had neither the eyes to see nor the mouth to speak and, of course, had no heart. Therefore, how could he write a poem accurately describing his feelings or her beauty as they were?

After a few moments of admiring the poet on his novel way of presenting his rhetoric, I began to suspect that he had not really touched her, kissed her, smelt her fragrance or held her close. If he had done so, all his faculties and senses would have had the experience of knowing her, and he would have been able to describe her accurately as the composite picture. Can this inference be applied to us all in everyday life? Do we use all our faculties before making assumptions, speaking our mind, taking action and so on? No, we do not. So how do we determine the right way to act, teach or give advice?

I am reminded of the frequently quoted advice given by Carl Jung; "Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes."<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the advice given by the *Rishis* in India several millennia earlier.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Narayana, *Hitopadesha*, Translated by Haskar. (Penguin Classics, England, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Jung, C.J., *Two essays on analytical psychology*; 2nd edition. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1977), pp 157.

<sup>3</sup> Rig Veda: 3.62.10.

Now that I have time for introspection and no pressures to conform to, or the rigour of earning a living, I can ask myself some questions and try to find their true answers. I find that I need to analyse the overt and the occult influences that have been shaping our lives, our personalities and aspirations, to be able to explain many common things around us which have had an enormous impact on us.

Our world has been dominated by several religious concepts. Understandably, any discussion on the esoteric inevitably encroaches upon one or the other religion. I believe that any religion could be a good thing, as long as it can show the path of truth, benevolence and compassion to the section of humanity which it serves. My enquiries and the quest to find their answers may be disconcerting to many faithful and devout people, and precipitate personal danger for me too. In my defence, I can only submit that I have tried to be as objective and neutral as I can, in the belief that the search for truth is encouraged by all religions.

This book is also an attempt at sharing my personal thoughts on these issues with readers belonging to all cultures and belief systems. I have tried to present my views in simple language and in a conversational style, in order to reach as many readers as possible. References to relevant world literature are given, to illustrate that the traditionally perceived divide between the occident and orient is unscientific, and probably reflects the difficulties in interpretation; there are more similarities than differences in philosophical thinking in general. Unusual Sanskrit words and names are written in italics and are also spelt phonetically to avoid the diacritic marks over or under the Roman alphabet.

I hope that this book will prompt a few readers to sit back and think a little about common issues affecting us all today.

Prasanna Gautam

- 
- i. Mahaabhaarata (Mahabharata, MB) There are three recensions, known as Jaya (8000 verses), Bhaaraata (24000 verses) and Mahaabhaarata (100,000 verses). The first deals mainly with the war and is attributed to KDV. The second is attributed to *Waishampaayana* and the last is credited to *Ugrashrawaa*, both being the pupils of KDV.
  - ii. Puraana (The Puranas): SBM, Vishnu, Naaradiya, Padma, Garuda, Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Vaayu, Skanda, Agni, Brahmaanda, Braamhavaivarta, Maarkendeya, Bhabishya.
  - iii. The Vedas: Rig Veda (RV), Yajur Veda, Saama Veda and Atharva Veda.

- iv. Avesta: The Iranian Gatha is regarded by some scholars to contain parts from the earliest Vedas.
- v. Monier Williams's Sanskrit English Dictionary.

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# INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Wittgenstein wrote that the “World is a totality of facts, not things.” It is this totality of facts that should shape our thoughts and actions. The present book delves freely into the vast data on philosophical thought which has been expressed and collected over several thousand years in different parts of the world. Therefore, a brief synopsis of the known facts is given, to illustrate the reference and context of the subject matters discussed in the chapters that follow. This may assist and guide a reader of any given cultural background.

## **Philosophers through the ages: a brief history, mostly from an Eastern perspective**

The thinking man has always tried to understand myriad things; events, emotions and aspirations which affect us all. These thinkers are generally known as philosophers. These men who think about life, reality of the universe, codes of conduct and the values to be followed in a humane society, and those who deal with the subtle aspects of religion, are all desperately trying to find the same end point which makes everything clear, transparent and relevant to most of us. We are aware that this state is unattainable because the acquisition of knowledge is an unending stepwise progression. Hence the quest continues, from the dawn of civilisation up to the present.

Human civilisation developed in many different areas, separated by distance and language. We had not been able to appreciate until a few centuries ago, that the philosophers other than those around us had also thought about similar issues and, surprisingly, reached comparable conclusions. This realisation of a global concordance of thoughts and concepts has been possible due to advances in science and technology. We now have easy access to the recorded thoughts (data) of the past six millennia.

There are records of several philosophers in the ancient Aryan (*Aryan*) civilisation. They were known as the Rishis, the ‘*mantra drastaa*’ (those who saw the formulae). They instructed what they had realised to their pupils, who memorised them and passed them on verbatim



to successive generations. These were called the *mantra* and the collection is recorded as the *Veda*. The first compilation, known as the Rig Veda, originating in circa 4000 BC, is frequently quoted in this book.

This system continued until several *Upanishads* were also produced. The philosophy of Yoga began to develop in about 2000 BC. At least six philosophical schools began to proliferate over the following centuries. Mahavira in the 6th century BC, who taught the ideals of non-violence and pacifism, and Buddha, a little later, proposed great philosophical ideas which culminated in the establishment of Jainism and Buddhism.

Tantrik (*Taantrik*) philosophy developed in the 3rd century BC, in India and has spread far and wide. This is a system that shows a man how to become capable of absorbing and harnessing the infinite energy of the universe, through a dozen neural centres within his body. Many modern Gurus and Lamas practice and teach this system for various uses, as well as abuses.

Contemporary to the Aryan culture, the Semites too had produced several philosophers. Most of them limited themselves to the deliberations within Judaism. Moses and Abraham were acclaimed as philosophers in the very distant past; it was not until Jesus Christ that a new philosophical thinking emerged from the fringes of Judaism. Today, the latter is followed by a third of the world's population. Judaeus was recognised as a great philosopher in the first century AD. It was in 1300 AD that Gersonides proposed the immortality of soul and also stated that reason could answer all philosophical questions.

The ancient Egyptians became accomplished mathematicians, astronomers and architects, but clung firmly to the concept of the afterlife which consumed their passions and resources, leaving the pyramids and the ruins as the mausoleum of their past achievements.

Chinese philosophical thought began to be formally produced and debated in around 600 BC. The famous among the Chinese philosophers are Confucius, Laozi, the founder of Taoism, and Dong Zhoushu, who put forward the concepts of the *Yin and Yang*. This is a system of duality in everything where opposing forces are believed to be mutually dependent to function in unison as a whole unit. Most Chinese philosophical thought is humanist in nature, unlike the Indian and Greek philosophies which emphasise metaphysical aspects.

Ancient Greek philosophers also surfaced around 600 BC. There are many who have profoundly influenced western civilisation. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and Pythagoras have become household names. It was Aristotle who said, “We must no more ask whether the soul and body are one than ask whether the wax and the figure impressed on it are the same.”

The Roman philosopher, Ptolemy, put the Earth firmly at the centre of the universe in 150 AD where it remained until Copernicus, born in 1473 AD, proposed otherwise. The philosopher and mathematician, Aryabhata (*Aaryabhaata*), in the 4th century AD calculated the diameter of the Earth to be equivalent to about 40,000 km. The prophet Mohammad brought about Islam in the 7th century AD. Several other civilisations developed, for example, among the Incans, the Mayans and the Aborigines, which flourished for several centuries before reaching their nadirs.

Galileo, born in 1564 AD, was put on house arrest for life for openly supporting Copernicus. Eventually, all those within the Church had to believe that the Earth moved around the sun. Martin Luther profoundly influenced the Christian world, heralding the Renaissance. The pioneering works of Newton, Kepler, Einstein and others, have taken us to the age of quantum mechanics and physics, and propelled man into space. This knowledge has enabled us to design, manufacture and use lethal nuclear weapons with which to destroy ourselves. Mohandas Gandhi and Bertrand Russel influenced political thinking in India and the world at large. The brave new world imagined by Aldous Huxley to come about in 2540 AD has already begun, as shown by the advances in genetic engineering heralded by the discoveries of Watson and Crick.

The intellectual world has come full circle from the blessed *Purusha* of the Rig Veda to the M theory and Super Consciousness proposed by Stephen Hawking, Michio Kaku (Nobel laureate and quantum physicist), Abdul Kalam Azad (former president of India, nuclear scientist and father of Indian nuclear arms) and others. The building blocks of the universe, i.e. the fermions and the bosons, closely correspond to the three *gunas* and the *pancha-tan-maatra* (*pancha*, five; *tan*, continuous; *maatra*, particles, i.e. five sequential particles) visualised by *Rishi Maitreya*, in about 1200 BC—as documented by Veda Vyaasa in *Srimad Bhaagavata Maahaapuraana* (SBM) Chapter 10.

We now live in a digital world, exploring new planets and reaching new horizons. Our ‘old’ world is changing rapidly and crying out for vitalising new concepts for the preservation of our civilisation. Although

many of the philosophical thought and values expressed over the millennia continue to be cherished, some are beginning to lose their weight and are not being replaced by appropriate ones. This is creating increasing unrest, polarisation and violence among human beings, as never seen before. Much thinking is needed to chart a new course in order for us to survive.

### ***Kaala: The circle of time***

According to the Vedic mantras, first documented around 4000 BC, the universe was always there, just as a circle which has neither a beginning nor an end. This has been implied in the concept of time without a beginning or an end. It is called the *kaala chakra*, (*kaala*, time; *chakra*, circle). This is described in the Bhagavad Gita (BG) when Lord Krishna says, “*kaalo asmi*” – ‘I am time’ – while showing his *Vishwaroopa* (the universal form) where simultaneous and incessant formations and transformations of everything are occurring continuously.<sup>4</sup> It can be likened to the concept of zero- nothing and also infinite at the same time.

The SBM, a great mythological and philosophical epic of the Hindus, proposes that ‘time’ originates from each ray of the sun. It begins as *Paramaanu* (the ultimate unit). Two Paramaanus make an *Anu*; three make a *Trasareynu*; three *Trasareynu* make one *Truti*; 100 *Trutis* make one *Weda*; three *Wedas* make a *Lawa*; three *Lawas* make a *Nimesha*; three *Nimeshas* make a moment and five moments, one *Kaastha*; 15 *Kaasthas* make one *Laghu*; 15 *Laghus* make one *Naadi*; two *Naadis* make a *Muhurta*; 30 *Muhurtas* make one night; 15 nights make a *Pakshya* (fortnight); two fortnights make one month and two months make one *Ritu* (season).

Three seasons make one *Ayana*; two *Ayanas* make one year, which is equivalent to one cosmic night; 360 cosmic nights make one cosmic year; 360 cosmic years make one *Yuga*; four times 70 *Yugas* make one *Manwantara*; 2000 *Manwantaras* make one *Kalpa* on the earth and is known as *Aharnish* for the Cosmos; 100 *Kalpas* are known as two *Paraardhas*. The sum of all these concepts of measurements of time represents one *Paramaanu* for the *Parabrahma*, i.e. the primordial source (the ultimate reality). In other words, ‘the nano x nano fraction of a moment’ is all that there is in reality which has neither a beginning nor an end.

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<sup>4</sup> BG: 11.32

Since formation and transformations are continuously and simultaneously occurring within each Paramaanu, this process is called the Circle of Time or Kaala and should not be confused with a Tantrik method of a special neural stimulation, the Kaala Chakra, which was developed much later.

Vedic mathematics used these measurements of time in astronomical calculations. The concept of zero (*Shunya*) probably developed in the first millennium AD and was used in mathematical calculations. This was subsequently explained and expanded by the Islamic scholars, circa 900 AD.

These theories on the measurement of time are similar to the mind-boggling modern concept of 'light years' which is another way of coupling time with the rays of the sun.

### **Yugas: The eras**

The Puraanas are the complex collection of Indian mythology, history, and philosophical discourses which propose that the earth transforms itself cyclically. Each cycle has four eras or Yugas, at the end of which there is total dissolution, i.e. the *Pralaya* and the beginning of another cycle. The current cycle is estimated to be the eighth, and the *Kali Yuga* we live in began about 4000 years ago. It is said to have about 6000 years remaining until its next transformation.

The four eras or Yugas are *Satya*, *Treytaa*, *Dwaapara* and *Kali*. Each Yuga is supposed to last for several thousands of years and the cycle to end with the *Pralaya*, similar to the 'Biblical Apocalypse', when everything on this planet will be destroyed and a new cycle will begin. The description of the last *Pralaya* was that the whole world was submerged in water, like the biblical flood. I suspect that a great natural calamity such as a tsunami must have occurred, destroying most things and lives at the time. Many new mountains and land masses might have surfaced, giving the impression of new creation. I fail to understand how very ancient knowledge could have survived and continued otherwise, if everything was indeed destroyed earlier without a trace.

It is likely that the various Yugas symbolically refer to the development of a human society, perhaps as follows:

A new civilisation begins with good will, joint ownership and peace within its community, as depicted in the *Satya Yuga*. Subsequently, when

selfishness begins to creep in a little, some discord also begins to manifest, heralding the Treyya Yuga, although society continues to function ideally and in a stable manner most of the time. When further deterioration reaches unacceptable levels causing turmoil, violence and conflict, it signifies the beginning of Dwaapara Yuga. This culminates in the Kali Yuga where the undesirable elements dominate and chaos finally ensues, leading to the dissolution or extinction of an entire civilisation. A similar concept was proposed by Hesiod, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. He had postulated five ages: the golden, the silver, the bronze, the heroic and the iron. It is interesting to note that this concept was beautifully put forward by Ovid, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, in *Metamorphosis*.

Then a new civilisation will emerge once again, thus continuing the cycle. The biblical concept of the New Jerusalem also indicates this possibility. Anthropological studies of extinct ancient societies would support this theory.

## **Guna: the nature or characteristic of everything**

These are Vedic concepts to denote the nature or qualities of all things in this universe. There are, primarily, three Gunas namely the *Satya*, the *Raja* and the *Tama*. These three are the main ingredients which make up the universe. The *Nyaaya* School of philosophy subsequently suggested 24 types of qualities of all the things in existence.

The Satya guna refers to the truth or the reality in anything. This is extrapolated as *Saatwik* to denote a pure, benevolent, charitable and divine quality. This term is also used to classify food, drinks, thoughts, activity and life itself. In addition, the Satya guna is commonly considered as the positive life force.

The Raja guna is the brilliant characteristic which describes that which is obvious (*raja* in Sanskrit means 'that which shines') to all. This also denotes the neutrality between the Satya and the Tama characteristics in matter or thought. Its extrapolation, the *Raajasic*, signifies this neutral characteristic in any activity, food, thought or material. The visible universe is raajasic.

The Tama guna refers to the dark or negative characteristic of matter and thought. Its extrapolation, known as the *Taamasik*, is used to identify the hidden, the unknown, the death, the violence, the hatred and all which are undesirable. This too is an essential component of this universe.

The Rig Veda describes a few mantras about Rishi Vishnu who was able to transcend these three qualities, thus attaining a state of *nirguni* (beyond any characteristic where nothing matters). This has since become a legend which relates how Rishi Vishnu was the first to overcome heaven (satya), the earth (raja) and the underworld (tama) in just three steps. Hence, the Hindus revere Vishnu as God and several men who have reached that state have become known as his subsequent incarnations (*avatar*).

## Upanishads

The Upanishads are a group of Indian philosophical expositions. The literal translation of the word, as given by Max Mueller, suggests that it means ‘devotedly sitting down near’, thus implying an intimate discourse or discussion on various philosophical matters. The Indian Sanskritists claim the same root of the word ‘*sad*’ in Sanskrit to mean a loosening, movement or destruction, implying annihilation of ignorance.

An unfortunate tradition has developed in which the Upanishads have been equated with the scriptures of the Hindus. It is extremely important to be aware that many words have changed their meaning or connotations over the ages. This is particularly important during translations and transliterations into other languages from Sanskrit. For example, *brahma*: *brahmaa*, *brahman*, *braahmana*, *braamhanam*, *brahmaanaama*, have been interpreted in different ways, and when their plurality is denoted in English, the meanings change further. So also, *aatma*, *aatmaa*, *aatman*, *aatmanam*, *aatmaanam*, *etc.* have been varyingly interpreted by English translators.

Careful studies of the contents of the Upanishads reveal that rather than being the ‘faith’, which is the hallmark of religion, they are a repository of many questions, anecdotes, philosophical concepts and aspirations of the inquisitive mind since ancient times. These are applicable to any religious following and do not specifically contradict any theological doctrine that I have read in the Bible, the Koran or the Buddhist literature. Some Upanishads, e.g. *Mundaka* and *Swetasvatara*, mix up pure philosophical ideas with sectarian thoughts too.

The knowledge obtained from the Upanishads is called *Brahma Vidya*, or Vedaanta and explained by S. Radhakrishnan as ‘the science of the Absolute.’ There are many Upanishads: many are short texts in prose. Careful studies also reveal that there are several instances when conflicting

and diverse views are expressed within the same context and with the same reference. This suggests that many ancient texts have been modified over the millennia. These kinds of additions are also evident in different publications of the Bible and other ancient documents.

The commonality seen among the Upanishads is that they all relate to the original Vedic mantras containing most of the concepts put forward as formulae by the Rishis. Some scholars have tried to pair a specific Upanishad to a Veda but this is an unproductive exercise. Similarly, attempts have been made to identify the probable dates of composition of the Upanishads. It is likely that the verbal tradition had continued for a very long time before someone decided to edit the verses and give it a name. Western scholars believe them to have originated in the pre Buddhist era, probably 800 or 900 BC, but scholars in India believe them to originate earlier than 1900 BC. I find this amusing since a glance at the contents of the texts of the Upanishads reveal them to contain ideas that emanated from the Vedic mantras of ancient times. Hence, it is unscientific to assign any specific period to them. Moreover, many of the personalities found in the Upanishads were also the seers i.e. the Rishis in the Vedas.

I have expressed my conclusions which are based upon my understanding and research which are by no means the most comprehensive. Therefore, I haven't the authority to question the validity of the suppositions made by the others. Since serious scientific research on this subject has not been undertaken, suppositions shall continue to prevail. It is, however, commonly agreed that there are about a dozen major Upanishads which represent the vast majority of Upanishadic thought. These are known as *Isha, Kena, Katha, Swetasvatara, Mundaka, Brihadaraanyaka, Maandukya, Prashna, Maitraayani, Chaandogya, Taittiriya and Aitareeya Upanishads*. There are several minor Upanishads e.g. *Paramhamsopanishad, Aatmanopanishad, Tejabindupanishad, Sarvopanishad, Brahmopanishad, Aaruneyi, Kaivalopanishad* etc., numbering about 200.

The important discussions in the Upanishads relate to: *aatmaa* (the soul), *brahma* (the spirit) and the self (the life); *vidya* vs *avidya* (ritualistic conduct vs meditation; knowledge vs ignorance); *praana* (the life force); specific forms and methods of meditation; states or levels of consciousness; consciousness and brahma; evolution of brahma through the five elements up to food and the human form; ultimate bliss or happiness; *shikshya* (teaching good values); one god manifesting in many forms; *tat twam asi* (reality, i.e. that thou are); *sansaara vrikshya* (the

upside down tree of the world); *sadvidya and upaasana* (knowledge and meditation), austerity, righteousness and duty, etc.

Some of the frequently heard and quoted Upanishadic teachings and aspirations are as follows:

- i. *Between a teacher and pupil:*  
 May we both be protected  
 May we both be nourished  
 May we both become courageous  
 May we both be enlightened  
 May we not fall out with each other.
- ii. *Teacher to the pupil at the end of his tutelage:*  
 Speak the truth, practice righteousness  
 Do not speak truth unkindly  
 Treat mother, father, guest and your teacher as god.
- iii. *A common prayer for all:*  
 Lead me from the unreal to the real  
 from darkness to light  
 from death to immortality.

## **The Big Bang, Om and M theories of Creation**

The Big Bang is often understood to mean the precise time of the origin of our universe, estimated about 13.8 billion years ago. It is supposed that the universe began as infinitesimally small. But this is a hypothesis, using various principles of physics, which was put forward by Professor Stephen Hawking and his colleague, Dr Penrose. This has been widely accepted and believed by many. However, I have my doubts.

We have seen the forces of gravity and understand the theory of relativity. I have no idea if these principles of physics will be valid at zero gravity and at a static point, since the supposition is that the starting point was an infinitesimal something which probably had zero mass and no motion. Hence, I find this difficult to accept as the full explanation of the beginning of the universe.

The Big bang is often equated with ‘The Word’ in the Bible, and the ‘Om’ in the Indian philosophical discussions. One needs to be aware, however, that there could not have been a ‘Bang’ of any kind at that point



of creation, if indeed such a point did exist. The pedantic arguments suggest the ultra, subsonic or supersonic sounds which could have produced the Big Bang. But the cosmic, and other, sounds come from the cosmos and not from a static point, variously referred to as a very dense particle or a wave prior to its formation.

Perhaps these doubts have led the quantum theorists to suggest ‘The Grand Design of Creation’ when all the theories of physics fuse into one another, resulting in the self-creating perpetual universe. This is referred to as the M Theory. The concept of Om is similar. The ancient Rishis had already provided this theory many years ago in the Rig Veda<sup>5</sup> which Vivekananda elaborated upon eloquently in the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, USA, in 1893. We appear to have come full circle!

It is interesting to observe that the conclusions of great scholars and scientists have begun to converge on the topic of the starting point of our existence. This is certainly a great testament to man’s quest to seek the ultimate truth.

## **Mahabharata (MB)**

This is an epic tome, containing 18 books, written in Sanskrit by Krishna Dwaipaayana Vyaasa (KDV). The plot is fascinating as it contains everything that one can imagine, from the sublime to the base, and all things in between which are related to human behaviour, emotion and philosophy.

In brief, this is mainly a narration of two sets of feuding cousins for a kingdom in ancient northern India. This may correspond to the ‘Heroic Age’ as described by Hesiod. This resulted in a war where millions died. The great discourse given by Krishna to the warrior Prince Arjuna is known all over the world as Gita (*Geeta*, BG). This is regarded as a distillate of the Rig Veda (RV), the foundation of the ancient Aryan (*Aryan*) civilisation. There is also a great discourse given by Bhishma (*Bheeshma*) to Prince Yudhishthira, which deals with righteousness and moral living.

The plot very cleverly distorts the sequence of events of different eras, draws freely from historical events and fictionalises them, and thus weaves a most intriguing narrative. The scale to which morality is lacking—

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<sup>5</sup> RV: 6.75

particularly among the Brahmins and the ruling classes—described in the Mahabharata, is horrifying even today. There are many clues which suggest that MB is a work of fiction, but most people in India regard this to be an historic and religious document. Serious and purely academic research on this epic is yet to be conducted. Readers are advised to read the short abridged Mahabharata by C. Rajagopalachari in English. Although an abridged translation, *The Mahabharata* by John D. Smith, is a much larger and more informative work.

It is thought that this was written in around 1200 BC, although the astronomical calculations of physicists at NASA suggest some of the natural events described in the book to have occurred in around 3000 BC. This may correspond to the period of The Indus Valley Civilisation. This can perhaps allow us to speculate that the Mahabharata war was based loosely on the historical and infamous *Dasaraja Yuddha* described in the Rig Veda. This was the very bloody war which the Aryans had to fight for 40 years with ten local kings who had unsuccessfully opposed their King Sudasa and block his eastward conquests.<sup>6</sup>

### **The story of two frogs: Illustrating religious rivalry**

The following is based on a story told by Swaami Vivekananda to the delegates at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

There lived a frog in a well, happy and content. He was alone, independent and was not challenged or threatened by anybody. There was sufficient food and insects for him to feed. He would jump from one point of the well to the opposite spot and be pleased with himself. All was well.

A toad from a neighbouring lake accidentally fell into the same well, alarming the frog. The toad was trying to get out of the well but it was a hard struggle.

The frog saw this. He realised that the intruder looked like him but was of different colour. He challenged him. The toad told him that he had fallen into the well accidentally and would get out as soon as he could. The frog was pacified. He asked the toad where he had come from and why he was of different colour.

“I live in the sea, so I look different,” the toad replied. “I am really like you,” he commented further, to assure the frog.

“What is a sea?” the frog asked.

“Oh! It is a huge area full of water,” said the toad.

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<sup>6</sup> RV: 6. 75

“What is huge?” the frog asked.

“It is really very big,” said the toad.

The frog jumped a distance and asked, “As big as this?”

“No, much bigger,” said the toad.

The frog jumped higher and further and asked, “As big as this?”

“No, much bigger,” said the toad.

The frog then jumped to the opposite point in the well. Triumphant, he said, “It could not be as big as that, surely?”

The toad replied, “No, much bigger.”

The frog got very angry and called him a liar and a cheat. “No sea can be larger than my well,” he declared, and was preparing to attack the toad. Luckily, the toad was able to jump out of the well at that time and make his escape.

## Abbreviations and phonetic spellings

Aryan, aaryan (Aryan)

Before Christian Era, BCE, syn. BC

Bhaagavata (Bhagavat)

Brihadaraanyaka (Brihadaranyak)

Dasaraaja (Dasaraja)

Ganges (Gangaa)

Geetaa (Bhagavad Gita,) BG

Mahaabhaarata (Mahabharat) MB

Puraana (Purana)

Raamaayana (Ramayan)

Rig Veda, Rig; RV

Saama (Sama)

Shaastra (Sastra)

Shraddha (shra-ddhaa)

Shraddha (Shraa-ddha)

Sootra (Sutra)

Swaamiji (Swamiji)

Upanishad (Upanisad)

Vishwaroopa (Viswarupa)

Vyaasa (Vyas)

# CHAPTER ONE

## SEX: HOW TO BEGIN AND WHEN TO END

“Campus rape happens in the UK, too” was the headline in *The Huffington Post* on 29th August, 2016. The victim, Nathalie Greenfield, a student at Cambridge University, had described her horrific ordeal. This reminded me of the news of the rape of a young medical student in Delhi<sup>1</sup> and other incidents.<sup>2</sup> Has any nation really thought seriously about the main reason(s) why heinous sexual offences are carried out at home and abroad? Is our denial of discussing sex in a comprehensive and open manner in our homes, educational establishments, our parliaments, places of worship and civic gatherings, the root of this problem? Is sex education the answer? Nathalie Greenfield had written “...education is key to reducing sexual assault and dispelling rape culture in UK universities...” Should each of us do something about this? What can we possibly do? What had I done? This jolted my memory.

The reflections triggered by the rape incident took me back to Kathmandu in 1972, when Dr Baral and I were commissioned to write a book on sex education in the Nepali language. The publishers had decided the title of the book would be *Youn: Tapainle jaanna chaahekaa Kura*.<sup>3</sup> It could be translated as ‘Sex: Things you wished to know.’ This was a blatant attempt to make the readers believe it to be a Nepali translation of the international best seller ‘Sex: all that you wanted to know but were afraid to ask.’<sup>4</sup> This was definitely not a translation of that famous book. The jointly authored book was published in 1974 and sold like hot cakes. I did not have a copy and was delighted to find one in my mother’s house in Kathmandu, when we put it up for sale after her death a few years ago. It

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<sup>1</sup> “Delhi Gang rape”, The *BBC*, [www.bbc.co.uk/magazine-31698154](http://www.bbc.co.uk/magazine-31698154). 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Profiles: “Delhi gang rapists”, The *BBC*, 20th Dec 2015; [www.bbc.co.uk/world/asia/indi](http://www.bbc.co.uk/world/asia/indi).

<sup>3</sup> Reuben D., *Everything you always wanted to know about sex but were afraid to ask*. (McKay publishers, 1969).

is a standard-sized paperback. Bookworms had feasted on its cover and a few pages, but it was largely intact. I had brought it back to Aberdeen and forgotten all about it until now. I rapidly scanned its pages.

I was glad to notice that we had indeed provided all factual answers correctly and often humorously. The information on all physical aspects of sex, ranging from foreplay to the actual acts and its possible consequences, had been given. It was more of a manual for training on sex than a book on holistic sex education as suggested by Nathalie Greenfield. We had not realised 45 years ago that there were big differences between the factual information on the physical aspects of sex and holistic education on this subject. We had thought that we were providing sex education with our book. Unfortunately, this ignorance has persisted: mainly factual information relating to the physical aspects of sex is being provided in most schools today. I find that we do not comprehensively tackle the issue of sex education in the UK. Clearly, this is far from satisfactory.

We, as parents, consciously avoid discussing these issues openly with our children. The teachers in our schools teach the basic facts but are unsure of how to match the information to the age of their pupils appropriately. We agree that sex education should be widely available, but there is still a debate about whether the parents and/or the schools should be responsible. We are also undecided on determining the right age for children to begin this learning. It may be fair to say that this reticence in delivering well-rounded and accurate education on matters of sex is one of the major causes of social discord and violence that we are witnessing today. The statistics on teenage pregnancy and termination, the divorce rates, instances of domestic violence, sexual offences, child abuse and the exposition of bizarre sexual practices make for depressing and alarming reading. I notice a similar situation in India, particularly among the educated high-earning households, who have almost wholly adopted a western lifestyle.

As new parents, we follow what we learned from our parents - if we learned anything at all. As children and adolescents, we learned about 'the birds and the bees' mostly from our peers, siblings, neighbours, movies, television shows, newspapers or magazines. The curiosity about the physical act and the promise of the pleasure that it guaranteed to provide, were sufficient enough for us to access information from any source. We never objectively thought about, or tried to ascertain, the validity of these secrets. I did not receive any sex education from my parents. I only became aware during my medical school days that I had accumulated

several erroneous notions on the subject. Likewise, I didn't give any sex education to my children. I was embarrassed to talk to them about sex. I remember explaining to them in detail about sexually transmitted diseases, but only haltingly about contraception. I remember both of them hastily telling me that they had already been taught about these things in school. They too were obviously equally embarrassed to talk about sex to their parents. Both of us were relieved to have finished with this issue right there.

Two common causes of marital breakdowns are pre- and extramarital sex. This is due to the enormous sanctity accorded by religion to an ordinary and common act of copulation. Should this biological impulse and a base physical act be allowed to destroy several lives by causing marital breakdowns? Would it be desirable for our religious leaders to consider an alternative to sexual fidelity as the foundation of marriage? Is it possible to form a strong foundation of married life on something more esoteric, sublime and tangible? We all know that marriage is a social contract, a compromise and an act of profound love. Should all these components be allowed to be destroyed by an act of impulsive animal instinct?

If an alternative or substitute could be proposed and agreed upon, then perhaps there would be no great heartaches, disruption in the family, and domestic violence associated with marital breakdowns due to sexual infidelity. This, however, does not mean giving license to becoming licentious and recklessly debauched. After all, for the vast majority, an act of sexual intercourse with one's spouse reinforces the love and tenderness between the couple. Religions demand sexual chastity, and restrict physical acts of sex to the purposes of procreation. This is obviously an impossible route which only few may follow. Religion deals harshly with its savants for indulging in prohibited sexual practices. Should the religious savants not be judged by assessing their pious lifestyles, demonstrable compassion and selfless service? Celibacy has been breached by many who have taken this vow and have been chastised severely if caught, with no benefit to anyone.

Sex is extremely important in our lives. For most of us, marriage and reproduction are the two most pertinent issues related to sex. But learned psychologists tell us that there is much more to sex than just these two aspects. They tell us that it is the main driving force which shapes our personality and guides our behaviour. To quote the famous Havelock Ellis: "Sex penetrates the whole person; a man's sexual constitution is a part of

his general constitution.”<sup>5</sup> Freud believed that infantile sexuality, which he termed the Oedipus complex, determined libido and adult sexuality. More recently, psychologists have developed novel theories about sexual expression. They have designed scientific methods of psychoanalysis and psychosexual counselling for many abnormal behaviours and personality traits. Repressed sexuality is seen to be expressed in schizophrenia, in psychopathic personality disorders and in many divorces.

It is an inescapable fact that sex is essential and deserves consideration with seriousness and an open mind. But we have not prioritised this issue in our civilisation. The Guardian, on 1st January 2017, began with the headline: ‘Sex and relationship advice from the Guardian: sexual health matters, sexuality, information and sex tips all discussed.’ This was followed by several advertisements about various books on sex, whose titles did not inspire confidence in me to believe in their authenticity. It appeared to be a blatant commercial scam. But it is not only the newspapers which promote this kind of hype and trash. The cosmetic industry, the fashion industry, the Yoga and Tantra industry, television chat shows, cinema, music and other branches of the media industry appear to be very lucrative enterprises by selling sex and sex products, promoting weird and intriguing sexuality globally and thus generating unimaginable incomes. Cumulatively, they are causing increasing damage to the younger generation. All these are so high profile that it is impossible not to notice sexual references in products and the media.

Children in their formative, tender years also notice references to sex. I have seen children as young as three and four indulging in sexual play, mimicking daddies and mummies! Carl Jung noticed this tendency in children as far back as the last century and commented: “Children are educated by what the grown-up is and not by his talk.”<sup>6</sup>

It is we, the adults, who have to alter our behaviour. We need to re-examine our attitudes and values, and to ask ourselves whether we wish to prevent the adults of tomorrow, i.e. our children, from plunging into the same sort of world as the one in which we are now living. The following examples give us a flavour of our current world:

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<sup>5</sup> Ellis, H., *Psychology of sex*. (William Heinemann medical books ltd. London, fifth impression, 1939), pp14.

<sup>6</sup> Jung, C.G., *Collected papers on analytical psychology*. Dr Constance C Long. (Balliere Tindall and Cox, 1916).

**Sex Slavery:** This includes all kinds of activities including child prostitution, human trafficking, white slavery, forced prostitution, etc. There can only be estimates for this kind of data. These practices have been recorded in almost all the countries of the world, including the UK, the USA, India, China, Japan, Germany and Russia. The estimate provided by UNICEF was 1.5 million worldwide in 2001. This has enormously increased since then.<sup>7</sup>

**Rape:** This is an under-reported crime. Victims often suffer too much shame and guilt to go to the authorities to report their suffering. In spite of this, the figures are staggering.

Approximately 8,500 women and 1200 men are raped in England and Wales every year.<sup>8</sup> Writing on rape statistics in India, *Firstpost*, on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2013, reported that out of more than 68,000 reported cases of rape, only 16,000 perpetrators were convicted there. According to NCRB,<sup>9</sup> there has been a slight reduction of reported rape in India but the overall reading is very alarming. More than three million women are abused every year.

In India, 93 women are raped every day, as reported by *The Times of India* on 1st July 2014. RAINN<sup>10</sup> reports from the USA show that currently, one American is sexually assaulted there every 98 seconds and, of those, every eight minutes the victim is a child.

Sweden has the highest rate of rape in Europe; the UN reported 69 cases per 100,000 of the population in 2011 (*BBC News*, 15th Sept 2012). According to rape crisis advocates in Sweden, one third of Swedish women have been sexually assaulted by the time they turn 20.

Belgium has shown a 20% rise in the thousands of rapes perpetrated there.

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<sup>7</sup> UNICEF report on sexual exploitation; <https://www.unicef.org/newsline>.

<sup>8</sup> "UK rape statistics", *Rape Crisis*, <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/statistics.php>. (Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2017).

<sup>9</sup> "Rape statistics in India," *Firstpost*, 3rd February, 2013, [www.firstpost.com/india/more-than-68000-rape-cases-from-2009-11-but-only-16000-convicted-611676.html](http://www.firstpost.com/india/more-than-68000-rape-cases-from-2009-11-but-only-16000-convicted-611676.html). (Accessed on 23rd October 2017).

<sup>10</sup> RAINN (rape, abuse, incest national network) reports from USA.



In South Africa, the proportion of adult men who have raped is between 28% and 37%, while 7% to 9% have engaged in multiple perpetrator rape.<sup>11</sup>

**Divorces:** The number of divorces in England and Wales in 2010 was 119,589; an increase of 4.5% since 2009. The divorce rate rose to 11.1 per 1000 marriages in 2010, although the rate of marriages per 1000 has decreased, due to the growth in popularity of living together outside of marriage. The number of divorces in 2014 was 111,169 and the rate was highest among men aged 45 to 49 and women aged 40 to 44. Same sex marriage was legalised in 2014 but no official records are available as yet. There is no official estimate of the broken ‘co-habitation’ relationships and the number of changed partners, but we frequently hear about them.

22% of marriages in 1970 had ended in divorce by 1985 in England and Wales (Ref, statistical bulletin 2013 and 2014; Office for National Statistics).

India has no national record on divorces. It has six family courts to grant divorces. Divorce rates have increased in these courts, by up to 350% in Kolkata. In Mumbai, the number of divorces rose from 5345 in 2014 to 11,667 by November of 2015 (as reported in *Hindustantimes* e paper in January 2016).<sup>12</sup> The mockery of the custom of saying ‘Talaaq, Talaaq, Talaaq’ (three times) by Muslim men (not women) to end the marriage arbitrarily and one-sidedly, without any safe legal recourse to the wife and child, is another mind boggling practice which is not usually reported.

In the USA, the divorce rate is 3.6 per 1000 of the population. 22% of all men and 21% of all women have been divorced at some point in their lives. Currently, 11% of men and 10% of women there are divorcees.<sup>13</sup>

Europe and the rest of the world have similarly depressing statistics. Sex-related crimes against humanity appear to be rising exponentially in

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<sup>11</sup> Laccino, L., “Top 5 countries with the highest rates of rape”, *International Business Times*, Crime, London, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> “Divorce rates in India,” *Hindustantimes* e paper, 4<sup>th</sup> Jan 2016, [www.hindustantimes.com/sex-and-relationships-how-and-why-number-of-young-indian-couples-getting-divorced-has-risen-sharply/-/story-mEuaEoviW40d6sILZbGu6j.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/sex-and-relationships-how-and-why-number-of-young-indian-couples-getting-divorced-has-risen-sharply/-/story-mEuaEoviW40d6sILZbGu6j.html). (Accessed on 23rd October 2017).

<sup>13</sup> The public Discourse, [www.thepublicdiscourse.com](http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com). (Accessed in December 2015).

tandem with the industries which have grown through selling sexuality and sex products. The current inquiry on the sexual abuse of children in Australia is a testament to the fact that heinous predators are often cloaked in the garb of benevolence and religion. These predators might themselves have been victims of child abuse. Sex tourism in Southeast Asia continues unabated.

It is interesting to note that many laws and legislations have been passed in every nation to tackle this issue but, apart from punishing a few guilty perpetrators, no real reduction in these crimes has taken place. We no longer live in isolated enclaves where only one religion prevails. We live in a multicultural society, and we and our children have to learn to adjust accordingly. But the obvious differences, which are openly and proudly demonstrated, are making children and many parents very confused and unsure of the right ways to behave. Let us examine a few aspects of our daily adult lives where sexuality forms a major part, either directly or indirectly:

**Dressing:** This varies from covering our bodies completely or exposing as much as possible—covering just enough to avoid police arrest.

**Alcohol Consumption:** This varies from being an essential component of a religious event to being totally taboo for some, or partially prohibited to others. It is acceptable for some adults but not until the age of 18. Clubs, pubs and other places are convenient places for sexual pursuits.

**Education:** An astonishing variety abounds: single sex schools, co-educational schools, private schools, state schools, comprehensive schools, faith schools, Sunday schools, Madrasas and home-schooling. Some receive homework, others do not; some have to pass their grades and others do not. This is where exposure to sexuality influences juvenile minds.

**Adolescence:** Going out on a date with the opposite sex: from being encouraged by parents to being totally prohibited, and always chaperoned, or even frowned upon and discouraged by others.

**Premarital sex:** Taboo for some, acceptable and/or the expected norm for others.

**Virginity:** Greatly valued by many parents but only among the girls; desirable for a few and not important for others in younger age groups.

- Marriages:** Monogamous for many, but polygamous (and polyandrous) systems also exist side by side; legally acceptable for some, illegal for others.
- Chastity in marriage:** Extremely important to most but secretly violated by many.
- Homosexuality:** Condemned and abhorred by all the scriptures; permissible by law in some countries only.
- Rewards:** Virgins in heaven (not stated whether it implies to both genders); milk and honey and all sorts of carnal pleasures in paradise; rebirth as richer and more beautiful.
- Punishment:** Usually very severe for females; hell for all non-believers irrespective of their religion; none, for the atheist, if he/she can get away without being caught.

The differences enumerated above are only some examples, and by no means an exhaustive list of different practices and values seen in any modern society. The immature and inquisitive minds of the young are continuously bombarded by advertisements, songs, sitcoms and gossip among peers; the behaviour of parents and siblings also exert a greater influence on the young than we may realise. In addition, parental and peer pressure, issues of gender equality and drug usage can cause adverse effects. These illustrate the conflicting influences with which a child grows up and becomes an adult in our society. It is no wonder that a significant number of these children become adults who are delinquents, psychopaths, sexual perverts and are unable to maintain relationships. Many of them have themselves been abused by their own parents, the church, other clergy and/or their teachers.

How can we provide a safe and homogenous environment for the younger generation? We need to find a way of tackling sex in a manner which enhances its sublime potential, balanced with honest passions and pleasure. Let sex be the frequently talked-about issue, motivating us to recognise our own sexuality, its control and applications. Is this not the essential duty of an advanced civilisation, in order to reduce sex slavery, child abuse, rape and other 'crimes of passion'? If we believe our learned sociologists and psychologists when they postulate that a balanced and expressive sex-life in an individual reduces the instinct to commit sexual offences, we have to re-examine our traditional habits and deeply held values to facilitate this change.

Our lives are profoundly influenced by our religions which have determined our cultural practices and social norms. We seek guidance on ethical issues from our elders, religious leaders and our teachers. Unfortunately, these leaders often appear to be inflexible and dogmatic about their creed. It is generally understood that they should be the responsible adults to steer our societies to greater heights. However, they are unlikely to show their leadership skills in this matter. Their lives are secure and they probably see no reason to trouble themselves, except occasionally by showing some lip service. I believe that they must take their responsibility seriously.

Pope Francis said in 2014, as quoted by the CNN on 27th February 2017, said “I beg your forgiveness, too, for the sins of omission on the part of Church leaders who do not respond adequately to reports of abuse made by the family members as well as by the abuse victims themselves.” Surely this is another platitudinous remark for, as the leader of 1.4 billion Catholics, he could have initiated some effective mechanism to deter this crime since his apology offered three years ago.

The traditional system of punishment has not deterred the perpetrators from committing these unsavoury acts. Moreover, there are double standards for men and women in most religions, a hypocrisy which is not acceptable in this day and age. Religious establishments appear to enhance their importance and influence when we express our discontent. This is increasing an undesirable polarisation amongst us. Sadly, a young adult can be easily misled and get converted into an extremist and/or a criminal.

Sexual infidelity and sexual attacks cause us deep distress. We see that it is not only the harm of physical abuse itself, but the deep-seated mental trauma that agonises the victims. The deep emotional distress, hurt and the feeling of being defiled make us extremely sad. This becomes exacerbated because sexual chastity is decreed by religions to be a divine ordination. One begins to feel dirty and self-perceived guilt takes deeper roots. The values that have been taken as valid over several centuries are not easy to overcome by individual efforts. Hence such victims need a great deal of support and rehabilitation.

Could the crude physical act of copulation be widely considered a very small and transient display of an animal instinct? If we could make the victims regard rape or attempted sexual assault as they would a dog bite or a street mugging, they may not suffer the severe shame and guilt associated with this kind of abuse. This can only happen if our religion and

society adopts more humane and rational values. The churches, temples, ashrams, vihaaras, mosques and synagogues have remained incapable of dealing with the deleterious effects of pre- and extra-marital sex, rape, sexual assaults and their consequences. The victims hardly ever get adequate support from these institutions; often, they get blamed!

It is we who must consciously observe our children's development, explaining universal human values to them from a very early age, encouraging them to respect and protect other human beings, however different they may appear to be. Is it not essential that, as parents, we should begin to take responsibility for our children's upbringing much more seriously than is obvious? The traditional custom of providing only love, nutrition and safety is sufficient for our pet dog; our children need a lot more, including comprehensive parental education from a very tender age.

Having a child is now a matter of choice. I do believe that most parents are largely unqualified to provide comprehensive care to their children. It would good for couples to attend a course in parenting as a starting point, before deciding whether they should go ahead and bring a child into the world. Perhaps comprehensively designed and informative pregnancy classes could be one way of reminding prospective parents about these important issues. It is the parent who nurtures a potential saint or a criminal, a saviour or a murderer. It is widely believed that we are the role models for our children. Although the parents of the perpetrators of heinous sexual crimes cannot be assumed to have been criminals themselves, it cannot be denied that unhappy quarrelling homes, negligent parents or substance abusers, and the sexual violence experienced or observed by children, do not inspire them to become model citizens. As Jung hinted at, we need to modify our own behaviour and values if we wish for our progeny to be better human beings than ourselves.

The conventional ways have clearly failed disastrously. The scope of sex, and the values attached to it too, need a great deal of rethinking and modification if we wish to protect the coming generations from sex-related crimes. Does this overview of the issues related to sexuality encourage most parents to think and act appropriately? Should this not be taken as a very serious matter? When should we begin to tackle this issue; how can we end this violence?

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE UNTHINKING BRAIN: THE GREATEST PARADOX

“Arjuna, have you listened with full powers of reason?  
Has the delusion of ignorance been destroyed?” BG: 18.72

I felt moved by the courage demonstrated by a lone young woman in Brussels last November. She had tied herself in front of the building of the European Commission to protest against the subsidy to the arms trade. Police had to close the whole area for that day. She appeared to be about 25 years old and had both her hands and forearms inserted into what looked like the barrel of a tank. She was wearing a yellow, hooded wind cheater with “Stop the Arms trade” pinned across the front and looked very happy doing so. She was swaying on the ropes and I did not see any crowd cheering her - she was protesting alone. She must have been arrested and released later that night; otherwise she could have made big news. I came across this photograph on the BBC website which provides a weekly pictorial record of unusual news and events.<sup>1</sup> Will she actually manage to stop the arms trade? It is unlikely that any of the EU’s 28 member states took any notice of her protest.

Last year saw unimaginable tragedies across the globe. Sad and horrible news of maiming, killings and bombings were reported almost every month. Our thirst for an accumulation of guns and firearms is rocketing. We can see that it has taken less than 600 years for human beings to evolve to become the most powerful predator on Earth, following the invention of the modern firearm in the 14th century. The last century saw the largest number of men killed by men than at any other time in history. We have also hunted many species to extinction. The world has acquired amazing stockpiles of nuclear and non-nuclear arms of far reaching and tremendous capabilities. With any of these arms a rich country can destroy the whole world on any given day and, of course,

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<sup>1</sup> “News in Pictures,” *The BBC*, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/in\\_pictures/nov](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in_pictures/nov). (Accessed on 14th February 2016).

itself too in doing so. Sadaam Hussain's attempt to build the 'Mother of all Guns' and Donald Trump's successfully used 'Mother of all Bombs' are frightening examples that we have witnessed.

I was horrified to learn that the five Security Council members of the United Nations sell 78% of the world's non-nuclear arms annually. We shall only see the blatant lies and deception of these nations talking about global peace, if we choose to open our eyes, to look at the facts and think about them.<sup>2</sup> Can we honestly believe the presidents and the prime ministers genuinely weep over the dead bodies of their citizens, when it is their government, i.e. their signature of approval, which allows and encourages the selling of arms? They subsidise the arms dealers through money taken from us, the tax payers. If we begin to think about this, we will know and begin to find a solution. If we do not start thinking even now, logic dictates that someday we will blow ourselves up. The USA alone supplies 44% of all arms to the rest of the world, trading in nearly 40% of the total trade of over 90 billion dollars annually.<sup>3</sup> Mr Donald Trump allotted billions of dollars to the US military in his very first budget proposal and diverted funds from health, education and care services. The UK too had sold arms worth about 5 billion dollars in 2010, and is reported to have given nearly 200 million in subsidies.

History has also recorded many individuals who have tried, time and again, to promote peace and nonviolence. In spite of all these examples throughout human civilisation, we are continuing to see and suffer from war, terrorism, unrest and unhappiness. Why is this so? Does it have to be like this? Can this be minimised, even if not entirely eradicated? How can this be done? Can another messiah be more successful at achieving peace in this world? Are these merely some rhetorical questions of no significance?

It appears to me that the human brain has been evolving in a lopsided manner and is not as properly balanced as it should be. Our intelligence has largely been focused on our physical world. Our great discoveries and inventions have produced wonderful amenities for us to live and go about our business comfortably. Our knowledge of science, and its application, has propelled us to evolve into the most accomplished species in the animal kingdom. This advancement has become possible because we have

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<sup>2</sup> Grimmet. R.S., "Conventional arms transfers to developing nations", 2004-2011, in CRS report for US Congress. 12<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The UN, [www.un.org/members](http://www.un.org/members).

strived, over millennia, to improve our physical living conditions. Mankind has never been satisfied with his habitat, whichever it may be. It has always thought of modifying it to live as comfortably as possible.

The Industrial Revolution<sup>4</sup> and subsequent scientific advancement leading to the current state of an advanced digital age has also generated incalculable wealth across the globe. The world is richer than ever before, although this wealth has not been distributed evenly. We have now acquired the technology for mass destruction and for the creation of vast wealth. We have the arsenal, both nuclear and non-nuclear, to destroy the world many times over.

Why is it that our brains have not sought mental prowess and wisdom in tandem with the acquisition of knowledge of the physical world? Our psyche has not changed significantly in parallel with these advancements. Each of us has a brain capable of reasoning and reaching conclusions. This is our most valuable asset. So, why does each one of us not use it to its full potential?

Although we have come a long way from the subhuman existence of the ancient past, we have not been able to suppress or abandon our barbaric instincts or emotions sufficiently. Instead, we are perhaps more greedy, more prone to violence, selfishness and intolerance than our very ancient forefathers who lived much simpler lives than us. I think this is a matter of great concern for humanity today—to appreciate, that, along with technical advances, we have also greatly enhanced the scale of our basic instincts like greed, violence, selfishness and intolerance. These have been succinctly described as our enemies by Lord Krishna in the Gita, as follows:

*Kaama yesha krodha yesha rajogunasamudbhavaha,  
Mahaashano mahaapaapma widdhyenamiha wairinim* BG 3. 37

*It is the desire and anger, arising from nature's quality of passion; know it here as the enemy, voracious and very evil* (Miller B.S., 1986)

We have no excuse for ignoring the fundamental doctrines of humane existence and behaviour. These concepts were given several millennia ago by the wise people of ancient times. There is an enormous amount of literature on these issues, whether we seek this information from philosophers

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<sup>4</sup> “Industrial Revolution,” *History.com*, [www.history.com/topics/industrial](http://www.history.com/topics/industrial). (Accessed on on 14th February 2016).



of the west or the east, and from saints and the prophets. But how many members of each household read this literature? Until a few decades ago, the world's literacy was confined to a quarter of the total population.

How many consciously think about these esoteric matters? The understandable retort to this question is the platitudinous answer: "One does not have time for day dreaming - one needs to work for a living and support one's family, you know." This is precisely the kind of justification that leads us to restrain our minds. This is indeed very poor reasoning. Why can one not think whether what one is doing will make them happy in the long term? This does not take enormous time or commitment. Just as we consider several aspects of merchandise before making a purchase, we can develop a habit of self-analysis before we perform any action. But we rarely question our own actions and always justify ourselves with or without any logic.

The current state of the world—its unrest, violence and poverty in the midst of plenty, mass murders and obvious disregard for human values—is the inevitable consequence of unconsidered actions. We tend to feel gratified by the immediate result of our actions, however short-lived it might be. Distortions or misinterpretations of old adages, such as 'nothing is more important than the present, who knows what is in store for the future?', or 'Make hay while the sun shines', do not impart the message that the present is but a fleeting moment in the midst of the vast past and future. We ignore the wide sphere of our existence and concentrate only on the narrow, short-lived present. As a result, we do not attach due importance to the lasting consequences of our actions.

It is amazing to realise that we do not even consciously think or become aware of the reasons for many things that we do on a daily basis. It is very often at the lower level of consciousness that we do routine things such as drive our car, take a shower, go jogging, and many other activities. Sometimes we get worried about whether we have remembered to switch off the gas cooker, set the alarm, or lock the front gate when we are out of the house, or when someone specifically reminds us of them. When in doubt, many of us have gone back to the house to double check and make sure that it is secure.

Actions done without due thought and concentration invariably invite unwanted problems or challenges. Despite knowing this, we appear to be content to function at the lower levels of our mental faculties. We like to follow tradition, develop hypothetical 'faith', carry out our actions as

required by this faith and continue to live in fear and sadness. We live in blind acceptance of our *Karma*, a most effective panacea for self-deception which has been illogically regarded as the reason for everything that happens to us.

For example, it is a known and accepted fact that a lapse of concentration while driving is the cause of many road accidents resulting in injury, death or the disability of the driver and others involved. Most accidents can be avoided by driving consciously and with full attention, anticipating the mistakes of other drivers. This pattern of doing things by rote and justifying or blaming 'fate', Karma or 'chance' has become deeply entrenched within us, even for other activities which are not of a routine nature. This is why we are facing a great deal of strife and misery today. I am sure that a psychoanalyst or a sociologist will enumerate many causes for this type of behaviour, most of which could be included within three broad categories. These are our habits, our rituals and our values (or lack thereof).

Commonly encountered habits that eventually lead to a wide spectrum of problems are lying, cheating, stealing and being secretive. These are basic instincts which are particular to human beings. One can enumerate a variety of lesser misdemeanours too. Although an individual may feel gratified by his apparently successful act of lying or cheating at first, this habit eventually takes him to his nemesis. The saying that one needs to lie again to cover the first lie could not be truer. The very first lie generates an avalanche of lies, creating many unwanted problems and eventually burying the liar. The liars know this and always live in fear of being caught or exposed. Their sleep is usually disturbed and they often have violent mood swings. Their interpersonal relationships and family lives are adversely affected. They are always in denial. Various psychosomatic diseases appear in them. They remain deeply unhappy within themselves. They are inflicting great problems, unhappiness and mental distress upon themselves and their loved ones. Would not a simple act of thinking of the consequences of their actions prior to executing them, such as telling a lie, have saved them from all the misery? No matter how unpleasant the outcome of speaking truthfully may have been, they would have kept their integrity, character and peace of mind, thus saving themselves from enormous additional and unnecessary problems.

Any person afflicted with these undesirable habits can overcome them by being conscious and aware of the possible consequences, i.e. thinking about the action and how that might affect others. It is the lack of thinking

or a faulty thought process that enhances these basic instincts. The liars and the cheats do see the innocent people suffer from the consequences of their lying or cheating. If callous, they may not care, but if kind in nature they will remain troubled by their guilt throughout their lives. Such people, if occupying responsible positions, can severely damage several generations by their lies, cheating and selfishness. We have suffered from these effects from civic leaders, politicians and other influential people. The abundance of violence, destruction, misery and poverty amidst plenty—seen in every society across the world—is a direct result of lying, cheating and the human greed of people with influence and power.

Indeed, human greed is as universal and encompassing as the darkest night of a new moon. It is this greed which enhances the fear of possible penury or destitution. It is greed which justifies some in hoarding enormous wealth in an attempt to ward off rejection, insult and indignity. It is an undisputed fact that we need food, shelter, clothing and a comfortable enough living. But how far we seek to live in luxury is a very personal choice. Very few among us, no matter how wealthy, have drawn a line and said, “This much is enough for me.” We continue to pursue wealth as much as possible for as long as we can, never for a moment thinking that the wealth is but a means for doing good to ourselves and others too: for sharing and helping.

As a physician, I have seen the insatiable greed in some of my patients and in my colleagues too. They would pursue wealth from their sick bed, even after knowing that the stress of that enterprise had produced that almost fatal illness. It is this successful accumulation of the vast resources of this world among the small number of misguided individuals which has resulted in mass poverty across the world. This greed is not confined to the pursuit of wealth alone. It is the same force of greed which drives ruthless people in all walks of life to seek power of control over other human beings. History has shown us time and again that this lust for power ultimately leads to violence, destruction, the death of those who sought it and the people who they control.

Of the many reasons which have prevented us from overcoming our basic instincts and emotions, it is the fear within us that has also exerted enormous influence. This has made us weak and vulnerable. We are afraid of the unknown or uncertainty. We fear failure. We are afraid to die. We are afraid to speak our mind. We are afraid to call a spade a spade. We are always afraid. Hence we are constantly seeking a prop to peg ourselves on, not realising that this makes us suspended, restrained and restless, and

unable to observe our values in life. These pegs or props are tools of self-deception, largely effective in allaying our fears temporarily and thus giving us a false sense of security. Unfortunately, some psychologists still appear to believe in them.<sup>5</sup> Instead of thinking of finding a way of strengthening ourselves, we get hung on this peg of false beliefs.

For many of us, these props have been rituals which we follow in our everyday lives. We have rituals for all occasions - personal, social, religious, professional and so on. Elaborate performance of any ritual, whatever the occasion, adds a sense of purpose and acts as a symbolic gesture of defiance to one's inherent fear. The rituals of funeral celebrations are very poignant examples of this kind of false bravado. The eulogies, the readings and singing appear to defy death and proclaim that the occasion is a celebration of the life of the deceased. Why can we not say that it is a sad occasion and that we have gathered to grieve our loss? Why should we deny that death is a reality and that it comes to us all? How can we possibly defy death when it is always associated with life and is inevitable? This illogical behaviour is due to the fact that we are all fearful of death. The subject of death is taboo - we do not wish to talk or think about it. Hence all that rhetoric envelops death into an opaque shroud of denial. These occasions are always sombre; the ceremonies succeed in imparting a spurious sense of solace.

Most of our rituals are traditional activities, the reason for doing so being long forgotten, but continued with great faith and devotion. One dares not question these actions for their real purpose or value. Do we ever consciously think about the usual rituals having any value in enhancing our self-confidence or imparting any benevolent effects? We are afraid to ask the real meaning and purpose of a ritual, lest this invoke unfavourable or unwanted consequences upon ourselves, our children or relatives and friends. Tradition dictates that it is followed. If it is a religious occasion, questioning it amounts to blasphemy. If it is a social occasion, it amounts to being antisocial. If it is a family celebration, one gets dubbed as a wet blanket. In other words, no matter what the occasion is, a ritual must be followed which recognises our inherent fear and magnifies it indirectly by this recognition.

This has allowed superstition to enter surreptitiously into our lives. If we think about these and then discard them, we shall begin the journey

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<sup>5</sup> Gino, F., Norton, M.I., "Why rituals work" *The Scientific American*. 14<sup>th</sup> May, 2013.

towards achieving fearlessness and the ability to accept our disappointments and successes with equanimity. But overcoming our inherent fear is not an easy task, for it is in our genes.

Man has always been fearful of nature. Mythology is based upon the natural phenomena of earthquakes, fires, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, storms, pestilence, eclipses, etc. The primitive mind perhaps hoped that a supernatural something (perhaps God) would control these phenomena. Hence there have been many gods of the wind, the sea, the rain, pestilence, war, fire, ghosts, the sun, the moon and so on. Such mythologies are abundantly recorded in India, China, the Far East, Greece, Rome, Scandinavia, the Hebrides, Egypt and Africa, and the Americas. Appeasing any one, or as many as possible, of the gods by way of the symbolic offering of personal possessions or worship or prayers, i.e. conducting some sort of ritual, must have appeared to be a harmless way to try to prevent such disasters. Thus we see religion becoming a prop to allay the inherent fear in primitive man. This custom has increased fear within the human mind. More recent religions have tried including sublime and esoteric concepts. During periods of conflict, however, the armies of both sides receive blessings from their respective religious leaders; the victors get proclaimed as the righteous ones and their violence, greed and lust are ignored. The proclamation of a 'just war' (*Raamaayana*), the 'war for self-defence' (Arab-Israeli War, WWII), the 'Holy war' (the Crusades, Jihad, and ISIS), and the 'war of Righteousness' (*Mahaabhaarata*) indicate these acts of approval.

Are we deliberately being discouraged from independent thinking? This is obviously not the case. The enlightened Rishis, philosophers, Prophets and ancient Saints have indeed encouraged knowledge-seeking. They have produced deep impressions on us and their messages have become the guiding principles of human development across the world. They have tried to teach us to realise the values of contentment, inner peace, fearlessness, compassion and the inevitability of death. Have we not chosen to ignore them most of the time, concentrating instead on enhancing our material possessions and lust for power? This makes us tell lies, cheat, believe in the supernatural, and renders us fearful of facing the consequences of our wrong actions.

"Look before you leap or think before you act" is perhaps the greatest mantra that man can apply to balance his mind. We do not need a man or an institution to make our brains think. We know that we seldom fail to find a solution to any problem if we think it through. We can definitely

guess the probable outcome of our actions. If we begin to develop this system of doing things consciously, being fully aware of our own actions and their possible consequences, it should not take many generations for the world to be a safe and happy place. Our children will emulate us.

The last two mantras of the Rig Veda illustrate this very eloquently, pleading mankind to think before doing anything:

*Samaaniwaaakootihisamaanahridayaaniwa I*

*Samaanamastuwomanoyathaawohasusahaasati II RV 10. 191. 4*

*May your mind become similar, as your common action can be performed,  
like that your resolve too may indeed become similar.*

What can be a more ridiculous paradox than the brain that does not think?

## CHAPTER THREE

### REAP WHAT YOU SOW: SUFFER YOUR KARMA

It was a colourful, although solemn occasion. The modest community hall in a suburb of Aberdeen in Scotland was full of eager men and women impatient to hear the discourse of the *Swaamiji*, who was reported to have undergone severe austerity for 40 years in the Himalayas. He had been initiated into *Sanyaasa*, the final state of renunciation, many years earlier when he was a promising civil servant in India, having been educated in Delhi University and gained a master's degree in science. A Sanyaasi is one who has renounced everything - personal property, all attachments including wife and children, and who lives on one meal a day obtained from alms, and spends his remainder of his life in introspection and meditation, in an effort to achieve *Moksha*; the ultimate liberation. The rumour was that his guru had appeared in his dream and ordered him to go to Scotland to spread the ancient message of the Rishis, as found in the '*Shaastras*' (a generic name for ancient literature written in Sanskrit, Sharada, Pali and Braahmi scripts prevalent in the Indian subcontinent and thought to be similar to the scriptures).

He was a house guest of a friend of mine. Perhaps due to jet lag or the aeroplane's air conditioning, he felt unwell and so I was asked by this friend to be on standby, just in case the *Swaamiji* became acutely ill during his discourse.

The *Swaamiji* arrived on time, escorted by my friend and his wife. He had an attractive disciple, perhaps in her 20s, clad in an ochre coloured long cloak, and wearing sandals. She looked serene. She had found him as her spiritual guru when she had travelled from Berkeley, California to Hardwar and beyond, in search of her true self. He looked imposing with a black and white beard, a full head of black and white hair, bright piercing eyes and a thin physique. He was about 70 years old, 5'10" tall, stood very erect and was robed like his disciple in a long and thick home-spun, ochre coloured silk.

The discourse began, with him loudly chanting ‘om’ three times. Then he recited a prayer:

*tamaso ma jyotirgamaya  
mrityormaamritamgamaya.*

*Lead me from darkness to light, from death to immortality.* (Quoted from *Brihadaraayanaka Upanishad* BU1. 4. 3)

The mention of death and darkness on an already dark and dreadful winter evening in Aberdeen certainly had the desired effect. The Swaamiji now had the total attention of his congregation. He raised his right hand in blessing. The congregation acknowledged it by reverently joining their palms in *Namaste*. He spoke in fluent English and said that he would talk on *karma* and *karmaphala*, the nearest translation being ‘action and its fruit.’

His 45-minute discourse was explicit in driving home the message that man received the just fruits of his actions: not so much in this life but definitely in the next. He mentioned the story in the Mahabharata where Yudhishthira is taught by Bheeshma in the *Anushaashana Parva*.

The discourse was heard with total devotion and concentration by the congregation, made up mostly of professionals; engineers working in the oil industry, pilots, university lecturers, doctors and their highly educated spouses.

There was one particular woman in the congregation who had come along with her husband, a cancer surgeon, and their young son (I have changed their identities). The boy was severely disabled. She asked the Swaamiji what bad deed the boy had committed as a result of which he was afflicted by that disability. Promptly came the reply, “Oh - he must have made a boy very disabled in his former life.” Then she asked him again what she and her husband had done to deserve a disabled son. The Swaamiji replied that they probably had shown no compassion to the parents of a disabled child. The couple felt guilty, humiliated and became silent. Then Swaamiji blessed them and prophesied that since all three in that family would have paid the price of their past wrongdoings in this life, they would be born happy and blessed with able and illustrious children in their next life. I was astounded when that couple did *Namaste* reverently. How could they have accepted the explanation of the Swaamiji? I do not know what I would have done if I had been one of these parents, but I certainly would have reacted differently. I could not stay there any longer to listen to this kind of sermon. I walked out abruptly.



My friend and the Swaamiji had thought that I might have been called away for an emergency. They arrived at my house the next day when I examined his chest. He had a barrel-shaped chest of emphysema, the condition where the lungs expand enormously and lose their elasticity to expel the breath efficiently. His lungs were nearly destroyed but did not show any evidence of infection. He just needed some reassurance. He subsequently returned to Hardwar from where he wrote me a thank you letter and expressed his desire to meet with me again in Scotland. I ignored the polite request for sponsorship.

This was several years ago but I have not forgotten this because it has left a deep imprint in my mind. Actions and their consequences are often regarded as ‘karma’ which is based on the theory of rebirth. The earlier philosophers grouped all the past and present actions together as karma, and this was exploited by many religions as an invaluable tool to explain the plight of their faithful followers. This is invariably linked with the concept of rebirth and *Samsaara* (the workings of the world), which has been extensively debated. It is indeed very surprising to observe that human beings have continued to believe in many abstract concepts espoused in their religions. The incident described above demonstrated the beautiful mixture of the truth, the half-truth and the downright lies, cleverly amalgamated as ‘words of wisdom’ given by an enlightened Swaamiji from the Himalayas.

To my mind, the truthful statements were:

The prayer truthfully reflected every man’s desire to be enlightened and live for as long as possible.

The relevant quotes from BU:

Whatever a man does so shall he reap;  
 a man of good deeds will become good;  
 a man of bad acts badly;  
 a man becomes pure by pure deeds, impure by bad deeds.

His blessings appeared genuine. He also appeared to believe in what he was preaching. The half-truths were:

The Swaamiji did not quote the full verse from BU. Rishi Yaagnabalkya, the author of that Upanishad, refers to the events in the present birth as karma and mocks the concept of rebirth after death (in a poem within the BU).

The dialogue between Yudhisthira and Bheeshma in the *Mahaabhaarata* was misinterpreted. Bheeshma had said that the destiny of a man depended upon his current action and past circumstances. 'Past circumstances' was substituted by the Swaamiji for past birth to prove his point of cause and effect, i.e. the result of karma.

This interpretation supported the theory of rebirth, which is not universally accepted or equally espoused by all the schools of philosophy in India, namely, *Sankhya*, *Nyaaya*, *Mimamsaa*, *Yoga*, *Charwaaka*, *Lokaayata* and *Adwaita Vedanta*, among others.<sup>1</sup> But the Swaamiji made this out to be a universally accepted fact.

The deception, or outright lies, were:

The severe disability was a direct result of asphyxia during child birth which could have been avoided. The father of the boy had known of this negligence. His wife and the foetal heart were not properly monitored during labour. The foetal distress had gone unnoticed until it was too late to prevent the damage. It was never the fault of the newborn baby.

It is unthinkable that any parent would have no empathy to the parents of a disabled child.

But why did the Swaamiji say these unkind things? I am sure it was an attempt to make it easy for the parents to bear their plight. But why did he have to be untruthful and unkind to do so? He made them feel guilty in front of the whole congregation so that they would complain less and accept their plight, hoping for better things in the next life. But could the Swaamiji not have said that the cause of that affliction was neither the fault of the child nor of the parents? It was the result of the negligence of the professionals in the hospital and should not have happened. He could have given them his blessings to try to bear their plight with resignation and preached the value of compassion and forgiveness which could have helped them to accept their conditions. I began to delve deeper into this incident than was perhaps warranted.

Was the Swaamiji blindly following the age old adages himself without considering the consequences of his own speech? Was what he said true? If not, had he made no attempt to unlearn and discard the past influences with which he had grown up? It gradually occurred to me that

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<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan, S., 1922. *Indian Philosophy* Vol. 1 and 2, Indian edition 1989. (Oxford University Press, 1989).

his years of meditation and introspection in the Himalayas had not really encouraged him to be as critically analytical as was necessary to seek the truth.

There have been several learned expositions of this concept by the Rishis, Jains, Buddhists, Yogis, Taantriks, historians and many more. A dispassionate assessment of ‘the doctrine of karma’ is essential for us to move forward in the present rational world. Karma, as postulated in the Vedas, is an action performed and dedicated to Agni (the ultimate source of everything) at the altar i.e. ‘*Yagna karma*’. The officiating priests gave a different interpretation of Yama Sookta in the Rig Veda<sup>2</sup> which deals with the dead. There is no mention of rebirths in this mantra. They developed a theory of rebirth, i.e. the cycle of birth and death which they supported through their manuals, known as *Grihya Sootra*. They decreed that the aim of the living was to break the chain, to achieve *Mokshya* (the ultimate liberation) from recurring births and deaths. Performing all kinds of religious rites, known as Yagnya, would help to achieve this liberation. Until this cycle was broken, the spirit would be reborn and suffer the consequences of its past lives. Many have continued to believe in this theory.

Scholars and philosophers had noticed this misinterpretation of the mantras of the Rig Veda and produced copious treatise known as Upanishads<sup>3</sup> and Aaranyakas.<sup>4</sup> They developed ‘the doctrine of the karma’, meaning that a person would be rewarded or punished according to his own actions. The first Upanishad and Aaranyaka authored by the richest and the most learned priest, Rishi Yaagnyabalkya, the Brihad-aaranyaka Upanishad (BU) endorses and refutes this doctrine simultaneously. This kind of juxtaposed opinion is consistently evident in the Upanishads - they always deliberated comprehensively and considered the opposing views. We find that whenever the ancient philosophers were challenged to identify or define life, the soul, brahma, spirit, etc., they avoided being dogmatic by saying “*neyti, neyti*” - i.e. “not this, not this.” They could not precisely define any of these terms. They could never say “*iti, iti*”, i.e. “this is so and this is so.”

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<sup>2</sup> Gautam, P.C., “Yama Sookta: RV10. 14,” *Modern English Translation of the Rig Veda Samhita*. (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Olivelle, P., *Upanishads: A new translation*. (Oxford World Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996), Ch. 3, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Aaranyakas*. These are: *Brihad-aaranyaka*, *Taittiriya-aarandya-ka*, *Shaankhalaayana*, *Kaushitaki* and also *Maitraayanyu-panishad*.

If birth is not birth, but the continuation of life, then why is there a concept of rebirth or past life? If death is the ultimate end, how then can one be reborn? If one needs to fall back on death to define life, then what is the reality of life? Buddha, in his benevolence, called this the doctrine of karma *achinteyya*, i.e. incomprehensible.<sup>5</sup> He did not wish to be rude. If the enlightened Buddha did not understand this, how could the ignorant among us, pretending to be wise, explain this with certainty?

Despite this, I was very surprised to read ten pages of definite and dogmatic exposition on karma by none other than the most highly educated Lama Geshe Tashi Tsering in his book explaining the four noble truths given by Buddha. Why? Because he is the guiding teacher in an institution called the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London, which obviously is meant for the propagation of Buddhism as a religion.<sup>6</sup>

The conflicting views and practices prevalent in around 600 BC led Maahaavira to question and discard the established religion in the India of his time. He founded Jainism and accepted the doctrine of karma in a different way, promoting the concept of rebirth. Nearly 200 years later, Buddha called the whole doctrine of *karma* and *karmaphalam* (fruit of karma) “an imponderable issue which would lead a man to madness.” But his followers continued to propagate this concept which is indeed a very effective panacea to explain several issues such as why a man should become rich or poor, healthy or sick, live long or die early, and so on. This has thus become a great tool for self-deception in the practice of several religions, e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, and Sikhism. Even Christianity, apparently not believing in rebirth, has found this to be a useful tool, as seen in the Galatians<sup>7</sup> and Matthew,<sup>8</sup> completely disregarding Jesus. The disciples, on seeing a congenitally blind man, had asked Jesus “Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be manifest in him.”<sup>9</sup> St Thomas Aquinas hinted about rebirth when he said, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, it follows that there is no good for human beings other than in

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<sup>5</sup> Bhikkhu Thanissaro, (Translated from Pali) *Acintita Sutta*: Unconjecturable; Access to insight. (Legacy edition, 2013) AN4.77.

<sup>6</sup> Tsering G.T., *The four noble truths: The foundations of Buddhist thought*; Vol. 1. (Wisdom Publications, USA, 2005), pp 72-82.

<sup>7</sup> The Bible: Galatians:6:7,8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid: Matthew:7:12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid: St John:9:2,3.

this life.” Religions appear to have chosen to ignore compassion and hard facts, and opted to take an easy path of ‘rewards and punishment according to one’s karma’ to make people feel guilty for their disabilities or difficult situations.

Modern man, bewildered by numerous religious doctrines, is being further taken for a ride by pseudoscientific explanations of philosophical or religious teachings by modern gurus, preachers, mullahs and Baabaas. We find many religious notions being explained, although poorly, on the basis of science in an attempt to make the religion very pertinent to our times. Many modern religious leaders and gurus have taken to doing this by misinterpreting the laws of physics.

One such example, often used to explain human actions and their consequences, i.e. the doctrine of karma, is the third law of Newton. This can be illustrated by the following examples: if I kick a weakling, I will get kicked by a stronger person in my next life. If you are virtuous and suffering in this life, you shall be richly rewarded in your next life. These myths are cleverly illustrated by saying ‘every action has equal reaction.’ The third law explains that if a force is exerted by an inert body upon another inert body, the latter also exerts equal force to the former. The floor where I stand exerts equal force on my feet which are exerting pressure on the floor. This allows me to maintain my balance. One example of distortions of this axiom could be to insist that if I were to ride an elephant, the elephant would ride me. They would explain that I may be born as an elephant and the elephant as the mahout!<sup>10</sup> Most modern gurus like to give similar ridiculous explanations of one’s plight.

The modern Swaamijis from India have obviously found a lucrative market in the West. The first person to travel to the West and take part in a religious conclave in Chicago was Swaami Vivekananda in 1893. His purpose was to spread knowledge and philosophy, distilled from several millennia of contemplation and practice in India, as ordered by his guru, Swaami Ramakrishna. He dazzled his audience in the USA with his knowledge and rhetoric, and dutifully presented only the esoteric practices prevalent in India in his time, before returning home.

This action has set a trend for later Swaamijis, who have established several ashrams and trusts in the western world. They have a very strong

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<sup>10</sup> *Mahout*: The rider of an elephant controlling or hurting the animal with a sharp goad.

following particularly regarding aspects of the Gita, Yoga, Tantra and meditation. I get regular emails and notifications of their programs, listen to their sermons and read their literature. I often find it vexing to observe that their lectures contain a cunning mixture of truths, half-truths and downright lies, like the lecture of the Swaamiji in Aberdeen.

Swaamiji or Baabaaji is a venerable term to identify a sect of mendicants known as Sanyaasi - the hermits who have renounced all personal possessions except what they wear, and who live a simple life. This is similar to the philosophy we expect to be followed by religious leaders and preachers of all religions and all over the world. They are expected to be wise, benevolent and to perform a selfless service to all. But, one cannot help noticing the opposite in action. They and their assistants appear to enjoy a very comfortable lifestyle. They proclaim themselves to be penniless yet wear expensive silk, unique headdresses, they travel internationally in comfort, maintain special dietary habits, and live in luxurious houses. Their followers are charged substantial fees to listen to their sermons or participate in their programs. They receive the patronage of rich industrialists, famous film and theatre actors, pop and classical singers, heads of states and governments. It seems that they have only renounced selflessness, compassion and the truth. Why does anyone need personal possessions if one's needs are sumptuously provided for by others or an organisation?

It is indeed fascinating to observe the machinations of religious institutions. For example, I noticed alms being given by the Vatican and Canterbury last Christmas. Should they be vindicated for their compassion by their annual distribution of soup or a morsel of food to the destitute, dispensed with the lofty messages of good will and human kindness? Is it 'compassion' to accumulate and invest enormous wealth in places of worship for further gain and to support the luxurious lifestyles of their personnel? The places of worship contain unimaginable wealth, real estate and exquisite artefacts which, if utilised for the good of humanity, could banish hunger and homelessness right across the world. But they tell us that it is our karma that makes us go hungry and homeless; it is our past deeds that have given us poverty, bad health or tragedy in our lives. They tell us that 'thou shall reap as thou sow.'

We notice that leaders of all religions have adopted similar lifestyles. The restraint in promoting personal gain as shown by earlier, true spiritual leaders, have now been openly abandoned. A simple search on Google gives staggering accounts of the material wealth and incomes of dozens of

these people. Religious leaders, born again preachers, self-styled gurus and many similar individuals all over the world and in every culture, are running vast commercial enterprises. They are also demonstrating their solidarity to each other in the name of the Interfaith Movement. Perhaps they believe that it is their karma which is now giving them their just rewards. It is their extraordinary skill and oration that makes us listen to them respectfully and accept them without any qualm, in spite of our faculties of reasoning, scientific education and inquisitiveness.

Our emotions and feelings are real. We do feel vulnerable at varying levels of our existence and often do not comprehend the depths of our own emotions. It is widely believed and accepted that we do need a source of strength to overcome our weaknesses and fears. Perhaps it is this incomprehensible fear within us which prompts us to follow religious leaders to seek and find a strong crutch of support. However false and short lived, they do instil some hope and courage when we are at our lowest ebb, as demonstrated by the couple with their young son with cerebral palsy. They obviously had received some succour from the Swaamiji, however uncouth it might have appeared to me. He encouraged them to seek this support in the supernatural, by developing 'faith' or blind 'belief', telling them that karma was the ultimate source of our true strength.

Contrary to this belief, we also know that we can achieve what we set out to do if we really put our minds to it. Without any outside prompting, we do achieve many things through our own resolve. However, we do not actively assert this reality that it is our mind which is the true source of all our strengths and fears. Should we not be striving to seek strength within ourselves rather than abjectly surrendering to the supernatural, the unknown? In the cold light of reasoning, belief in the non-existent 'supernatural' appears to be enhancing our weaknesses and fears, because we can easily find refuge in fate, karma, God's will, destiny and the like, during crises in our lives. We surrender to, rather than accept, our adversity as a challenge to be overcome. We forget our own strengths and hold on to the props which do not help us to be strong within ourselves, and as a result we suffer repeatedly.

What is more, as parents, we are showing our children that this blind faith is the right path for them to follow. Are we doing the right thing?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RETIREMENT: LIBERATION OR LAMENTATION?

"O Ananda! Be ye islands into yourselves. Seek no refuge outside self".  
Buddha.

A good friend of mine came to visit me a few years ago. I remember him looking a little restless and unhappy, far from his usual cheerful self. Clearly he was troubled by something. I knew better than to ask him the cause of his discomfort. I waited, for I knew that he would tell me all in his own good time. It took the second glass of wine and a lot of small talk for him to open up. Dramatically, he asked me how I had felt once I had retired from my job. The conversation that followed went something like this:

"I was most happy that evening. I had no unsettled issues in my job, no complaints from any one and no blemish to my career," I said.

"But why is it that I am not feeling happy when I too can say the same things about myself?" he asked, ruefully.

"Retirement can come as a shock if one has not planned for it well in advance. Did you not know that you were going to be retired?" I asked.

"Yes, I did. I did plan financially, health wise, and sorted out various family commitments. I have no major worries of any kind."

"Let us celebrate, then," I said, and raised my glass.

"I miss my job," he said softly, and did not raise his glass. "What shall I do?" he almost cried in anguish.

"Hmmm! Will you be allowed to work unpaid in your old post?"

"No, a young chap has already been appointed. They gave me a beautiful carriage clock and a farewell party last night."



“Congratulations. That was nice. Welcome to the club,” I said, flippantly.

After a short silence, he asked me, “What do you do nowadays?”

I explained that I was educating myself and getting an entirely different perspective on life, and that this was making me much happier than before.

He eyed me, perhaps with suspicion, and happened to remember that he had an urgent errand to attend to. He left rather abruptly, saying he would come back later to ask for some advice. I felt a little sad. He was highly educated, a doctorate in electronics from Cambridge, highly competent and respected by his colleagues and friends for his forthrightness and humility. So what advice could I possibly give him if he ever asked me for it?

Retirement can be very frightening for many, particularly if it has not been planned well in advance. But in spite of planning this well ahead of time, why is it that retirement can produce severe adverse effects on so many of us, instead of giving us the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of our lifelong labour? I did attend a few seminars on retirement and also lectured on how to keep healthy in old age. There is extensive literature on this subject<sup>1</sup> and many retirement gurus run various seminars, although many are not worth their cost.

My friend reminded me of some patients who I had observed and treated a long time ago. We had coined the name of their condition as ‘the string bag syndrome’ (*you will not find this in the medical books; we never got round to producing a research paper on it and our letter to the editor of The British Medical Journal describing this condition was not accepted for want of objective data*). I used to be a junior doctor in Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria in the 1970s when the town was in full employment, producing coal, steel and ships. The long line of factory workers on their bicycles used to cause massive traffic jams on the roads during rush hour. ‘The Harbour’, the pub adjacent to our hospital, used to be full in the evenings, patronised by us from the hospital, and many of the regulars who were from the ship yards.

The assembly line workers would go home, have their evening meal, and gravitate to the pub and join other regulars - friends and colleagues.

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel, G., *The literature of retirement*. (Library reviewed, Vol. 25, issue ¾, 1975), pp 117-118.

After enjoying a few rounds of strong ale and games of darts, they would stagger home to bed soon after the landlady rang the bell for last orders. The weekends were for football, rugby and DIY at home. This routine was repeated for 40 years until suddenly, one fine morning, one worker would find that he did not have to go to work. He had retired the previous day and had celebrated the occasion with a few more rounds of ale than the customary three pints. He would not know what to do. He would be restless and curse his headache. He would then wish to go for some fresh air to a park nearby. His wife would give him a string bag, which could be twisted into a small ball to fit inside a pocket, asking him to get the 'messages' - commonly a pound of sausages - upon his return. This would then be the new routine - leave the house after breakfast, sit on a bench in a park, munch his sandwiches at noon, reminisce about the past, feel worthless and sad, dose off and on, and eventually buy some potatoes or sausages on the way home in the evenings. Within a few months, he would be visiting the hospital with all kinds of symptoms. Many would not see the second anniversary of their retirement - they would have succumbed to heart attacks, strokes, pneumonia or in some cases, accidents. The cause of death: the 'string bag syndrome'!

Upon retirement today, one misses the camaraderie, the social exchanges at work and elsewhere, and one's status in society at large; one gets the feeling that one is no longer valuable to society. This feeling of worthlessness becomes most disturbing. This is why my friend said he loved his work and did not wish to give up. The modern system of retirement is based on the concept of maintaining at least the same standard of living as during working life. The aim is to prepare for a more luxurious lifestyle, if possible. In the lives of many, the sudden void caused by cessation of work leads to the pursuit of more money, more leisure, more holidays, more golf, more of everything, just to prove to oneself and others that one is 'not finished' yet. I remember my neighbour going out on a very expensive month-long Caribbean cruise. He also bought his wife a *Boxster* Porsche sports car. She dared not drive it for fear of criticism by her younger relatives and said to herself that it was an inappropriate car for an old lady. It stayed in the garage for the rest of her short life.

This rampant and universal ageism also has a very negative influence on the life of a retired person. The younger generation appears to ignore a number of facts. They do not always acknowledge that it is their elders who produced the enormous scientific advancements that they take for granted today. Nobel laureates are mostly in their advanced years. Only a

very small percentage of the elderly population is dependent, disabled or diseased. The majority of the older population are healthy, able and productive. They contribute enormously as volunteers, support their children and offer pastoral care and good advice. They continue to pass on their fine skills. They are certainly not a burden to society.

However, social norms have now changed. We have now begun to quantify a person in economic terms. If this indeed is the standard way by which to judge people, then the younger generation too should be prepared to face a reality which could be ugly. For example, one often hears of beds blocked by the elderly in hospitals, and feels sorry for the younger patient thereby deprived of medical care. Is it not right economically for those who have contributed to the exchequer a significant portion of their earning for all their working lives to receive this care in preference to the young chap who has not done so? If the economic criterion is to be the sole parameter, were the Nazis wrong in exterminating children, disabled men and women, the chronically sick and the mentally ill? Does it have to be this way? Is there a better system of retirement? Is there a better method of utilising the already limited resources?

It appears to me that both the elderly and the society in which we live need to take a pragmatic view acknowledging the mutual benefits and interdependency amongst us. To call the elderly an economic burden is to try to hide the incompetence of the leaders in finance, bureaucracy and politics. This is an insult to humanity.

One sees the vast waste, the duplication in the use of resources, frivolous spending and wrong priorities established in every sphere. One cannot plug the black hole of these cumulative practices; this shall always result in insufficient resources, leading to poor and inadequate delivery of essential services. Also, the elderly complaining that society has become callous and uncaring is not admitting their own responsibility, i.e. the bad upbringing of their children. Obviously, they failed to furnish them with good values and provided poor leadership in their time as parents. The elderly do not realise that they become rigid in their views and inflexible in their dealings with others as the years roll on. Suddenly, their mortality becomes obvious, and they fall apart. The resulting demented, disabled, heavily dependent individual obviously becomes a burden to all, a sad caricature of himself - scared of impending death and deeply distressed within his mind. The following story told to me by a general practitioner colleague succinctly illustrates this situation.

One of his patients was in his mid-70s. He was a rich businessman and fully active in his business. He was obese, diabetic, arthritic, hypertensive and suffered from a heart disease. He would not follow any dietary advice nor change his unhealthy lifestyle; he would continue to drink heavily and forget to take his pills. But he had somehow managed to stop smoking a few years earlier. He was found to have bowel cancer during a routine check-up. The patient had been horrified with this news and begged my colleague to save him from this certain death. He was prepared to spend any amount or go anywhere. My colleague had been rather put off by his request and his affectations and had asked him, "How long do you wish to live for?" The patient was taken aback and said, "As long as possible." The GP had asked him why, and he fumbled with his answers. He was then kindly told that he already had sufficient diseases to kill him any day and that the new cancer was unlikely to be the cause of his death.

As we grow old, we realise that we are usually dependent upon others, but often forget that we are very dependent upon ourselves too. It is this dependence on our own habits that inhibits our adaptability to changing circumstances or environment. Even simple things like a cup of tea in the morning to begin the day assumes great importance if it is not available one morning. Our bodily functions, namely, eating, excretion, copulation, sleeping, dressing, etc., are all conditioned and regulated by our habits. Any deviation from these makes us uncomfortable. We must also remember that our bodies will soon pack up, and the mind too may join in this deterioration eventually. But retirement is the best opportunity in life to be truly free and happy. We also have to realise that we have limited time at our disposal. So we do need to make conscious and efficient efforts to get rid of both internal as well as external dependence if we wish to assert control over our own mind and body. These are the essential first steps towards true independence.

I would like to describe a little known aspect of this stage of life in another culture. The Rishis, founders of the ancient Aryan culture (i.e. the Hindu culture, in modern parlance) very cleverly divided life into four stages (*Varnaashrama*, vide *Manu Smriti*). The first was studentship (or apprenticeship) after the age of eight, which lasted until the completion of tutelage over the course of about 25 years of celibacy.

Marriage and living the life of a householder would follow, paying a sixth of the household income as tax, producing offspring to continue the line, and work for the benefit of the population at large for the next 25 years. The most difficult stage in life was considered to be the householder's.

This is when one has to work, prove one's worth to peers, support charitable activities, bring forth an able new generation and contribute to the enhancement of society in some way. The emphasis was on earning as much as possible by honest means but never hoard it for a rainy day or for old age. The money surplus to one's requirements was to be used for philanthropic activities, near and far. Only after paying these dues or obligations for 25 years would one be allowed to be independent of society (this was not compulsory for all. Many wealthy people ignored this concept and continued to live a hedonistic life and eventually perished, probably in misery and remorse).

One would then be allowed to voluntarily enter the third phase, the stage of retirement, i.e. liberation. Here one would begin to be independent of most of one's needs and services. One would begin a lifestyle of simplicity approaching asceticism, and restart any studies and discourses which had been interrupted earlier. This was regarded as the stage of freedom to enhance the quality of one's life but not the standards of living. A clear difference was perceived between the quality of living and quality of life.

The quality of living which we equate with modern living means sufficiency of resources needed to afford maximum comfort, luxuries and fantasies. This would lead to increasing dependence on 'sense' objects which would tempt one to aspire for more of the same, leading eventually to discontentment and frustration - since nothing is ever sufficient for our gratification. Quality of life, on the other hand, would be enhanced by an awareness of independence or freedom from the three most powerful binds that control the human psyche. These are our pride, greed and fear. These fetters are strongly linked to social custom, lack of spiritual clarity and religious indoctrination. These three strong bonds can prevent a human being from knowing one's true identity, thus leading one to an irrational lifestyle and behaviour in old age.

What is our true identity? Do we, or can we, exist just being us, without adopting all kinds of personalities to perform various roles in life? Should one accept that one does not have a separate and unique identity, even though one knows that there is no other being like one in the entire world? Do we not all instinctively know that somewhere within each of us is a tiny 'me' struggling to come out and assert itself? This 'me' is not allowed to assert itself by virtue of being someone's son, or spouse, parent, or friend, boss, worker, leader, follower, cleric, atheist, philosopher, rogue and so on. These different identities are numerous to

the extent that they have camouflaged the true identity of each one of us; even our names are not our own but are given by our parents.

The quest and effort to understand and expose our true identity would need conscious and focused enterprise. This could be done either by living under the same roof as before or by going away somewhere else. '*Baanaprastha*' literally translates as 'go to the forest'. The forest here denotes the earliest home of homo-sapiens. It means starting from the beginning, once again. Spouses would also be free to join if they so wished. One would need to be exempt from participation in social activities, that is, keeping up with the Joneses, peer pressure from the family and all kinds of distractions. In other words, one would be allowed to be as one wanted without being considered selfish. But there would be temptations to pursue a hedonistic lifestyle too, to which one could succumb to by misuse of this newly found freedom. This needs to be crushed at the very start.

Not much is needed by way of resources to pursue this austere lifestyle. One accepts that it is the body which cures itself and not the medications that doctors prescribe - they merely enhance the body's ability to fight disease. The vast majority of chronic illnesses which are not curable by modern medications are in essence psychosomatic in nature. Even most of the pneumonias in old age, caused by organisms, are not cured by antibiotics. It is the mind which is the most powerful and potent of all medicines. Elaborate organ transplants and machine-sustained life prolongation in old age would be an unattractive proposition at this stage in life. The barest essentials like a simple meal, a roof over your head, and a change of clothes cover the basic needs. Thus the wise pensioner shuns medical, and other, support and does not chose to be an economic burden. He seeks contentment which will lead to happiness.

The effort needed to reach this kind of true freedom would generate inner peace, a sense of equanimity, acceptance of death as a positive and essential component of life, and a great deal of knowledge and wisdom. A wealth of scientific research points to the fact that happiness is the strongest indicator of longevity. To quote, "he practices the art of living in a spirit of dispossession amidst his possessions."<sup>2</sup> This is the way to gain greater spiritual clarity. He begins to shun religious rituals.

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<sup>2</sup> Parthasarathy, A., (1983), pp 91-94

The most successful outcome of this phase of life would be entering into the final stage of life, known as *Sanyaasa* - the stage of complete renunciation. The stage of renunciation is prescribed to be the ultimate goal for every individual. This is the state of perennial bliss, benevolence and blessings. Variousy described by ancient thinkers, this is also known as the stage of enlightenment, freeing one from all fear, desires and needs and every kind of bondage. This is true renunciation or *Moksha* (ultimate freedom) as espoused by all great Rishis and the prophets.<sup>3</sup> This is allegorically described as the realisation or entry into the Devaloka,<sup>4</sup> the ascent to paradise,<sup>5</sup> “the house of my father”<sup>6</sup> while still alive!

It seemed to me that my friend had a clear choice of making his retirement a success, or sinking into deep despair and depression, reminiscent of the patients I described earlier. He could accept retirement as a challenge to prove to all that he was still somebody worthy of his name, follow his peers, perhaps set up his own consultancy, write books on his subject and go about teaching and feeling important and useful for as long as he could. He could take up hobbies like golf, bridge and gardening and cruise all the world’s seas until such a time as he would face his nemesis, totally unprepared. Or, he could take this as an opportunity to seek inner peace, bliss and equanimity, to understand himself and his true identity in order to rejoice in the freedom accorded to him, perhaps, for the first time in his life.

He did not ask me for any advice. Soon after he left town and we lost touch. But recently I happened to come across the woman I recognised as his wife, who informed me that they had divorced. He had got himself a face lift and a much younger woman with whom he was now living in Florida. He had a yacht to sail on the Caribbean. He was obviously taking on a new identity and proving himself in his own way. She too had found a new man in her life. I offered them my best wishes.

When I shared this essay with a renowned psychiatrist friend of mine, he informed me that going to work regularly helped people to cope with their deep-seated depression. He thought that the man might have been deeply unhappy with the idea of having to be with his wife ‘full time’ as he no longer had an excuse to escape from her for many hours every day.

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<sup>3</sup> Sankaracharya, Verses 72-107, pp 136-153

<sup>4</sup> BG: Gita.

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Koran.

<sup>6</sup> The New Testament: St John 14. 2.

He must have been depressed and my insensitive outbursts must have needled him to the extent that he did not bother contacting me again. If I had thought about his situation and asked more questions of him before giving my platitudinous words, our friendship might perhaps not have been broken. This made me wonder whether the 'string bag syndrome' in this case was indeed the result of a long repressed depressive illness.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## SUPERSTITION: FAITH OR FEAR?

We had gone to a wedding. The daughter of our good friend was getting married. It was a vibrant and happy occasion. The young bride was the envy of all her friends - she looked radiant. She was surrounded by happy giggles and the clinking of champagne glasses until suddenly someone had asked her what she had worn as ‘something old’. This is the superstition that wearing white and the other four things, namely old, new, borrowed and blue, at one’s wedding were essential for a successful and happy married life. The bride touched her neck to find the thin silver chain with a tiny cross which had belonged to her great grandmother. It had fallen from her neck.

I was astounded to notice that the poor girl became disconsolate and began to frantically look for it. She had never seen the old lady, and the chain was probably worth less than the glass of champagne she had ignored. Someone found the chain later at her dressing table and brought it back to her. She had not worn ‘something old’ and she was clearly unhappy about it. She was not a sentimental person. She was embarking on a new journey in her life and a good omen had been lost. She became fearful of her future as a married woman. This incident reminded me of my first journey away from my ancestral home.

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“The driver has arrived. Are you ready?” asked my father.

“Yes,” I remember saying with a great struggle and mixed feelings. I was apprehensive and also excited at the same time. I had won a prestigious international scholarship to study medicine in India. This was a dream come true for me. I was leaving the house alone to go to university which was 3,000 miles away from home. One of eleven very close knit siblings, I was just 17 years old and had never travelled alone before. Being home-schooled until 12 years of age, I had negligible interpersonal

skills and no confidence in dealing with strangers. I did not even know the various parts of the city in which I lived. The upshot was I did not know how to travel to a distant place. My father had planned the journey for me. I knew that it was going to be very long and arduous. I was about to leave Kathmandu for Patna by aeroplane. I would then have to make a 12-hour train journey to Calcutta by night. After waiting at the railway station in Calcutta (Kolkata) until 8pm the next day, I would embark on a 48 hour train journey to Madras (Chennai). I would change trains there, eventually reaching Bangalore (Bengaluru) at 8pm on the fifth day. I needed all my courage and spirit to boost my confidence.

I remember looking for my mother to say goodbye, hoping for a warm and affectionate hug of encouragement. That would have enormously boosted my confidence. She was nowhere to be found. I called her loudly but my younger sister answered instead. She whispered to me that it was inauspicious to have a menstruating woman in the house when someone was going on a journey, and hence mother was hiding out in the garden. I should not see or hear her when I was about to leave because she was on her period. I felt sad and helpless, and departed with all sorts of bad premonitions and forebodings. I did manage to arrive in Bangalore and reached the hostel, only to learn to my horror that I was allocated a room numbered 13 to share with another medical student who had not yet arrived. Presumably we were the last two to arrive. My fears were realised when I discovered the next day that my place in the medical school had been cancelled for some reason. It took a lot of trouble to reverse that situation.

I returned home a year later during the summer holidays. It turned out to be a Tuesday when I arrived in Kathmandu after a tortuous journey of five days. I was told not to come to the house until it was dark that evening. Apparently, it was auspicious to return home during daylight hours on a Tuesday. It was ok to do so towards the end of the day. I had to curb my emotional need to hug my parents and my siblings, whom I had missed so much for the past year. I waited for nightfall in the house of a friend.

My mother was highly superstitious. She would find a hidden message in any event of any or no consequence and attribute serious importance to it. My sisters were not allowed to wave goodbye to someone going out on a journey if they were menstruating. Even a cat must not cross your path. You must blow on your fingers if you touched your Adam's apple. If you did not do so, it would develop ugly swellings (goitre). I notice that my

sisters have continued to follow many of the superstitions followed by our mother.

My father too was superstitious. As a young boy, I used to be told that I must not sneeze when my father was going out of the house to go to work as it would bring bad luck to him. I used to be terrified of doing so since I used to suffer from hay fever. The most serious belief was that a hearse must not cross your path, for it will lead to another death - maybe your own. So, one had to return and wait for someone else to cross the path before doing so: let someone else die first, how charitable! He was emphatic about travelling on only auspicious days. He asked me to memorise a mnemonic about which day of the week was inauspicious to travel in the direction of the final destination. I have forgotten that now. Many Tibetan Buddhists do not like to travel at all on Saturdays, fearing some catastrophe might come their way.

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I believe that most mothers are very concerned about their children. They want the best for them. They would go to any lengths to protect them and ensure their wellbeing. So it is no surprise that any mother would accept any act or notion, whether obviously logical or illogical, natural or unnatural, earthly or supernatural, which might even remotely affect her child. But what happens to the child after she/he grows up? Does a superstitious mother nurture her child to be a confident and self-assured adult? Do the superstitions exhibited by parents continue to weaken a child, even into adulthood? I remember one incident when a friend of mine—a highly educated and rational person who claimed to be free of superstitions—was explaining such myths to his nine year old daughter. He did not, thankfully, notice the incredulity in my face when I heard him blessing me absentmindedly after I had suddenly sneezed.

I do believe that superstitious parents affect their children profoundly. I cannot quote much scientific research to prove this observation, but we have numerous reports of child abuse in the guise of superstitious religious beliefs in most parts of the world. I can talk of myself, though. I must have been a very cowardly boy at 12 because I used to be scared of ghosts on the other side of the front gate of the house. I could not sleep without light in the room for fear of all kinds of spirits that would roam in it when it got dark. My grandfather must have noticed this, for he gave me a small book called *Hamumaan Chaalisa*, a hymn of 40 lines to the God Hanumaan, to be recited morning and night. I believed him when he said that I should

silently invoke Hanumaan, the Hindu god of ultimate power in the form of a monkey, whenever I felt scared and that he would be there to protect me. That worked wonders for me and I stopped being such a coward in the security of Hanumaan. I can thus see some merit in the suggestion that one superstition can ameliorate the other effects of other superstitions.

Nevertheless I have made a lifetime's worth of conscious effort to discard certain habits; of swearing, reading astrological predictions every week, never sleeping with my head towards the North Pole, not overtaking or crossing the path of a hearse, and many other superstitions with which I was heavily afflicted. I deliberately chose my first flat with the number 13, and was delighted to buy the property we currently reside in with the same house number.

Should we encourage our children to believe in supernatural omens and assumptions? Does it harm them in the long run? Should we actually encourage the little boy to believe in the tooth fairy, by quietly putting some money under his pillow at night? Should we encourage the little girl to believe that Santa brought the gifts, while it was her father who secretly ate the mince pie and drank the milk left on the mantelpiece? Would it be any less intriguing for the little boy if he were to discover the next morning that his mother had rewarded him for not having had a filling in the fallen milk tooth? Would this not encourage him to eat less candy, or not to drink fizzy drinks that damage the teeth? Would it be heart breaking for the little girl to know that Santa was just a myth and that her parents would give her the gifts she wanted? Should my grandfather have tried different methods to help me overcome my fear of the ghosts and spirits?

We do need proper scientific research to ascertain the truth of these customs, if we wish our children to grow up being confident, righteous and strong. Perhaps it is best to remember David Hume who said, "weakness, fear, melancholy together with ignorance are therefore true sources of superstition."<sup>1</sup> Only parents can minimise their children's superstitious beliefs.

A quick glance at literature shows us that superstition has been a very hotly emotive issue, and has been discussed over the millennia. As it is never easy to define an abstract, it is indeed difficult to find an acceptable

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<sup>1</sup> Hume, D., *Essays: Moral, political, and literary; of superstition and enthusiasm*, 1742-54. (Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, USA, 2011).

definition of superstition. Some also call it ‘blind belief’. The Oxford English dictionary gives it this meaning: “excessively credulous belief in and reverence for the supernatural.” Not being sure of its own interpretation, it goes on further to state “a widely held but irrational belief in supernatural influences, especially as leading to good or bad luck, or a practice based on such belief.” But these two phrases do illustrate the complexity of this term, i.e. excessively credulous belief vs irrational belief. The respect or reverence shown to these acts of belief, whether rational or irrational, is one of the greatest paradoxes in the human psyche.

Supporters of superstition believe that engaging in them may enhance one’s performance. They even claim that this may also increase self-confidence in a person. Those opposed to superstition have been known for several centuries before the Christian era. Time and again, they have suggested that it is religion which is responsible for propagating this falsehood, i.e. superstition. We have several websites<sup>2</sup> and spurious research publications which have expressed opinions about superstitions. The majority of these are only good for a laugh, since they do not stand up to objective, scientific and statistically sound scrutiny.

But can we abolish superstition? Not until we become strong in our minds and stop blindly belonging to a religion or sect. Although earlier philosophers decried superstition as atheism or worse, it is clearly apparent that religion, particularly when conducting rituals of any kind, invariably practices superstition, camouflaged as symbolic gestures or acts. As one Maverick Philosopher put in his blog on Monday 4th March 2014, “fear of the invisible, feigned by the mind or imagined from tales publicly allowed, RELIGION; not allowed, SUPERSTITION.”

Serious philosophers in ancient Greece vehemently condemned acts of superstition. Plutarch, in circa 70 AD, thought superstition to be worse than atheism<sup>3</sup> and wrote, “Ignorance and blindness in regard to Gods divides itself at the very beginning into two streams, of which the one produces in hardened characters, as it were in stubborn soils, atheism and the other in tender characters, as in moist soils, produces superstition.” He cautioned further, “every false judgement, as especially concerning these matters, is a mischievous thing; but where emotion also enters, it is most mischievous. For every emotion is likely to be a delusion that rankles; and

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<sup>2</sup> *Live Science*, [www.livescience.com/14141-13-common-silly-superstition.html](http://www.livescience.com/14141-13-common-silly-superstition.html)

<sup>3</sup> Dante, A., *Inferno, The Divine Comedy*, 1321. (Oxford Classics, OUP, UK, 2008).

just as dislocation of the joints accompanied by lacerations are hardest to deal with, so also is it with derangements of the soul accompanied by emotion.”<sup>4</sup>

Voltaire observed that both Christian and non-Christian sects accused each other of superstition. He blamed the clergy for propagating superstitious thoughts and actions to the detriment of the layman and claimed that these benefitted only the church and the clergy.<sup>5</sup> He suggested, “... less superstition, less fanaticism; and less fanaticism, less misery.”

One sect of Muslims ridicules the reverence shown to the burial places, tombs and *Dargaah* (mausoleum) of saints of another Islamic sect. They believe in amulets, talismans and other objects of black magic. Hindus have perhaps as many superstitions as the pages of the Rig Veda. Buddhists too have as many superstitions as one can imagine. It is interesting to note what Buddha had to say about the behaviour of responsible individuals:

They do not get carried away by superstition; they believe in deeds aspiring to results from their own deeds through their own effort in a rational way; they are not excited by widely rumoured superstition, talismans, omens, lucky charms; they do not aspire to results from praying to miracle. (Buddha: Anguttara Nikaya)

The great spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda declared, “I would rather have every one of you be atheists than superstitious fools.”<sup>6</sup>

Superstition is universally practiced. One could prepare an interesting encyclopaedia or compendium of superstitions, ranging from the most sublime to the most bizarre. This could be highly amusing. It is widely recognised that superstition is illogical and should be discarded from our lives. Although one may find that one has purposefully discarded belief in many common superstitions, one still feels compelled to acknowledge something which might herald or signify harm. Most people who claim not to be superstitious involuntarily cross their fingers, touch wood, make the sign of the cross or offer a short prayer, silently or in a whisper.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Babbitt: Translator; *Plutarch: On superstition*. (Loeb classical library edition of *Moralia*, 1928), pp1-11.

<sup>6</sup> Vivekananda Lecture series: “The work before us”, [www.belurmath.org/Swwamivivekananda.org](http://www.belurmath.org/Swwamivivekananda.org). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017).

I was amused to notice the following on the website of the British Council, Education UK:

Question: You are having lunch with your friends and a black-and-white bird lands on your path. How do you react?

A: Say, ‘Nice birdie!’ and throw it a corner of your sandwich.

B: Shoo it away...

C: Gasp in horror, blow it a kiss, run to the nearest tree shouting ‘touch wood’, spit over your left shoulder and round off the whole ritual with the words, “Hello Mr Magpie, how is your wife and children?”

If your answer is C then welcome to the UK!<sup>7</sup> (The British Council Website)

This is a novel way of using superstition, by a government agency to attract foreign students. I wonder whether one of their representatives would be singing the following as a welcome song while receiving the foreign delegates, since this too was given on the same page:

One for sorrow  
 Two for joy  
 Three for a girl  
 Four for a boy  
 Five for silver  
 Six for gold  
 Seven for a secret, never to be told

Does one assume that the British encourage and proudly practice superstition?

Why do people perform these bizarre acts? Primarily, it is a lack of faith in one’s own ability, and fear of the unknown. However, very powerful forces have been exerting their effects on the vulnerable human mind. Superstition as a valuable tool in propagating greed, selfishness and hatred among different religious sects has not been widely acknowledged. All modern religious leaders, self-styled spiritual healers and gurus depend upon a weak human mind which is susceptible to negative suggestions. Their enormous influence and accumulation of wealth testify to this fact.

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<sup>7</sup> *The British Council*. [www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org). (Accessed on 13th Feb 2013).

The concepts of Heaven and hell, the wrath of God, rebirth and reincarnation, all encourage one to believe in religions as they are practiced today. No one really dares to question current religious practices. Many countries actually feel proud to have a state religion because that allows for easier control of their people. Within this superstitious environment, a multi-billion pound Feng Shui industry (*Vaastu Shastra*) is flourishing worldwide, as well as enterprises built around astrology, palmistry, spiritual healing, alternative medicine, and several other activities recognised as fake, or pseudo-sciences.

It is interesting to observe that the leaders of all religious sects accuse one another of indulging in superstition, completely oblivious to the fact that the concept of religion which they propagate is also based upon belief in the supernatural! People ridicule the superstition of others, while cherishing their own. Voltaire too posed this question “Can there exist a people free from all superstitious prejudices?” He then provided his own answer, “that is to ask; can there exist a nation of philosophers?”

God too is said to have told Jesus “Son of man, go thee into the house of Israel and speak with my words unto them; but the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee: for they will not hearken unto me.”<sup>8</sup> St John mentioned the beast in the Book of Revelations. Since then, 666 has been a taboo in all churches and taken to be the devil’s numbers.<sup>9</sup> Would Jesus have condoned this superstition?

Martin’s succinct exposition illustrates the scope of superstition and its effects from Greek to Christian times.<sup>10</sup> There are reports of serious child abuse in the guise of religious practices too.<sup>11</sup> Have we tried to eradicate superstition or are we propagating it to be stronger still?

Is it not essential that contemporary philosophers begin a debate and come up with solutions to this curse of humanity? But it seems ubiquitous; even the word ‘curse’ itself is a concept mired in superstition!

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<sup>8</sup> The St. James Bible: Ezekiel 2, 3 Also, Revelations 13.18.

<sup>9</sup> The St. James Bible: Ezekiel 2, 3 Also, Revelations 13.18.

<sup>10</sup> Martin B.D., 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace J., 2012



# CHAPTER SIX

## EUTHANASIA: KILLERS OF MERCY

There was sad news in the e-newspaper of 16th September 2015 which reported that a child had been given a mercy killing in Belgium. The details were not given.<sup>1</sup> Belgium passed a law on Euthanasia in 2002 which was modified in 2014 to include children under the age of 18. This was the first such incident to be reported from there.

Euthanasia has been much debated over the past few decades. Many are still against this concept. However, its protagonists appear to be winning the argument, as evidenced by its being increasingly accepted as a humane and kind action in several diverse cultures. In Belgium alone, it was reported that 47% of mercy killings were not even registered as such, and that the numbers of euthanasia deaths were increasing exponentially.

There is also a considerable corpus of opinion which believes euthanasia to be a wrong and cruel action. Some go so far as to suggest that, although presented as an act of piety, euthanasia cleverly absolves society of the duty to provide the expensive support needed by the suffering human being who is living in abject misery. Sentiments such as “hiding behind the mask of false benevolence, the healthy and strong offer euthanasia to the weak, frail and disabled person” have been expressed. Whether supporting or opposing, it is interesting to notice that this cold and calculated action appears to be guided mainly by our emotions and not by impartial logic.

The well-presented human rights issue, i.e. the “respect for individual autonomy and the right of an individual to choose in distressing circumstances the time of death, provide prima facie grounds in support of

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<sup>1</sup> Chazan, David, “Terminally ill child becomes first euthanized minor in Belgium.” *The Telegraph*, Paris, 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2016. News.

voluntary euthanasia”<sup>2</sup> is difficult to argue against. In addition, the two phrases “fundamental human dignity” and “in their better interests to die” are often quoted by many. These have never been specified and defined. Hence, I find it compelling to think further about these sentences in a comprehensive manner. This is extremely important since, once performed, euthanasia can never be reversed.

Are both parties not making subjective and emotional issues with these statements? If this is our wish, should we not also be aware that our emotions, sentiments and thinking can result in erroneous judgement, particularly when we do not have sufficient data on which to base our decision? A review of euthanasia and assisted laws around the world shows varying safeguards and practices.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to enumerate a few of the issues involved in the consideration of euthanasia. I do not believe that sufficient consideration has been given to these issues.

Chronically disabled people in pain, i.e. the subjects of voluntary euthanasia, usually show signs of reactive depression. Death may appear to them to be a merciful release from their suffering. But this depression can be treated successfully. I have not been able to find any objective data on the repeated psychological assessments made on the subjects prior to administering euthanasia. Two doctors, usually the same two who agree to offer euthanasia, have to assess the suffering individuals and decide that they are able to make their fateful decisions. Whether these two doctors have to follow a mandatory procedure that includes independent psychological assessment of the subject by a minimum of two specialist psychiatrists is not clear. There are also several other operational issues to consider.

The relationship of the patient with the carer, spouse and different members of the family, treatment options, and available medical and care facilities must be major determinants in a holistic assessment of a patient being considered for euthanasia. I have not been impressed by the Dutch or the Oregon approach.<sup>4</sup> As a geriatrician, I have had to deal with many

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, JM, Kitson, AL, McKnight, TJ. (Chapman and Hale, London 1992) pp167.

<sup>3</sup> “Euthanasia and assisted suicide laws around the world”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/2014/17/euthanasia-assisted-suicide-laws-world>. (Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

of my patients' family members and carers who had conflicting interests (emotional, economic, religious and others) in their elderly relative during his/her end of life management.

My objection is to the easy way out taken by those who advocate euthanasia and who ask doctors to administer the lethal agent. As a doctor who has had to certify many natural deaths, I can say with conviction that this is not a pleasant or satisfying thing to do. No matter how doctors may appear to be unemotional, objective and professional, the fact of death affects them significantly. I know what can kill, but how would I feel if I administered a lethal injection to another human being deliberately? I do not know. How would any doctor feel? How would you feel? Psychologist Dr Allen Ault, a Commissioner of Corrections for the state of Georgia, USA, confessed to the BBC that he still got horrible nightmares, even after so many years of supervising the capital punishments of convicted criminals. He said "no-one has the right to ask a public servant to take on a life-long sentence of nagging doubt, shame and guilt." He had no doubt that he had been committing murders legally.<sup>5</sup>

I have not read any comments on euthanasia by forensic specialists working in prisons who actually administer lethal injections on convicted criminals. Perhaps the thought that one is doing a good deed by preventing harm to many, makes this action comforting. But to end the life of a harmless individual is another matter entirely. What about the long term effects? How will it impact on his/her normal and subsequent performance? We have no data about these issues. Perhaps Dr Shipman<sup>6</sup> too was a well-meaning and compassionate doctor until he voluntarily administered the first lethal dose on his elderly and suffering patient. This led him onto a slippery slope of no return. His wife believed in his innocence until the end, and he never accepted his guilt. Ultimately, he hanged himself in his prison cell.

It used to be very common for the elderly and the very ill to be left out to die, without being given food, water, care or shelter. Some cultures, even today, prohibit death occurring indoors; patients who appear to be terminally ill are taken out of their houses and carried to the designated place for deaths where they die shortly afterwards. If they get better, they are allowed back home. Throughout recorded history, we have known of supporters of euthanasia; including Greek philosophers such as Plato and

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<sup>5</sup> *BBC News Magazine*, 23rd Feb 2014. Hard Talk.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Shipman, *The BBC*, [www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news3391897.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news3391897.stm).

Socrates. Hippocrates was against it for he is on record as saying “I shall not prescribe a deadly drug to please someone, nor give advice that may cause his death.”<sup>7</sup> Today, doctors are expected to follow the spirit of this oath.

The idea of mercy killing has continued over the millennia, whether legally or otherwise. Francis Bacon brought this up in the 17th century.<sup>8</sup> The Nazis killed nearly 5000 disabled children by putting them into mass gas chambers.<sup>9</sup>

I remember seeing a boy, probably in his early teens, who was severely affected by cerebral palsy and subsequent cerebral hypoxia, due to pneumonia, who was left to die outside an orphanage in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A Scottish tourist had found this boy and taken him to the hospital at her own expense. He had survived and become stable enough to travel. She then adopted the orphan. She brought him to Scotland. He had grown big with nourishment and was pubertal. His double incontinence was extremely difficult to cope with for this new mother. He was also totally uninhibited, and at times embarrassingly so. Hence she had brought him to me, to see if I could help.

I was spellbound when I heard his history. This was true human compassion. This was inspirational. This was selfless service without expecting any reward. I thought that the Goddess of Mercy would look like her, if indeed there were any such goddess. The child was already given passive euthanasia in the orphanage. She need not have done what she did. When I asked her why she had done this, she had replied “I felt that that was the right thing to do.” The advocates of euthanasia will obviously disagree with her.

I remember an incident with a friend of mine.

He begged me with tears in his eyes, “Please give me a pill or some injection that I may die.” I was alarmed to see the abject misery in his face. He had been diagnosed as having very advanced cancer two years earlier, and had only partially responded to treatment. While he was still ambulant and self-caring, his prognosis was very poor. He was already

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<sup>7</sup> The Hippocratic Oath, [www.MedicineNet.com](http://www.MedicineNet.com). (Accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Vickers, B.: Editor; *Major works of Francis Bacon*. (Oxford Classics, OUP, 1960), pp 630.

<sup>9</sup> Lehnardt, K., “91 Important facts about the Holocaust,” [www.factretriever.com](http://www.factretriever.com). (Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

showing significant deterioration. It would be a matter of weeks or a few months before he would depart forever.

Believing that the end was near, in a moment of madness of remorse, he confessed his one unfaithful act, which had happened several years earlier, to his wife. She had found this a convenient excuse to leave him. His children too supported their mother and began to avoid him. He was now alone. He had also been my friend since childhood.

This was not the first time he had asked me to assist him to commit suicide. I had ignored his earlier requests. But I could not turn this request into frivolous banter this time. I asked him seriously, "Do you really wish to die?"

"Yes," he said, looking straight into my eyes.

I was pouring some special wine for both of us at that time. He loved his drink and I was trying to cheer him up. I stopped pouring, and stared hard at him for a few seconds. Then I opened the balcony door of my apartment in a high rise building.

"This is the tenth floor, 130 feet above the hard granite floor, come and jump out. You will be dead in seconds - much faster than my pill or the injection - it would kill and you will not feel any pain," I said to him, in all seriousness.

His mouth openly sagged. He finally comprehended what I was gesturing with my hands. I was also shouting, "Jump now! Jump now."

He became rigid, rooted in his chair, and broke down. I stopped shouting, stared at him, but did not make an attempt to do anything else.

After what seemed like a long time, he got up, walked to the glass of wine and took a long gulp.

"This is good. What is it?" he asked.

We had some stilted conversation thereafter. Just before he left, I had asked him why he wished to make a murderer of me.

He looked at me with uncomprehending eyes. Slowly, he realised what I was asking him.

"Sorry," he said. "I did not think."

It was clear to me that he was depressed. He was feeling worthless and a burden to himself. But he had not really wished to die. He lived much longer than expected. He never asked for the pill again, and hinted that that incident had helped him to come to terms with his plight.

There was another profound instance which has strengthened my belief that euthanasia is not the right way.

I was asked to admit a middle-aged woman brought in for palliative care in the hospice near London where I used to volunteer as a part time staff doctor. I was studying the Rig Veda in London during that time, and helping out in the hospice. It was a good diversion for me. As a geriatrician, I had seen many deaths and provided end of life care to many elderly patients. But doing so to younger adults and children was a new experience for me. I was rapidly learning how the death of the elderly differed from the death of younger people and children. The social perspectives are so different when it comes to ageing.

The patient's partner of several years was visibly upset. The patient, at first, was totally indifferent towards me. Her answers were monosyllabic. She let me examine her fully. Suddenly she grabbed my hand and said, "Can you end all this for me, please?"

Being the foolish doctor that I was, I patronised her by saying, "Do not talk like that. We will help you."

"No-one can," she retorted, and turned her face to the wall, dismissing me.

I spent several minutes talking to her partner. He was a kebab shop owner who had faced hard times all his life. They had promised themselves to go to Athens to get married in the same Greek Orthodox Church in which they were both baptised; they had not been able to do so. So they were never married. Their two boys had now grown up and were working as general labourers. He had an elder brother in Athens who had been like a father to him, who he had not seen for many years. In fact, they had lost contact.

He knew that his life partner was dying. She had advanced cancer of the ovary which had spread all over. She had difficulty in breathing. He also asked me whether I could relieve her of her life. If assisted suicide were legal in the country, she could have been given the injection to end

her suffering right there and then. I offered my platitudes once again and departed.

After completing my clerking of the patient, I gave appropriate instructions to the nurse and went to see another patient. But her words “no-one can” came back to haunt me throughout that morning.

How could I provide the help that would make her dying peaceful? I could sense that it was not the pain nor the discomfort of laboured breathing that was making her want to die. What was it? I began to study my notes, i.e. her case history, again and again. I saw a way out.

I went back to her room later that afternoon. I had discussed the case with my colleagues and the hospice director. They were in agreement with my plan of managing the end of her life, although I had had to make efforts to convince them.

The patient looked at me with dull, expressionless eyes and turned her face away when I knocked and entered her room. The man stared at the floor. I did not know how to say what we had decided to do. I hesitated for a while and said softly, “I can get you two married here.”

I had not expected to see her turn towards me with incredulity. She suddenly sat upright which she had been unable to do when I was examining her. The man had actually jumped, speechless. Their unspoken words and their shining eyes told me all I needed to know.

I explained that I would be getting in touch with the representative of the Greek Orthodox Church in England, and would make all the arrangements for the wedding as soon as possible. I also asked for the details of the church in Athens they had mentioned. I did not tell them that I would be trying to trace the elder brother through the church. I did not wish to disappoint them if my plan did not materialise.

They both began to cry silently, holding each other. They became speechless. I exited in haste, lest I too might lose my objectivity and succumb to my own emotions.

I had much to do. After several hours on the phone, I eventually traced the supreme head of Greek Orthodox Church in England who was visiting Rotherham, up North. He agreed to finance the trip of the priest of the church in Athens in which the couple had been baptised, and wished to be wed in, to come to officiate at the wedding. Further, he generously

volunteered to pay for the travel of the elder brother too, which I kept as the last minute surprise. The nurses in the hospice did home baking and someone found a fine wedding gown from a charity shop. The director of the hospice agreed to provide tea for the guests, who were deliberately restricted in number.

The wedding was a solemn affair. The elder brother, who was unmarried, was the best man. He had brought his late mother's wedding ring for the bride. There was no-one on the side of the bride to give her away, so the director of the hospice did the honours. Two volunteers from the local high school became the bridesmaids.

The patient died two days later. Her death certificate had her new surname. I ask myself: Would I have been as satisfied if I had administered a whopping lethal dose of morphine to the patient when she had asked for it?

Many of my elderly patients, who did not want any interference or medical treatment, would simply refuse medicine, food and water and point their toes to the ceiling. Any intervention against their wishes would have constituted medical assault and would not have been allowed. They would soon become unconscious, and die within a short time. No-one who really wanted to die has ever asked me to kill him or her during the many years of my medical practice. Those who did ask had no desire to die, really.

There is no doubt that most people who ask for assistance to die are in reality trying to find the will to live with less pain, less discomfort, less dependence and less sense of worthlessness, having their psyche debilitated by the chronic nature of their predicament. They need precisely that support—and not the easy solution of taking away their lives. This kind of support is available in hospices across the length and breadth of the country, albeit in inadequate numbers. The science and art of managing the terminally ill patient requires empathy, interest in the holistic practice of medicine, and humility on the part of the health worker.

Should a civilised society not demonstrate a little compassion by making palliative care facilities easily available to all who suffer from the terminal stage of an illness? Ideally, they should be counselled, and provided with psychological support from the onset of their illness to prepare them for what is to come. The end can indeed be a blissful event, although tinged with inevitable sadness.



Euthanasia has been debated by the UK Parliament and rejected.<sup>10</sup> It is legal in several states in the USA, Switzerland, the Netherlands and several other countries. Suicide is illegal in India. Sob stories of how a terminally ill patient or his family or carer have spent a fortune to take a patient to one of these centres frequently come up in the tabloids and are very effective in projecting this emotion of mercy killing among many of our kind hearts. If they would, instead, start a campaign to establish a hospice in every county in the UK, they would be doing a tremendous service to their fellow human beings at the cusp of their life's end.

Many severely distressed, disabled and elderly patients who may fulfil the proposed criteria for mercy killing do not wish to die even if this were to be offered. On the contrary, they are worried in case someone dispenses with them. My wife told me of a recent experience of her friend whose 86 year old mother was, apparently, terminally ill. She had had several small strokes, had lost her speech and was totally disabled, doubly incontinent and refusing to open her eyes to look at her children and her visitors. She would not sit up. After several days of regularly visiting her mother in this state, this daughter felt that her mother was in severe distress and should be helped to depart peacefully. So she asked her softly, "Mother, do you want me to help you to die?" The mother suddenly opened her eyes and shook her head. From that moment, she did not shut her eyes upon visitors and greeted them with a smile. She would demand to be sat up. She must have been frightened that she would be done away with if she had continued her charade! She was obviously seeking some sympathy, but not to the extent of being killed in mercy.

John Milton was probably not alluding just to his blindness when he wrote, "they also serve who only stand and wait."<sup>11</sup> We have seen time and again that individuals who themselves are very frail and disabled, have cared for a severely disabled and terminally ill patient for significant periods of time with diligence and devotion, succumb soon after the demise of their loved ones. Paradoxically, they were keeping their carers alive.

Many individuals suffering from quadriplegia and other sufferers of intractable neurological conditions, who genuinely sought their own quick

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<sup>10</sup> Bingham, John, "MPs reject assisted dying law," *The Telegraph*, 11th Sept 2015. News.

<sup>11</sup> Milton, J., *Paradise Lost: A poem written in ten books*, 1667. (Penguin Books, England, 1980).

deaths earlier, have changed their minds through the power of love and compassion shown to them; some were even subsequently married.<sup>12</sup> I knew a devoted wife of a patient of mine, who used to visit and sit with her dying husband every day in hospital. She was admitted the day after his funeral and succumbed to a fatal myocardial infarction.

This clearly illustrates that even the frailest and most disabled person can contribute to keeping others alive, perhaps by giving them a purpose and some solace. This in turn conveys that for every story espousing the desirability of providing compassionate end of life care, there is a sob story which highlights the plight of people thought appropriate for mercy killing.

Can killing ever be merciful to the person who is killed? It certainly may appear merciful to one who is spared the sight of the suffering of a fellow human being. Is this desirable? People talk of ‘death with dignity’ and ‘good death’. I do not understand these phrases. I do not understand whose dignity should be in question or for whom the death should be good. Those who advocate euthanasia use these phrases frequently, but fail to provide a consistent explanation of these terms.

We appear to be living in a world dominated by mutually opposing and irrational ideologies. We have the enthusiasts who wish to save lives at any cost and there are many others; the ardent believers who want to end it early as an act of compassion. When the time of death arises, most of us would like to slip painlessly into oblivion. We have finally agreed that we can give ‘advance directive’, or write a ‘living will’ in advance of any illness, to allow us to precisely specify our wishes for our terminal care or the management of our incurable conditions. We can thus protect ourselves from the overzealous doctors and the hospitals that perform various procedures upon us and administer medications, food and fluids, in an attempt to keep us alive for as long as they can. Although this is an attempt to prolong the life for as long as possible, its real function is to prolong the agony of death.

A group of a few elders, church men, the patient or a legal representative, an advocate, and a public figure could constitute a committee to determine the eligibility criteria for euthanasia if a country made this legal. Expert

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<sup>12</sup> “Quadriplegic marries”, *ABC News*, [www.abcnews.com/Health/decoding-marry-quadriplegic-couple-tells-love-story-id=19282468](http://www.abcnews.com/Health/decoding-marry-quadriplegic-couple-tells-love-story-id=19282468). (Accessed on 19th October 2017).

doctors should be available to this committee to shed light upon the medical conditions and the nature of their pathology on the subject of a proposed mercy killing. Let the committee be the judge and the executioner. If a society must decide that euthanasia is a humane action, let its leaders administer the poison. I wonder which president, prime minister, speaker of the parliament, chief of justice, Sankaracharya, or whether the Pope or the Ayatollah will be the first to inaugurate this law by administering poison to kill a helpless suffering fellow human.

It is not difficult to kill, but it is hard to save. It is also hard to live with the consequences of killing.

The doctors who support voluntary euthanasia need to reflect on whether this is compatible with their vocation. Personally, I submit that administering euthanasia as a doctor is professionally incompatible. We have been trained to try to save, not kill. The doctor must not become God or the Angel of Death. Our job is to try to heal, comfort and improve the quality of the remainder of the lives of our patients as far as it is possible and supported by nature.

There is no substitute for well-planned and well-delivered palliative care. I do not know what the doctors who administer voluntary euthanasia are called in those countries where this is legal. Are they called ‘killers of mercy?’

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# BIOETHERAPY FOR RELIGIOUS MALADIES: AN ELIXIR OF QUESTIONS

I wished to visit the Ashram (*Aashram*, a hermitage) of an ancient sage and his wife who had lived in the lower Himalayas several millennia earlier. I knew that a small hut had been constructed, supposedly at the very spot where the ancient couple had had their Ashram. We have no idea when this hut had become the *Maataa Anasooyaa* Temple and was dedicated to the wife of the sage. About two kilometres further, the cave—among the hard and slippery rocks, beside the amazing waterfall of the river Alaknanda—was known as *Atri Gupha* (Atri’s cave).<sup>1</sup> It is widely believed that Rishi Atri had received enlightenment when he was meditating in that cave.

I wished to stand beneath a tree at that Ashram, look around and imagine how it would have been when Rishi Atri, the original source of my Y chromosome, and his wife, Anasooya, had lived there several thousands of years ago. This was possibly as far back as I could trace my ancestry. Perhaps this ancestral connection needs some explanation.

I was born into a Brahmin family belonging to *Atri Gotra*. Traditionally, the Brahmins had been very precious about guarding the purity of their caste. They did this by establishing a custom whereby every male child born must belong to a *Gotra*. *Gotra* identifies the name of one of the seven ancient Rishis, the original ancestors of the Brahmins. Literally, *Gotra* means ‘cow pen’ in Sanskrit, the place used traditionally to deliver a baby. Thus, any male child born in the ‘cow pen’ of Rishi Atri, and his descendants, will be allocated *Atri* as his *Gotra*. Thus an unbroken line of male descendants has been preserved. There must be 100s of 1000s of men belonging to Atri Gotra. I met one south Indian Brahmin who lived in Aberdeen whose Gotra was the same as mine. I am sure our DNAs will match if tested.

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<sup>1</sup> “Atri Gupha,” *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5Pub9inVE>. (Accessed on 17th September 2017).

The realisation that I had translated the mantras given by my founder ancestor, Rishi Atri, several millennia earlier, had given me the goose pimples. I wished to bathe in the Alaknanda, the same river where Rishi Atri must have bathed every day and offered his oblations to Agni, the Vedic representation of the Supreme, and light a lamp as a token of gratitude. The prospect had so thrilled me, that I had made the special trip from Scotland to India.

This was the purpose of my visit to Hardwar which is at the foothills of the Himalayan range of the gigantic mountains in northern India. The Ganges (*Gangaa*) emerges here after the fusion of the Alaknanda and the Bhagirathi rivers in the mountains high above. One would need to negotiate the narrow and winding road for one full day of travel from Hardwar up to the small township of Pachali. From there one needed to go a further 20km on a mud road and then begin an arduous ascent of five km, trekking on foot through the thick forest at over 10,000 feet. I had no idea until recently that this Ashram existed.

I was looking forward to this adventure of potholing at that altitude, dragging myself on my stomach to negotiate the narrow entrance of this cave. Unfortunately, I could not accomplish this; I was stranded at the foothills for several days because of severe rainfall which had caused landslides and damaged the mountain roads. The advice from the army was to travel only if it was absolutely essential. I would not have been allowed to go at all.

Rishi Atri has given several mantras, which are found in the Rig Veda, which is regarded as the oldest literature in the world. It is a complicated and abstruse literature, composed in ancient Sanskrit verse, which I have translated into English. The fifth book of this treatise is named after Rishi Atri and is known as *Aatreya Mandala*. He is also credited as the inventor of Arani, a small contraption made of two planks and a handle, constructed from a special kind of hard wood, which when rubbed together would easily produce sparks of fire. This had become a household item in every home, making it very easy for all to light a fire. This was perhaps the forerunner of the modern box of matches!

I waited for several days for the weather to improve. But there was a pattern of heavy rainfall and thunderstorms during the nights and relatively deceptive calm sunshine during the days. The river's water level continued to rise and the river banks became very muddy due to the unusual

landslides and high waves in the normally serene river. This forced a break in the journey gave me an opportunity to explore the township of Hardwar.

Hardwar is famous as a place of pilgrimage for the Hindus, millions of whom come here to bathe in the holy water of the Ganges (Gangaa), perform *Shraaddha* (a ritual of homage) to their dead parents and ancestors, and visit the temples and ashrams of religious Gurus and Yogis. The township was full of temples and pilgrims. Many pilgrims had been stranded, like me, as they too were unable to scale further up the mountain to the temple of Badrinath, which was situated at about 12,000 feet above sea level.

At first, I liked what I found. The multitude of colours in the outfits worn by the pilgrims, the bright shop displays, the street vendors cooking fresh snacks and sweets, and the loud gestures of the shopkeepers inviting you into their shops, all added to a festive atmosphere to the township. I would also take long walks by the river in the mornings and evenings. I would see the pilgrims, men, women and children, taking a dip in the swirling water holding on to the steel chain kindly installed by the municipality. The younger women would appear to be conscious of their wet clothes clinging to their bodies, as they would take the dip fully dressed. The older women would only wear their petticoats, pulled up to cover the bosoms, and recite prayers loudly while bathing. They would not show whether or not they were conscious of their appearance when they got out of the water. It was amusing to get some interesting glimpses. Young men would display their bulging physiques and some would even swim in the dangerous river; the older men would not be so adventurous. The evenings were full of music and prayers in Sanskrit. They would float thousands of small oil lamps with flowers in the river as an offering to the *Goddess Gangaa*. One sensed a profound vibration of faith and devotion permeating the air, along with the fragrance of camphor and incense.

But this kind of wonderfully invigorating feeling lasted only for a couple of days.

I began to notice the merchandise for sale in the shops. There were colourful booklets, trinkets, amulets, charms, plastic bottles, jars and buckets containing the “holy waters of *mother Gangaa* from Har Ki Pauri,” the lagoon by the bank of the river where Lord Shiva himself had bathed! There were other shopkeepers who claimed the same spot to be the one where the God Vishnu had bathed, and others claimed the spot for Lord Krishna. The overall emphasis was on bewildering the pilgrims and

making them spend their limited resources, by instilling fear and guilt in them. The books in all Indian languages, including English, were full of distorted stories from ancient mythology. There were also books written by men looking impressive and learned on the cover photographs. Even a rapid and cursory glance at a few pages would reveal their false and bizarre interpretation of the mantras and the prayers.

I did notice lines of pilgrims on the banks of the river performing the *Shraa-ddha*, since that was the designated *pitri pakshya* (fortnight for the ancestors). I also began to notice the excessively persuasive soliciting by the priests offering to perform *Shraa-ddha* for the pilgrims. It is customary all over the world to remember the dead, usually on the anniversary of their deaths. The Hindus call it the holy ritual of *Shraa-ddha* and attach very great importance to this ritual. Some of the priests would just not let go of their potential victim. The priests would negotiate their fee but the pilgrim would not be told at the beginning that he would have to offer additional money for each god and ancestor who would be invoked. And many would be invoked. This would eventually add up to be a lot more than expected by the man performing the ritual. I remembered being duped like that a long time ago.

Entry to any temple was equally hazardous for one's purse and bare feet. The florists would have prepared offerings of all sorts to the god or the goddess as appropriate, and would offer to look after the shoes for free, if one made a purchase from them. The pilgrim would be continually hounded until he/she could show that a purchase had been made. Once inside the temple, the priest would bless you nicely if you offered a substantial offering to the deity. He would also perform worship in the name of anyone whose blessing you wished, if additional offerings were made. I visited many such temples just to see the expressions on the faces of the pilgrims. I am sure many were very educated and rational people who incongruously demonstrated total stupidity by falling prey to the system and peer pressure.

There were many Ashrams too in the vicinity of the temples. Holy men lived and taught there. None were empty. I was politely invited on several occasions by their agents to "just go inside and listen to the Swamiji." Exhortations like "it would not cost you anything, why not go inside and just listen?" I felt that although I could resist the mesmerising prowess of the rhetoric of these holy men, I might be beaten if I dared to challenge any of them on their interpretation of the Vedic mantras. I declined and avoided them.

I began to notice the scanty facilities that were available to the pilgrims. I found that many had no place to stay for the night - they were lying on the side of the roads. The toilets were few and filthy. The streets were littered with rubbish and flies were buzzing all over the displayed food and sweets which were exposed to dust and bird droppings. Why is it that the millions of pilgrims who bring so much of a boost to the local economy do not receive any support from the local community?

To add to this indignity, they were being subjected to lies and cheating by the agents of God too! One would not expect to be cheated in the place of pilgrimage by petty thugs and pickpockets. One would expect the gurus to preach the truth, and not rubbish in obscure rhetoric. Should a place of pilgrimage not be serene and peaceful? One should be able to contemplate there quietly, undisturbed by the agents of the Godmen, the shopkeepers, and the cacophony of loud hailers blasting songs and badly recited hymns. Surely it is the right of every pilgrim to feel safe, eat clean food and have decent shelter!

All these observations made me very angry. I also began to remember my experiences as a tourist visiting other places in India, such as Tirupati, Madurai, Badrinath, Rameshwaram and the Buddhist Stupa at Saranath. I have also visited many temples in Thailand and Cambodia, the churches, mosques and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, Israel; the Vatican in Rome; churches in Malta; the Church of the Baby Jesus in Prague and Chicago, and many other places of interest. I realised that the blatant commercialism camouflaged in religious garb was the same all over. I cannot forget the spectacle of a breathlessly panting and profusely sweating old man from Brazil who had been conned into dragging a big heavy wooden cross uphill on Via Dola Rosa leading to the ancient Church in Jerusalem. He was even given a discount for the price of the cross! I remember talking to the pilgrims, and many had said to me that they had felt blessed after visiting these shrines. They too had carried crosses. It was their vows that had made them do it. They had been made to believe that they would have committed a great sin if they had not been able to fulfil their vows. Should any religion stoop so low as to exploit the most credulous in this way?

Every pilgrim appreciates that priests as well as shopkeepers need to earn a living, but surely he does not expect to be ripped off by false pretences. The religious rituals should hold profound significance, not just become a source of lucrative income for the priest, or a tool of superstition. Some of the misguided among us perform elaborate religious ceremonies as an opportunity to show off lavishness and pomposity too.



The old news of Mr. Mallya offering ten million Rupees (£118,000) to the temple of Tirupati Balaji after not paying his workers for six months, and eventually dissolving his airline company,<sup>2</sup> was an example of this kind of behaviour.<sup>3</sup> History tells us that many cruel kings and autocrats built temples as a penance to appease their gods and thus reassured, continued with their nefarious practices.

I began to be quite disturbed by these thoughts, which would not stop surfacing repeatedly. It became clear to me that religion was encouraging, permitting and/or turning a blind eye to many wrongdoings, openly peddling untruths, and exploiting the sentiments and resources of the faithful, for the selfish gains of its organisations and workers. Religions had become great commercial enterprises the world over, where spurious gods and their fake gospels were being sold by spurious ‘godmen’ to vulnerable and gullible human beings. This was obviously propagating sectarianism, greed, and conflict, thus causing great harm to humanity.

I also realised many of us like performing religious rituals, however irrational they might appear. We perform them as we are told to, and without asking questions. We understand it to be an act of blasphemy if doubts and questions are raised during a religious ritual. How can we find a way which would encourage the sublime to flourish and the base to disappear from our religious endeavours?

This seemingly paradoxical situation further increased my frustration. I was asking myself all kinds of questions, analysing facts, weeding out fictions and getting nowhere. Finally, logic prompted me to restrict my analyses to just one ritual, and carry out research on it in the greatest detail possible, in the hope that I might be able to find a way to turn that activity into a sublime and blissful event. I began to concentrate on just one ritual, the *Shraa-ddha*, which was being performed there frequently and with good attendance. This ritual was connected to my travel to Atri Gupha, too.

I used to follow the family tradition myself and perform three *Shraa-ddhas* every year, one for my mother, another for my father and a combined one for both, in that auspicious fortnight which fell around September each year; the *Pitri Pakshya*, meaning ‘fortnight for the ancestors’. This would

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<sup>2</sup> “Kingfisher airline crisis,” Timeline, [www.Thehindu.com>article14380262](http://www.Thehindu.com>article14380262). ((Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2017).)

<sup>3</sup> NDTV. (30th Jan 2013).

be regarded as a very holy undertaking, which only a son was privileged to perform. This was considered the most solemn duty a man could do for his dead parents. This was indeed the main reason for a man to get married - to produce a son. The repeatedly asserted belief was that the spirits would go hungry and thirsty if they were not fed annually by their sons. A very strict procedure had to be followed. The officiating priest had to be a Brahmin by birth. If the spirit of the ancestor was made unhappy by a son's failure to make the appropriate offerings, or by not following the strict procedure of this ritual, then a curse might ensue, or some undesirable circumstances might fall upon him or his family. I had observed my father and grandfather when they did this *Shraa-ddha*. So I too performed this by rote.

The ritual had to be performed after self-purification the previous day when I had to avoid consuming any meat or alcohol. Only one cooked meal was allowed; fruits and/or some milk constituted the evening meal. No sexual intercourse was allowed that night. After a bath the next morning, the ceremony of *Shraa-ddha*, the offering of rice balls, would begin.

The family priest would initiate an elaborate process which would go somewhat as follows. A small area on the ground would be swept, cleaned and sprinkled with water to be designated as the altar. An oil lamp would be lit within this area. He would then chant several mantras invoking the gods to come and bless the occasion and to ward off any harmful spirits. He would sprinkle holy water from a pitcher (freshly collected and blessed by his reciting mantras earlier) in all ten directions. He would then invoke several gods serially, and symbolically shape Kush grass—which is said to be a very holy plant—into the human form of a human body. Each god had to be bathed, dressed, offered food and drink symbolically and presented with money. Once all the gods had been well-seated and propitiated inside the altar, the priest would ask me to invoke my ancestors.

I would have to prepare several balls of rice by cooking the rice itself in milk and roll it into balls the size of a small orange. I would recite after him several prayers and mantras, offering worship with flower petals, milk, honey, yoghurt and water. The first to be invoked would be the spirit of my father, then of my mother and subsequently came the turn of paternal grandparents and their parents, then the maternal grandparents and their parents. Thereafter came the turn of all great uncles, aunties, and so on. One also had to invoke the wife's dead parents, the teachers who

first taught us the alphabet and those who initiated one into Brahminism at a special ceremony called *Upa-naya-na*.<sup>4</sup> It was customary to offer the rice balls, covered in black sesame seeds, to each of them. Finally, when the priest was satisfied that the spirits of all the invoked ancestors and the gods had been adequately fed and watered, he would ask them to bless me. Then he would thank them, asking them to leave and return when invoked the following year. The priest would then chant some more prayers and bless me for successfully conducting the ceremony.

It would then be my turn to propitiate the priest by putting a yellow sandalwood paste on his forehead and giving him *Dakshinaa*, a generous fee in cash. He would collect all the items that were offered to the spirits and the gods—e.g. money, clothing, ornaments, gold and silver pieces—except the rice balls. He would then eat the specially prepared lavish meal and depart contentedly. I would be exhausted after that ritual and often not even remember the wonderful and tender memories associated with my parents. The whole ritual would be a futile exercise in this respect. But I continued this charade year after year in the same fashion.

I came to understand the real purpose of this ritual just four years ago. I came to know that the term *Shraa-ddha* comes from a Sanskrit word *Shra-ddhaa*, which means reverence. It is commonly used to express respect to someone, especially as an act of gratitude. I found the origins of this tradition in the Rig Veda,<sup>5</sup> in Yama Sookta.<sup>6</sup> The reference is explicit. The son lights the funeral pyre of his parent, thanks him for nurturing him into a righteous person, and says the prayers wishing *bon voyage* to the spirit (believing there is one, although the mantras do not fully corroborate this supposition) into the deep void. Subsequently, the elders in that ancient society designated one fortnight a year for all to remember their dead parents and all those who had influenced or contributed in some way to their becoming righteous individuals. The offering of rice balls and water, i.e. the oblations, was a symbolic act. The man was offering everything to his ancestors that sustained his own life; it was not to nourish the spirits of his ancestors but to satisfy himself by this acknowledgement of gratitude and veneration.

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<sup>4</sup> Pandey R., *Hindu Samskaras; socio religious study of the Hindu sacraments*. (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, India, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> RV: 10, 14. 7-8; RV: 10. 15, 1

<sup>6</sup> RV: 10.16.1

The scare stories and anecdotes about the spirits depending and thriving upon the annual offering of the rice balls, the innuendo suggesting some untoward events or curse falling upon the defaulting son and the need to perform the ritual perfectly as decreed by the priest, were all designed to enhance the status of the priest as well as to ensure a substantial regular income for him. I stopped performing the traditional *Shraa-ddha* described above when I realised that I was not only blindly following a wrongful action, but I was also aiding the lies and exploitation on the part of the priests. In addition, I was wasting my hard earned resources on false beliefs. I have now begun to choose a convenient day in September to go to a quiet place on the bank of a river and silently remember all those dead relatives and friends, and anybody who did me some good. I offer handfuls of water to each as a token of my gratitude. The expense which used to be incurred during the *Shraa-ddha* ceremony is now given to a deserving poor student, or someone very needy.

When the rains did not abate, the roads remained closed and the date of my departure from India came nearer, I decided to abort my trip to Atri Gupha. Early the next morning, I chose an isolated spot on the bank of the Ganges which had some steps constructed for safe bathing. After taking the symbolic dip in the river and half submerging myself, I began to offer handfuls of water to each one on my mental list. An idea suddenly flashed into my head during this process. This was the solution, the mantra, i.e. a formula that I was desperately trying to discover. I stopped for a while and then continued my own ritual until the last person had been remembered and thanked. This contented me.

The formula that had flashed through my mind at that dawn when I was half submerged in the clear waters of the Ganges was '*wayam prichhaamah*' (we ask). Just as medications derived from within the human body can help to cure cancer and other diseases—which is known as biotherapy—the spirit of religion can help eradicate religious maladies and malpractices. We can do this by examining each and every component of a ritual.

I have noticed many similarities between daily rituals, elaborate ceremonies, and compulsive obsessive neurosis, schizophrenia and autoimmune disorders. I have seen and treated some of my obsessively religious relatives when they developed additional illnesses. Since these malpractices, the aberrations sprouted from religion, are like cancer which is the result of the body's distorted healing processes, we can use the spirit of religion as biotherapy to eradicate or cure these maladies.

I realised that although I had discarded the old custom, I had developed my own spiritual ritual, which made me happy performing it. This was my fourth year of offering water oblations like this. I had not realised earlier that most of us need rituals of some kind or other for a variety of reasons - psychological, social, spiritual and so on. My need was very personal: a psychological need. This need makes us blindly follow traditions, without questioning their significance. Is it possible for rituals to be based on the truth and not on spurious scares and superstitions? In other words, should the rituals not be based on the spirit of religion rather than on their sectarian or spurious dogmas? The essence or the spirit of any religion teaches honesty, righteous behaviour, tolerance, compassion and the discipline of one's mind and body, all of which enhance self-confidence and equanimity.

The various rituals designed by priests should enhance these concepts, not exacerbate superstition, fear and greed. For example, it had taken a lot of study for me to understand the purpose and significance of the ritual of *Shraa-ddha*; I was now able to modify this ritual by discarding the untruths which had clung to it for a very long time. My self-styled method of performing *Shraa-ddha* gave me much happiness and satisfaction. It was the spirit or the essence of this ritual which satisfied my emotional and spiritual needs.

We need to separate the false premises in every ritual and religious ceremony which spread fear and superstition, and weaken the human mind. This will reveal the real essence or purpose of the ritual. The lies and deceit too will thus become obvious. We have to learn to ask ourselves why we carry out a certain ritual. We need to teach our children to question us about these things. We can seek further answers from our priests, vicars, mullahs, rabbis, gurus, lamas and all clergy. They must explain the significance and logic behind every ritual they recommend and ask us to perform. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism all encourage spiritual enquiry. The clergy must accept their prophets' original sermons.

If we agree that our lives are being governed by blind and irrational beliefs which subject us to unwanted exploitations, we must start making serious enquiries. At first a few clergy in all religions will very likely discourage us from doing so; threats of sanctions and expulsions may follow. They might take this kind of enquiry as a threat to their own livelihood. I suspect that they themselves are also ignorant like us, and are simply plying their trade and believing in it too! But we need to be

persistent and continue with our childlike, exhausting ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ repeatedly until we are satisfied. This was the mantra of ‘religious biotherapy’ that had flashed into my head on that dawn.

Our religions should welcome this trend among the faithful. We have seen time and again that any enterprise which peddles an inferior commodity eventually fails and goes into liquidation. A company selling genuine goods shall always prosper. Our multi-billion pound industry in religion will remain healthy and withstand the test of time if truth and honesty become its fundamental pillars once again for all to see.

This inquisitiveness will behave like immunotherapy; the phoney components of all rituals will be selectively targeted and destroyed by the enquiring mind. This action will begin to change our rigid mind set. Each ritual will be conducted with the same faith but its truthful purpose, i.e. its spirit, will always be in the fore. This religious biotherapy will destroy the bonds of our ignorance, blind beliefs and superstitions, and make us truly free. It is not unthinkable that modifications in the traditional rituals will automatically follow over the next few generations, prompting all of us towards a more benevolent world of whichever religion we may choose to accept and follow.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE REALITY OF REBIRTH: A CIRCLE WITHOUT A CENTRE

We were travelling in a car when my companion, a scientist of distinction, suddenly exclaimed, “No, definitely not- I do not wish to be born again.” I tried to divert the conversation to light topics, saying, “I would like to be born as a beautiful woman if it were possible.” But he began to quote the usual mantras in Sanskrit, which extol a man’s quest to attain ‘*Nirvaana*’, when he or she becomes one with the Creator, thus ending the painful cycle of rebirths and deaths. Apparently, this is then the ultimate stage of eternal bliss, the Cosmic Consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

He looked very serious, even animated with the emotions of a hypnotised person. This amused me and prompted me to ask a naughty question, perhaps to needle him a bit. I too pretended to be equally serious and asked, “How do you know that you will be reborn as a man, if at all?” He glared at me and quoted several lines from the *Geetaa* (Gita, BG) espousing the discourses of Krishna to Arjuna about the cycle of Karma and its results in this or subsequent lives. And here was a unique situation. A scientist whose working life had been spent on searching for the truth had now just stooped to memorising the verses of the BG without making any effort at the critical analyses of their contents. He appeared to have taken this up seriously after his retirement.

I tried to help him bring out his scientific, enquiring mind. I should have perhaps shut up but did not keep mum. Instead, I said, “That was probably the opinion of Veda Vyaasa. He had dictated a musical interlude, known as the Gita (BG) to his disciple Ganesha, the scribe, while dramatising the war of Mahabharata. Did you know that the Jains think

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<sup>1</sup> Mascaro, J., “Swetasvatara Upanishad,” *The Upanishads*. (Penguin classics, London, 1965), pp 85-86.

that Krishna is waiting to be reborn as a *Tirthaankara* in the next age that is coming soon?<sup>2</sup> I think all this deserves some good scientific research.”

He looked at me, unsure of what to say. “I am past all research now,” he finally said, “One cannot research Cosmic Consciousness. You may mock me but my faith will see you off,” he added impatiently.

*Brahmachakra* (Disc of *Brahmaa*) is supposed to denote the Cycle of the Creator. It is a fascinating term from *Swetasvatara* Upanishad<sup>3</sup> adopted by the sect known as *Anandamargi*, which began to spread its roots around 1955 in India, and has since spread far and wide.<sup>4</sup> This Upanishad is more affiliated with the Black Yajurveda, which is favoured in Tantrism (the practice of Tantra). He obviously did not know that BG espoused Yoga and not Tantra. The organisation calls itself “a global spiritual and service organisation” as attested on its website.<sup>5</sup> He had probably come under the influence of the practitioners of Tantra, which struck me as unexpected.

He began to fidget in his car seat, looked disturbed, but controlled himself and looked out of the window after giving me a piercing look. I smiled and said, “If only looks could kill.” He did not utter a syllable until we had reached our destination. His parting words were, “I hope we shall not meet again under similar circumstances.” I realised that I had insulted him in some way, though unintentionally.

Strangely, I felt kind of chastised. How dare I mock ancient beliefs? How do I know that I am on the path of truth? Honestly, who do I think I am? I began to look at myself from scientific, philosophical and religious perspectives.

## The scientific perspective

Well, I said to myself, I have evolved from a cell, one half of which had come out of my father in his spermatozoon, and the other half was from my mother’s ovum. This is undisputed because this process has been

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<sup>2</sup> Sanglikar, M., *Krishna in Jainism*, [www.hubpages.com/religion-philosophy/Krishna-in-jainism](http://www.hubpages.com/religion-philosophy/Krishna-in-jainism).

<sup>3</sup> Avadhuta, AV, *Brahmachakra*, [www.anandamarga.org/articles/Brahmachakra](http://www.anandamarga.org/articles/Brahmachakra). (Accessed on 17th September 2017).

<sup>4</sup> “Cosmic Consciousness”, *The Divine Life Society*, [sivanandaonline.org>public\\_html](http://sivanandaonline.org>public_html). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



clearly demonstrated in the laboratory and used to produce thousands of test-tube babies. So we can take this to be true.

We have studied the development of this fertilised cell, how this fertilised cell divides into two, then four and eight and so on. At every stage it would be changing into a peculiar creature - looking like a blob or a worm, a fish or a frog and eventually a baby girl which mysteriously transforms into a boy half the time. Many of these embryos do not survive, and are expelled as waste products by way of menstruation, miscarriage or still births. Many are born 'normal' and some with aberrations which we call abnormalities. My mother had had two miscarriages before I was born alive—so she had told me.

Going backwards, the spermatozoon and the ovum which had come from my parents were the evolved cells of my grandparents, who were similarly produced by their parents. We can see this continuity when tracing many generations. Indeed this would take us back many millennia when we reach down to trace the original cell, a ubiquitous stem cell (a particle?) which evolved into a plant or an animal. That takes us back to The Big Bang theory: the miracle of the nano-nano-nano-nano sized speck developing into the vast universe, the galaxies.

We know and can prove that our cells are continuously—though at different rates—dying and being replaced. This process starts after the embryonic stage and continues until the second of what we call clinical death. This phenomenon is more obvious to us when we look at the plant kingdom. A tree continuously grows, sheds its flowers, leaves and dried up branches for a long time. Its roots would sprout elsewhere and become trees. This is not the rebirth of the tree but its propagation. Eventually the whole tree falls but its 'spirit' which made it has already continued elsewhere, long before it falls.

Everything around us is thus proclaiming clearly that it is evolution and transformations that are occurring, and there is nothing like a definite death. So how can there be a rebirth? We are never dead because we persist through our offspring who facilitate our continuation. 'Dust to dust' merely means that the original source was speculated to be a speck of dust, and that speck is the building block of our planet, our universe, our galaxy and much more.

## Philosophical perspective

It could also be argued that the ‘tracing back’ to this original speck, source, or primordial life, i.e. the only ‘absolute entity’, is a fallacious notion, because it makes us think in terms of time which is not an ‘absolute’ entity. Ancient scholars had to create the concept of time to prove their theories. Religious leaders had to have a Creator and so ‘time’ was needed to speculate that He must have created it at ‘the beginning’. Logic tells us that any beginning or creation must have an end, i.e. the apocalypse or the *Pralaya* (the deluge). This brought about the concept that life must have an end, i.e. death. Just as we are unable to define either life or creation, we cannot define death or the end of creation. One speculation has thus led on to many suppositions, which we have accepted as being true without questioning their merit. Our theories of the Big Bang or the Grand Design are man’s quest to seek the ultimate truth - they cannot be the truth in themselves.

We have been subjected to the concept of time over thousands of generations. Can we think in terms of this Earth, our universe, our life, without the conscious awareness of ‘time’? This is practically impossible because even the concept of ‘the present’ is linked to the past and merges into the future. So, the supposition of ancient Greek philosophers that ‘this was always thus, and shall always remain thus’ is again implausible.

This separation of time from the hard reality of a three dimensional world would take us to the realisation that the concepts of the past, present and future are merely a convention. It follows therefore that there can be no sequential process in real terms: everything is but an instant.

Once, a great philosopher king called Janaka in India had called a conference of the intellectuals. Great scholars and learned men from near and far came to take part. The king officiated and informed them that 1000 dairy cows were the prize for the winner. A bundle of gold nuggets was tied on each horn of these cows. The most knowledgeable among the participants would be given this prize. So the king began by declaring, “Let he who thinks himself to be the most knowledgeable, rise and prove himself.” No-one stood up. Then a sage called *Yaagnyabalkya*<sup>6</sup> instructed his pupil to drive away those cows to his home. All the participants got furious and challenged Yaagnyabalkya. How dare he defy all the learned

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<sup>6</sup> Sivananda, S.S., *Yaagnyabalka in Lives of Saints*, (Divine Life Society Publications, 1941), e book.

men there? He was challenged to answer their questions on life, death and rebirth. He satisfied them all with his answers. Finally, no-one could find a question which the sage could not answer. Eventually, the commotion died down. All fell silent. There was no-one to challenge him. Yaagnyabalkya then recited a poem through which he chastised them. The last verse of that poem is as follows:

Once he is born he cannot be born again  
 Who, I ask, will beget him again?  
 Perception, bliss, *brahma*,  
 The gift of those who give,  
 The highest good awaits those who know this  
 And stand firm.<sup>7</sup>

Although he had satisfied his questioners with his powerful rhetoric, he confessed at the end that he did not really know the answer. He soon after went away to the forest to meditate further.

## Religious perspective

Let us now try to find answers to the questions of births and rebirths in our religions.

The Pitri Sookta in the Rig Veda is ambiguous about the concept of rebirths.<sup>8</sup> Only a few Rishis have unequivocally conceded the concept of death and rebirth. This can be understood in more detail in *Kathopanishad*. The legend tells us that Nachiketa, the young son of Rishi Gotama, was granted three boons by Yama, the god of deaths. Nachiketa says, “when a man dies, there is this doubt: He exists, say some. Some again: He does not. This I should like to know as my third boon.”<sup>9</sup>

Yama tries to dissuade him from approaching this question because that would be imparting the ultimate knowledge which the boy was not ready to receive. But the boy was insistent and would not be tempted instead to receive wealth, wives, etc. Eventually, Yama gave in and said, “It does not get born or die. It has not come into being from anything, nor has anything come into being from it. This unborn eternal everlasting ancient one suffers no destruction. It is not killed even when the body is

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<sup>7</sup> Olivelle, P., *Upanishads, A new translation*, (Oxford World Classics, Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1996), Ch. 3, 9.

<sup>8</sup> RV: 10.15.16

<sup>9</sup> Kathopanishad: 1.20, KU: 2.18

killed.”<sup>10</sup> Vivekananda explained this by saying that this universe was not a creation but a manifestation of the absolute,<sup>11</sup> a perennial with neither a beginning nor an end.

Hence, it stands to reason, as Yama explained to Nachiketa, that ‘it’ never dies because it is never born.

Not having the same scientific knowledge in ancient times as we have now, the seers postulated that we have two entities: the body and the soul. So to keep this concept alive, the hypothesis of rebirth and the cycle of birth and death were put forward. A holistic view such as the one above would demonstrate that each is complementary to the other in making the whole organism. It is life that is the soul; the unborn, deathless and eternal, forever changing its form and being manifested as diversely as we can imagine or comprehend. How can there be rebirth if there had been no birth in the first place?

This also makes the concept of reincarnation suspect. We tend to believe that the god and the prophets will be reincarnated. The mantra in the Rig Veda says clearly that who we call God has no form or shape.<sup>12</sup> So how can it have a face, birth or indeed a rebirth?

It must have been this concept which the ancient Seers called the soul, the Brahma, the Holy Spirit, the Jehovah, and Allah and so on because this most baffling concept has pervaded the minds of the faithful and the iconoclasts alike for several millennia. Veda Vyaasa plagiarised this from the Rig Veda in the BG by stating that it cannot be burnt, slain or killed (11: BG 2:18-25).

“Muslims do not believe in reincarnation (souls living a series of lives in different bodies), but no person may suggest a limit for what God might choose to do.”<sup>13</sup> However, Surah 56:60-1 suggests, “we will not be prevented from changing your forms and creating you again in forms you know not.”<sup>14</sup> Some minor sects, meanwhile, do believe in rebirth.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Das, S., “Swami Vivekananda’s speeches, 2007”, updated 24/02/17 at, [www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda](http://www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017).

<sup>12</sup> BG: 2, 18-22

<sup>13</sup> Ruqaiyyah W. Maqsood. (Islam; Hodder Education, London, 2006), pp 51.

<sup>14</sup> Pickthall M.M., Translator; the Koran; Star books. (W H Allen & Co plc, London; Surah LXIV, 1930) pp 402, 7-9 A.

Contemporary Buddhist scholars are equally unclear. They proclaim that, “the cause of death is not disease but death,” never defining what a birth or death is in actual terms. Christmas Humphreys says, “Life does not die at the body’s death, nor do the consequences of a deed. Forms are created and destroyed; they come into being, serve their purpose and then die; but the life within knows no such limitation.”<sup>15</sup> If there is “life within”, how can it be dead?

Buddha taught the concept of ‘no soul’ (*anatta*). The Eightfold Path does not attach great importance to the debate of rebirth. This tells us that *Nirvaana* (Nirvana) and *Parinirvaana* (Parinirvana) are the two ultimate goals for human beings (15 *ibid*). The former is the ‘end of owe’, similar to the state of absolute bliss proposed in the Upanishads, the latter is a state which is supposed to be beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Various teachers have used the concept of Karma to denote the concept of rebirth, perhaps as a way of explaining the quality of life. This has confused the issue further.

Christianity has been unclear in its interpretation of rebirth or transmigration of the soul. This debate began in earnest in roughly 300 AD with Origen, a devout Christian scholar, and culminated in his condemnation in 553 AD at the Second Council of Constantinople.<sup>16</sup> Christianity does not officially support the concept of rebirth. Now Christians talk of a ‘rebirth of spirit’, a concept which appears incomprehensible to me. Cardinal Mercier gave three views on rebirth, ending his statement with, “[it] cannot be shown either to be impossible or even to be false.”<sup>17</sup> However, many interpret Job<sup>18</sup> and St John differently.<sup>19</sup>

How can we ascertain the truth about rebirth, Karma and reincarnation? Is it absurd and illogical to suggest the following simile: when one extinguishes light A and then switches on the bulb B, can one say that the same electricity from A has illuminated the bulb B? And, can we imagine that light bulb A would have caused any impression on light bulb B?

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<sup>15</sup> Humphreys C. (Penguin books, London, 1951), pp 103-7; 127-28.

<sup>16</sup> “Origen: Second Council of Constantinople,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://britannica.com/events.co; pp73>

<sup>17</sup> Abbott George Burke, “May a Christian believe in reincarnation?” In <https://oocoy.org/original-Christianity-may-a-Christian-believe-in-reincarnation>.

<sup>18</sup> The King James Bible: Book of Job: 1:21; 19:26-27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, St John: 7-8

It appears to me that death and birth are instant transformations into the unrelated and unknown, i.e. the simultaneous formation and dissolution envisaged in the Vishwaroopa, as stated in BG<sup>20</sup> or indicated in Purusha sookta.<sup>21</sup> The sad fact is we have no say in this matter. We were transformed from some unknown organism, and will be transformed into an unknown entity once again.

Do all these suppositions mean anything? Should we all not just live a life of righteousness, helping as we can and sharing what we have?

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<sup>20</sup> BG: 11.13, 16

<sup>21</sup> RV: 10.90, 1-2.

# CHAPTER NINE

## KNOW THYSELF: WHY AND HOW

I received a jolt to my intelligence when I came across a mantra in the Rig Veda where a Rishi thanked his son to have produced him. It took me some time to realise that when his son was born, the man too 'was produced', i.e. became the father. If a father is the son of his own son, then who is the father and who is the son? So, both have to be sons and fathers at the same time. Extrapolating this dual identity, we can safely say that we are because others are. Does this mean that we have no independent existence or identity? Is this the purpose of the old dictum 'Know thyself'? It sounds silly, does it not?

The wise men of the past have told us that we are not what we appear to be. These wise men were in India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Italy. In India, they were called the Rishis. In Greece, they were called the philosophers. The Egyptians and the Babylonians are better known as mathematicians and astronomers than philosophers. Then there are the mystics, the saints and the modern scientists, psychologists, biologists, the gurus, the spiritual leaders and many more. Apparently, there is someone else within each of us who has no physical body but is the real us. The Tibetan Lamas call it 'the astral form'. How can it be that a physical thing which can be felt, measured and seen be unreal while the unseen indemonstrable 'whatever' be real? What is unreal about the physical me?

The theorists of the past provide us with many interesting examples which, in some ways, demonstrate the evolution of the human mind, but do not introduce us to ourselves. The debates are interesting.

Thales, 624-526 BC, told us that everything (including us) was made of water. Not to be outdone, Anaximenes, 585-528 BC, told us it was air, and not water that everything was made of. Anaximander, 610-546 BC, thought that there was a fundamental something of which everything was made, and in which all would eventually end. Pythagoras, (571-496 BC), theorised that everything had a mathematical origin.  $1+2+3+4=10$  (1,

earth; 2, sky; 3, space and 4, everything else, thus totalling ten i.e. the entire universe). Heraclitus, in about 500 BC, was dogmatic about everything being in a state of constant change, but he did not change his own opinion. He proclaimed to the world was made of fire which was always changing. Zeno, 490-430 BC, postulated paradoxical concepts between space and time but got nowhere. Empedocles, around the same period, told us that the world was made of earth, air, fire and water before he immolated himself in the volcano.

Many still believe that we become what we eat - a concept put forward by Anaxagoras, 500-428 BC. Plato postulated the theory of innatism, i.e. that we are all pre-programmed with certain knowledge. Modern geneticists attribute this innate behaviour to be coded in the DNA. The idea of the smallest piece which cannot be cut further was postulated by Democritus, 460-370 BC, which is similar to the modern atomic theory. We now know that an atom is not a single entity but has components. Socrates, 470-399 BC, maintained that he knew nothing but also proclaimed that the 'soul' was immortal. The concept of yet another unknown variable, 'the soul', was now postulated to define the previously proclaimed existence of the 'real man'. Plato, his pupil, postulated the parable of the cave of shadows, i.e. the concept of the dark and unknown mind, which brought this into the philosophical debate. Could he have been prophetic about the Black Hole?

The modern wise men too continue to say that we are not what we appear to be. What are we? Why is it that the unseen, unheard, untouched, un-smelt, untasted, obviously unreal is regarded as the real? Why is man, the so called 'most intelligent species' in this universe, so confused?

This is because we produce our own theories and confine ourselves to think within and not around them. Confining our logic within our own stated concept is only partly scientific. It has not been our standard practice to take into account the temporal, cosmic or other dimensional relationship of the concept, i.e. 'thinking around it'. Every concept must be analysed as broadly as is humanly conceivable with the tacit acceptance that perhaps this may also be influenced by things beyond our imagination. Protagoras, 490-420 BC, had observed this fallacy and said that "man is the measure of all things." We exist because everything exists. We do not exist singly. We do not know everything that exists. So, our conclusions must be faulty. Born 50 years later, Socrates had taught his pupils to question everything. He was not tolerated for this and was murdered - exterminated by poison.



Buddha, in around 563 BC, dispensed with all these speculations. For him, man was a composite being, comprising his body, five senses and personality (*nama-rupa*). There were only two things that were important: misery and happiness. He saw and felt the misery of ageing, death, disease, destitution and he also experienced happiness when he became enlightened. He was neither convinced of the soul, God, the immortal spirit, nor any kind of religious ritual prevalent in India at that time. The religion prevalent in India during his lifetime was the highly corrupt form of a ritual-rich practice of the Brahmins, known as *Karmakaanda*, wrongly transmitted to unknowing followers as the Vedic *Sanaatana Dharma*, which he had rightly renounced; an act for which he had been labelled an atheist by the traditionalists.

Buddha postulated the doctrine of non-soul (*anatta*). He taught through parables which were not documented until nearly 400 years after his death. The three pillars of his teaching, i.e. his formulae for mankind to attain happiness, state *Buddhim sharanam gacchami*, *Sangham sharanam gacchami*, *Dharmam sharanam gacchami* (literally translated these phrases mean ‘I seek refuge in knowledge, I seek refuge in the commune, I seek refuge in duty’). This can be paraphrased into ‘seek enlightenment, share what you have and be dutiful’—the three simple ways of being happy. Subsequent to his death, his disciples probably caved under the peer pressure of the several religious orders prevalent at that time. Firstly, they made him into a god and proclaimed Buddhism as a religion. They became abbots, his agents, masquerading as teachers and gave completely contrary interpretations to the three formulae. Thus ‘*Buddhim*’ became *Buddham*, ‘*Dharmam*’ became His teaching, and *Sangham* became the place of learning, among them the vihaaras, the ashrams, i.e. the monastery.

This resulted in the evolution of Buddhism as a religion or a cult, which has proliferated into several orders. The abbots and monks (the *Laamaas*) have ensured their personal supremacy and hold over the ignorant masses, as in all the religions prevalent today.

We can take ourselves further back in time to the very ancient society of the Aryans, in around 4000 BC. The account of a developing society and the thinking of the sages around that time are well documented in the Rig Veda.

They did not come up with a ‘‘Know thyself’’ doctrine. The seven great sages collectively known as *Saptarshhee* (the seven Rishis), who

designed and established society, admitted to there being something called the *Purusha*<sup>1</sup> which was the source of the universe with nine spherical planets, each consisting of mass, sky and space, all the life forms and inert matter. They agreed that a miniscule proportion of that creative source was within everything which they called *aatmaa*, life. They also said that humans existed in two dimensions: the physical and the non-physical, for one cannot ‘exist’ without the other. To aid our comprehension of this concept we can look at the brain and the mind. The brain is the physical matter, the mind is not. But unless these two are taken together, each becomes non-existent, that is, meaningless. The Aryans identified four cardinal requisites for a society to develop and flourish. They appointed an enlightened man as Manu, the Governor.

There was no named religion; only doing one’s designated duty (*dharma*). There was no identifiable, ultimate or specific divinity known in other religions as ‘God’; Agni (the source of all energy) was regarded as nearest to that entity, as indicated in the very first mantra of the Rig Veda. Agni was worshipped in all social and personal celebrations as a thanksgiving to the Ultimate. Since a bit of this Agni existed in every creation, they said that the primordial being had many names—as many as the creation.

Society appears to have evolved rather rapidly with this kind of well organised structure and system. There is evidence of a highly successful economy and overall development. As is inevitable, personal greed and ambition too began to flourish, and corruption among the leaders and the rulers began to raise its ugly head to the detriment of all.

However, during the following centuries, the enlightened sages also discovered the aim of life; they called it emancipation or a state of perpetual bliss. They came up with the technology of combining the physical with the non-physical planes of human existence and called this Yoga (the synthesis). The Yoga system identifies that we exist in seven dimensions- three physical dimensions as we know them, and four non-physical dimensions which are time, the senses, mind and knowledge. The process of fusion of these separate and independent but interrelated dimensions produces a vector which is the ultimate reality—call it what you will—God, enlightenment, eternal bliss, etc. They called it *Brahma*. The process of accessing this state was known to only a few. It required

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<sup>1</sup> RV: 10.90

observing several austere practices and training.<sup>2</sup> Most people could not get the full advantage of this knowledge. The Yoga schools of today are mainly teaching the control of body parts, mostly as exercises. This is known as *Hatha Yoga* (Hatha means to force, to insist). Hatha Yoga also includes some practices performed with self-torture, such as standing on one leg or on the head for long periods of time, and amongst others, contorting the body into various knotted positions.

By the 7th Millennium BC, this polarisation among those who knew, and those who did not, had become profound because this knowledge and the technology of true Yoga was not easily accessible to all. ‘Know thyself’ appears to have been the potent weapon for the subjugation of the masses. This phrase implied that an ignorant man was ‘nothing of any importance’. Only the Brahmins (the leaders, the priest class) or the Rishis, the philosophers, knew the reality, the truth; other mere mortals must follow their dictates. The Brahmins themselves also feared for their exalted status in society and began to seek rich and powerful patrons, the kings. Cleverly, these kings were told that they had divine powers and authority and that their lineage could be traced to Lord Vishnu via the Sun God or the Moon God. Between the clergy and the kings, society degenerated into the swamp of greed, debauchery, and lowest level of unrest where mass killings were justified, as described in the Mahabharata (in around 1200 BC).

The Upanishads had begun to develop, along with the Vedic mantras. These were the deliberations among the learned, their disciples and other seekers of the truth. Rebellion against the established order began to develop subsequently. Several theories and explanations for God, the soul, *aatmaa* and *Brahma* began to be openly debated. ‘Know thyself’ now began to suggest a more respectable concept than the earlier connotation ‘of no consequence individually unless supported by the exalted Brahmins who performed special rituals for the insignificant mortals’. The philosophers or the Upanishadists, as a friend of mine calls them, could not however win the debate.

The real man was now really a soul which would not be born, or die. This ‘real self’ is the subject in the oft-quoted three verses of Gita, Chapter 2, 23-25:

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<sup>2</sup> Woods, H.J., *Yoga System of Patanjali or the Ancient Hindu Doctrine of Concentration of Mind*. (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, India, 1914).

Weapons cannot pierce it, fire cannot burn it, waters cannot wet it, and the wind cannot suck it dry.

It cannot be cut, burnt, wetted or dried. It is unchanging, universally present, ever calm, and fixed and eternal.

This is unmanifested, imponderable, and unchangeable-hence you should not grieve (of death).

This realisation was thus considered just a step away from being *Brahma*, the ultimate reality, the ultimate source of the universe. He who could reach this stage called himself '*shivoham*' (I am Shiva).<sup>3</sup>

A few centuries later, Buddha appeared on the scene and successfully denounced the prevalent organised religion, the concept of God and *Brahma*, and religious rituals. Five centuries later, Jesus once again brought about the concept of man (*Aatma*, the son of God), the Father (the *Brahma*, The God) and the Holy Spirit (*aatmaa*, the soul) being the essential trinity for this world order. Seeing this also degenerate to perhaps the same levels as the old decadent 'Brahminism', the Prophet Mohammad, in around 600 AD, simplified this to just two entities, man and Allah, which appeal to a third of humanity today.

The 'Know thyself' concept has yet to be properly explained. This is now being linked to the 'inner consciousness', which is also undefined. The *Anandamargi*, since the last century, have been hypothesising that 'consciousness' is everything. This is not a new concept, being mentioned in *Swetasvatara Upanishad* as the Cosmic Consciousness. The idea of 'Super Consciousness' or 'Cosmic Consciousness' has been floating around for several millennia - it has been equated with the *Purusha* of the Rig Veda, with the *Shakti* in Tantra, the Big Bang, and with elements of myths and legends all over the world. There have been countless papers written on consciousness without defining what it is. So, how can we add any adjective, e.g. '*Super Consciousness*' to it? Perhaps common sense gets overshadowed by superior knowledge. APJ Abdul Kalam<sup>4</sup> thinks that when the consciousness of the self is transcended, we reach the fourth level of consciousness which he describes as the Cosmic Consciousness; the first three levels of consciousness being the reptile, the monkey and

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<sup>3</sup> Adi, S., [www.sankaracharya.org](http://www.sankaracharya.org). (Accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Kalam APJ, *Transcendence*. (Harper Collins, Noida, India, 2015), pp 86-7.

human consciousness, as theorised by Michio Kaku.<sup>5</sup> Professor Wood (1914) while translating Patanjali Yoga Sootra observes that “Knowledge of the stream of consciousness is impossible unless it be a permanent order as contrasted with a succession of transient appearances.”<sup>6</sup>

Noticing how established and traditional religions are obviously not propagating the truth as relevant to modern man, clever gurus have begun an ‘Interfaith movement’. This is a far cry from the concept of “the parliament of world religions” first established in Chicago in 1893.<sup>7</sup> This appears to be an attempt to placate all of the religious faithful for some ulterior motive or benefit to the organiser. Instead of the traditional religions, a new concept of Humanism has also been established and is starting to appeal. Once again, religion is being separated from spirituality, which is perhaps a good thing. But this has now led to the proliferation of several ‘spiritual gurus’ around the world, who offer to teach us how to ‘find’ ourselves. This is a lucrative enterprise.

The god particle, ‘Higgs Boson’, has been discovered.<sup>8</sup> Atomic fission and fusion have been studied. These discoveries have led on to serious debate. Are the sub-atomic particles waves of energy or matter? They divided particles into fermions (electrons, protons and neutrons) and bosons (photons, gravitons and gluons). They believe that the bosons are like the glue holding matter together. This wave/particle duality has been put forward by quantum physicists.

If we are made of matter, and matter is made up of the energy waves, then are we too not a special form of energy, the indestructible soul (*aatmaa*)? In modern scientific jargon, are we then merely the sophisticated and highly advanced holograms?

Were the ancient Vedic philosophers, the Rishis, already aware of this fact when they tried to convince everyone that the whole physical world was *mithyaa*, i.e. unreal, and it was all *maaya*, an illusion? Swaami

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<sup>5</sup> Kaku M., Lectures on You Tube, Also in *Cosmology Today*, 3rd May 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogs2rxRocPo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogs2rxRocPo). (Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Woods, J.H., *The Yoga –System of Patanjali or the Ancient Hindu doctrine of concentration of mind*. (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, India, 1914).

<sup>7</sup> “Parliament,” *Parliament of the world’s religions*, <https://parliamentofreligions.org>chicago1893:general/org>. (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Lederman, L., Teresi, D., *If the Universe is the Answer, What is the Question? (The God Particle)*. (Houghton Mifflin Co, New York, 1993).

Prabhupaada asserts, “The whole scheme of Vedic wisdom is targeted to the aim of eradicating such a misconception and thus liberating the living being from the illusion of material identification.”<sup>9</sup> So, what is new?

This raises the ultimate question: If we are not real, can our brains be real? How can we know ourselves?

Should we really care?

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<sup>9</sup> Swaami Prabhupaada, ACB, *Srimad Bhagavatam* First Canto part Three, pp 40,154.

## CHAPTER TEN

### TRUST IN YOURSELF: WHERE IS YOUR JUDGEMENT?

Soft and serene music was in the air. People were speaking in hushed tones. The dais at the far end of the hall had a solitary chair on which sat a lady in white, gently smiling with shining eyes. I had just managed to reach my seat when the light was dimmed except over the dais. The music stopped and the lady said, “*Om Shaanti*” (Om! Peace!) on the microphone. The hall reverberated with hundreds of “Om Shanti” in unison. The distinguished speaker raised her hand in blessing and acknowledgement, and began her discourse.

I was attending a lecture organised by the Aberdeen branch of a self-styled spiritual university that evening. The organisation claims to be nondenominational and approved by the United Nations. It is supported by voluntary contributions and has a worldwide following. Raja Yoga, as a method of meditation, is also taught there. This Yoga appears to be different from the Raja Yoga mentioned in the Patanjali Yoga Sootra, which is regarded as the most authentic text on this subject.

The guest speaker was a highly respected member of the organisation. She was a lady in her mid-50s and had come all the way from London to grace the occasion. The highlight of the evening was a discussion on a series of prepared questions about fear, trust, confidence, conflict and spiritual matters. I shall confine myself to the subject of trust, as illustrated by this speaker.

She explained that it was the trust in oneself that overcame the fear of an unknown person. If either party were to be lacking in trust within oneself, a situation of discomfort, unease, perhaps even hostility, might develop. If one has the utmost trust in oneself, then one can become friendly to anyone, which gets reflected in one’s body language. The interaction then begins to be open, cordial and peaceful. Both parties begin to trust each other and all becomes wonderful. However, if anyone breaks this trust, the interaction plays out in an unwanted and unsavoury manner.

She did not advise us on how to improve or strengthen our trust in ourselves.

I had expected to hear her advice on how to do so and was disappointed that she had omitted this useful topic from her sermon. I hoped that this question would perhaps be addressed at the end during the discussion session. After preparing the audience of about 100 keen listeners, she concluded her talk with the following true story.

There was a boy and a girl, about seven or eight years old, who were playing in a park on a bright and warm summer's day. Their mothers also appeared friendly and were happily chatting to one another. All looked very positive. After a few hours, the mothers decided to return to their homes. The two children were told that it was time to go home. Their mothers began to walk towards the exit when suddenly the boy kicked the girl who fell and was hurt a little. She would not get up but howled away, resisting any attempt by the two mothers to console her. She did not stop creating a scene, despite being offered an apology by the boy, which was demanded of him by his mother. She kept on screaming for a long time.

The lady preacher then asked this question: "Most children do not behave like this after a small fall like that. Why did the girl behave this way?" The congregation, as expected, answered that "the boy had broken the trust of the little girl. This had hurt her more than the minor physical discomfort caused by the fall. Hence she was protesting vehemently." The lady was surveying her congregation with a satisfied look and nodded her head wisely until I asked her whether anyone had asked why the boy had kicked the girl in the first place. She just shrugged her shoulders. I persisted by asking whether her conclusions were correct since she had not taken into consideration the boy's motive. She glared at me and shrugged her shoulders again. My question remained unanswered. She then switched over to meditation and its usefulness and a few other topics which are not relevant here.

I would have accepted that an abrupt break of friendship or indeed any relationship could certainly produce bizarre and unique reactions. But I was not prepared to accept her hypothesis that it was the result of broken trust, without first knowing why the trust had been broken, if indeed it had. The boy might have kicked her for any number of reasons. The girl might have reacted that way because she might have known the reason for the boy's action or she might have been genuinely surprised, too. This could even have been play-acting to punish the mothers because they had



put a stop to their nice time together in the park. There were many possibilities, obviously.

I could not believe that the girl's trust being broken was the only logical conclusion. The speaker did not give any importance to my questions because she had probably not thought comprehensively about the difficult concept of trust. Perhaps no-one had challenged her before; she was unprepared to face this question and continued preaching as she might have done many times in the past. I did become aware of many impatient, almost hostile, glances at me. The congregation of the faithful does not question their preachers and does not welcome any enquiry which might be seen as a challenge to their beliefs and values. The congregation was happy to listen to her, accept her sermon, thank her and depart. I felt very uncomfortable and could not get out of there fast enough. This incident set me thinking about 'trust' in general.

Trust is hard to define or explain. Even the Oxford English Dictionary has to revert to examples to convey its meaning;

1. A firm belief in the reliability, truth or ability of someone or something, e.g. relations have to be built on trust/they have been able to win the trust of the others. 2. Acceptance of the truth of a statement without evidence or investigation: e.g. I used only primary sources, taking nothing on trust. 3. The state of being responsible for someone or something: e.g. a man in a position of trust. 4. A person or duty for which one has responsibility: e.g. rulership is a trust from God.

Trust, therefore, could mean to be a firm belief in one's own ability, and being responsible for oneself as a duty. This could equally mean the opposite too; to realise one's own weakness, limitations and drawbacks. Either way, 'trust in oneself' appears to exert tremendous influence on shaping personality. However strong we might consider ourselves, we know that each of us has our Achilles' heel. We need an anchor of some sort to prevent us from sinking into the depths of despair. This is very well understood by our religious leaders, who advise us to have faith in God and do His will. It appears that the concept of a benevolent god has become this type of crutch throughout the world. If our faith in God were to tell us that it is He whose will is done, then He should be responsible for our actions, surely absolving us of all our responsibilities. This is absurd, obviously. It appears to me that when they preach to us to have total faith, they are probably demanding us to follow blindly what has been taught by them for generations. Hence 'faith' is something that can never be debated with any logic. Why do learned and seemingly intelligent people use an

abstract concept to prove another similar concept, neither of which has any demonstrable or tangible basis?

‘I trust you, you will be able to get over this’ or ‘trust in yourself, you will get over this’ are the two frequently used phrases, given as advice to encourage someone who is beginning to show a degree of anxiety, apprehension or has suffered a setback. ‘If you trust yourself, God will support you’ and ‘if you trust in God, you will be able to trust yourself’. These are also frequently used phrases. Is this just platitudinous advice or a profound statement of great significance? I have not really understood the meaning of these phrases.

Psychologists attach another meaning to this word; trust for them appears to be a covenant between two parties or individuals which becomes mutually binding. ‘I trust you’ indirectly means ‘you too are expected to trust me’. If the other party does not accept this term, then the first party feels betrayed; the trust is broken. According to them, trust is the single most important factor in defining our relationship with one another. If I can trust another person, then I shall feel safe and not be afraid of him. If I cannot trust another person, I will be afraid of some harm that may come to me from that person. This mistrust, or lack of trust, will be reflected in my uncomfortable body language which will also make the other person uneasy. Both of us will then be adversarial, rather than become trusting friends, and the interaction may end up with unwanted consequences.

What is it that can enhance our self-confidence and lead to appropriate judgement or action? The wise have repeatedly reminded us that the pursuit of knowledge is the only formula for enhancing one’s self-confidence. To my mind, the only faith that can boost our confidence to deal with any situation is factual and comprehensive information i.e. knowledge, of any issue, situation or event which needs our judgement or action. Knowledge or information is the power which enables us to make an appropriate decision and take the right course of action. It is unfortunate to observe that although we have known of this formula, we seldom follow it. It appears to me that we prefer to depend upon a prop made up of some ‘faith’ as an easy way to boost our confidence, not realising that this ultimately leads us into dependency and submission to fear. Should we not dispense with these distractions to empower ourselves as strong and confident? This is not difficult if we cultivate the habit of thinking about all related aspects of any job or issue which happens to be at hand. We do need to think as deeply as necessary.

‘Trust in your own judgement’ is perhaps a better and more useful piece of advice than ‘trust in yourself’. This exhorts us to think things through sufficiently. In the final reckoning, we do what we *think* is right, and that is tantamount to our judgement.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE: THE TINY ME

The ‘universe’ and ‘life’ are the two most debated subjects which have herded clerics, philosophers and the layman into several opposing camps, each claiming to be the proponent of all that is real and true. Scientists have also joined in the fray and produced many theories based upon their logic, deduction and supported by experiments and photographs taken by astronomical telescopes and space missions. Not satisfied with the earlier Big Bang theory, Stephen Hawking<sup>1</sup> is now postulating M theory<sup>2</sup> which will expose the grand design of a universe that creates itself. Do we know the true answers, yet?

I was intrigued by the legend of the Vestal Virgins, the priestesses of the temple of Vesta which was built by the second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius, 753-673 BC. Although rebuilt and destroyed several times, one can see the ruins of this temple in the Roman Forum. I saw the ruins of several of its columns and the central hearth, which was supposed to be the site of an everlasting flame representing the sun. Numa believed the sun to be the centre of the universe and built this temple to honour it. In contrast, Aristotle proposed in around 350 BC that the Earth was stationary, and all the celestial bodies orbited around it. He believed the Earth to be the centre of the universe. This was reinforced by Ptolemy in 150 AD. The Christian church adopted this theory to propagate their scriptures after that. We now know that this is a meaningless phrase in its literal sense because there are countless galaxies in the wider universe. “The universe looks the same whichever direction we look in”<sup>3</sup> might justify the Earth being the centre of the universe, but we have not proved the opposite, and hence this logic is faulty. Even if we confine this to mean our galaxy, this is meaningless and untrue, because we do not know its circumference. It is constantly expanding in a way that only microwaves can indicate. Hence

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<sup>1</sup> Hawking, S., *Brief History of Time*. (Bantam Books, 1988), pp10, 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 7, 8, 181.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp10, 47.

we cannot determine its centre, even assuming that it has a limit, i.e. a circumference. It is strange that this meaningless phrase, ‘the centre of universe’ is so commonly used by religious leaders to illustrate their faith that the Earth is the centre of universe, and that man is created by God in His own image.<sup>4</sup>

I am sure many parents fob it off when their children ask very pertinent questions about life, evolution and creation. An easy recourse that many of us take is to say that a god created it all. Some children persist and ask what or who is God and why would He create anything? The atheists tell them it is nature which does these things. The child begins to wonder whether ‘nature’ is another god but shuts up for fear of becoming a nuisance. Churches, schools, mosques and temples and other places of worship provide their own individual beliefs regarding God and creation, continually subjecting a child to a variety of concepts, presenting them as the sublime truth. This is worrying because there are at least 20 different recognised religious groups in the world, each claiming to be the one true religion. One would be more inclined to believe a statement to be true, if only one were to be universally accepted.

I remember my eight year old son asking me one day how monkeys could still be present today when the theory of evolution stated that they had evolved into human beings 1000s of years earlier. It was clear to me that the boy was seeking answers to the most baffling question ever tackled by man, that of the creation of life. This required a serious explanation for which I had no concrete knowledge. I still do not know. I remember being humbled by the enormity of this question. All I could say to him was that some monkeys evolved but others did not. I was dreading the next question that could have followed. Why did only some evolve and others did not? But he had become silent, thoughtful, and did not ask me further. Feeling a great deal of relief, I remember telling him that the theory of evolution was a very big subject which he would learn about at university when he was older.

Over half of the world’s population follows Christianity, Islam and Judaism, all of which subscribe to Genesis in the Old Testament. This states clearly that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. He created Adam in his own image, which Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, in Rome. One

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<sup>4</sup> The Holy Bible: Genesis.

notices the image of a thick-set, middle-aged, bearded person with curly hair reaching out to his son, Jesus Christ, from the heavens.

Genesis 1.6,7 says,

And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

Genesis, Chapter 2.7 says that at first there was darkness over the earth and void; then God created light. It continues: “and the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Adam was thus produced.

In 2.21-22 it describes how God made a woman from the rib taken out of Adam when he was in deep sleep. Adam named her Eve. In chapter 3.22 we read “and the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil...” and he banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, lest they learn the divine knowledge of immortality.

The Christian concept of man being created in the image of God who breathed life into a mannequin made of dust certainly appears to convey that the ‘life’ in Christian Homo sapiens is somehow different from life in other species. This does not satisfy even the most faithful. If Eve was produced from a body part of Adam, what should their relationship be? Would she be his daughter? If God had to breathe life into her too, then would she not become a sibling? How was sexual intercourse permitted in these unclear circumstances? Are we all descendants of illegal parentage? She could not have been a clone like Dolly the sheep, as she was not the same gender as Adam.

Greek mythology came up with its own theory. It believed that there was chaos and a void at first, from which love was born. This produced light and as a result the goddess Gaia was born, who produced the Earth. However, the Greek philosophers did not believe in any divine creation - they believed that the universe had always existed and shall always exist. Hence, time was always there and always will be.

It is interesting to note the profound similarity of thinking on the concepts of void, darkness and water, expressed as above, over a period of a few millennia. We find them in the Old Testament, teachings of the

ancient Greek philosophers and the Rig Veda. However, the Rig Veda was written much earlier than 1200 BC.

A few millennia later, John 1.1-3 says

in the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made.

In modern parlance that ‘word’ was probably ‘the catalyst of creation’ or the trigger that set off a chain reaction.

The ancient sages in the Indian peninsula, known as the Rishis, had given this ‘word’ a name. It is ञ, a syllable in itself (say this aloud as something like ‘owum’ reverberating within your chest - only then will you know its correct pronunciation). Modern gurus equate this syllable to The Word in the Bible and the Big Bang in quantum physics. The ancient Rishis had attributed three components to speech - *paraa, pashyanti and baikhari*,<sup>5</sup> i.e. subsonic, ultrasonic and sonic. Om ञ, was thus the sum total of ‘all sounds’, the catalyst of creation.

The ancient scholars in the Indian peninsula had different ideas. Some honestly asked questions, rather than guessing the answers to the unknown. To the understanding of total ‘void’ and ‘chaos’, one wise sage, known as *Rishi Paramesthi*, asked the question:

Who really knows by what reason and from where this creation has been produced and who shall explain (this) here (and) well? The gods came later than the creation of this universe. Who knows from what this universe was produced? (Rig.10.129.1,6)

He continues to ask “whether at that time the existent was not, the non-existent was not, space was not, that splendid sky was not, what, where and under whose dependence was the desirable object? Was there dense unfathomable water (fluid)?”<sup>6</sup>

He then goes further to theorise

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<sup>5</sup> “Stages of sound,” *Para, Pashyanti, Madhyama Baikhari* in *Yoga. The magazine of Yoga school of Bihar*,” [www.yogamagnet/archives/2009/june09/stages/shtml](http://www.yogamagnet/archives/2009/june09/stages/shtml). (Accessed on 16th March 2016).

<sup>6</sup> RV: 10.129.1,6

...at first a darkness devoid of light was covered by darkness. This, which was all watery, was covered by ignorance from all sides. Something was (then) produced by greatness of austerity. That cause, the first seed which was at the beginning, produced the desire to create in the mind of the creator. The learned, after contemplation by knowledge, discovered in the heart the relationship of that which exists and that which does not exist (Rig10.129.3-4.)

A later sage, *Rishi Madhuchhandaasa* proclaimed “...light was born through the rigorous asceticism of the creator and the truth (reality) was also born. Then the night was born. The ocean, the possessor of water, was then born.”<sup>7</sup>

Is this an earlier version of the Big Bang or the M theory of the model of a self-creating universe? Is it possible to imagine that this universe was smaller than an atom at the time of Big Bang, estimated to be about 14 billion years ago, and rapidly expanded to its limitless nature as it stands at present?

The same Rishi then went on to describe how the concept of time was established “...the year (time) was produced from the sky full of water; it became the lord of all moments making the days and nights.”<sup>8</sup>

Edwin Hubble<sup>9</sup> informed us in 1920 that ours was not the only galaxy that existed, and that there were vast empty spaces and voids between the galaxies. Stephen Hawking informs us<sup>10</sup> that ours is one of some 100,000 galaxies, each galaxy containing a 100,000 million stars, and they are all moving away fast, and expanding.<sup>11</sup>

I think that it is our inherent proclivity for denial that prevents us from taking a holistic approach to the concept of creation and the universe. Now that man has proved that energy can be created from matter and vice versa, the next step, i.e. how life was created within matter, needs to be determined. It is unlikely that we shall be able to do so if we continue to bring in all kinds of theological concepts to plug the holes in our knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> RV: 10.190.1.

<sup>8</sup> RV: 10.190.2

<sup>9</sup> Christiansen, E G, *Edwin Hubble: The mariner of the nebulae*. (Chicago University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Hawking, S., *Brief History of Time*. (Bantam Books, 1988) pp10, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Hawking, S., Mlodinow L., *The Grand Design. M theory*, (Bantam Press. London, 2010), pp 7, 8, 181.



To understand the creation of life, we need to know what life is in reality. Do all living beings have the same life or are there different lives for different species in the biological world? Does life mean just that infinitesimal energy within each living cell which controls or regulates its metabolism?

All this philosophy, knowledge and discoveries will have no meaning unless they help us to understand 'life'. Whatever the trigger for the Big Bang was, that transformed itself into matter, was it the same or a similar trigger which created or instilled 'life' in the first ever tiniest cell? Did some or all the subatomic particles—and quite a few have been discovered until now—somehow manage to transform into 'life' which began to multiply equally fast into a proliferating mass of matter; thus being transformed into living beings?

If the Big Bang theory is correct, we can theorise that a minuscule amount of radiation, an unstable form of energy, somehow got trapped within an infinitesimally small speck of silicon, the substance supposed to be at the deepest centre of the earth, turning it into the precursor of life - a 'pre-life form', like the characteristic of the prions that we can see today. This could then be extrapolated to theorise that this energy did not dissipate, but continued to expand, i.e. proliferate. This might have developed further into viruses and then to bacteria and more advanced forms of unicellular organisms which proliferated, eventually creating the biological world. Is it evolution, natural selection, as described by Darwin, which began to add a mechanism of coordination and regulation of all metabolic functions within the cell? The summation of awareness as imparted by the sense organs, along with the ability feel, to think, and deduce, became further concentrated into human beings; this collective experience could perhaps be described as our 'consciousness.'

Not having known the current depth of cellular function and structure, Charles Darwin conceded that "probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some primordial form, into which life was first breathed."<sup>12</sup>

Who breathed that life into the primordial form?

*Rishi Prajaapaatya* describes the existence of a *Hiranyagarbha* 'the golden embryo' which was the starting point of the universe inclusive of

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<sup>12</sup> Darwin, C., *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1859. (the Folio Society, London, 2006), pp384, 387.

all animate and inanimate matter.<sup>13</sup> This concept of a primordial cell, the golden embryo, the half matter, half energy speck of universe, or the ubiquitous ‘stem cell’ must have reached a point in its evolution when it split into animal and plant precursors. Subsequently, these stem cells must have been what Charles Darwin in 1859 believed in; “to the belief that all animals and plants have descended from one prototype - all living things have much in common, in their chemical composition, their germinal vesicles, their cellular structure, and their laws of reproduction” and went on to prophesise “embryology will reveal to us the structure, in some degree obscured, of the prototype in each class.”<sup>14</sup> He was indeed prophetic. Our scientific achievements have now made it possible to demonstrate that the RNA regulates the metabolism, and the DNA determines the formation of a cell.

If we subscribe to this view of creation, then we must accept that the same original life and matter are continuing today and show no sign of ever abating. This may not be palatable for some to accept—that life in all is the same, that we humans are just a transformed form of a unicellular organism and that nobody created us or this universe.

This concept will assert that highly evolved living beings such as humans who exist in the three dimensional physical planes are the sum total of consciousness, memory and the physical environment. Time is manifested as our consciousness. The three abstract concepts, i.e. the mind, reasoning and memory (*mana, chitta, buddhi*), are the metaphysical dimensions proposed by the ancient Rishis. Perhaps the next step in this evolution is for man to reach beyond consciousness as a result of the fusion of all these modalities of existence in the seven dimensions, as above.

This idea is not entirely new. The ancient Rishis in India had discovered a method of synthesis of all these dimensions, i.e. the apparently different levels of existence, as close together as possible. They had called this system ‘Yoga’, which means synthesis or fusion. This is the concept of Yoga, i.e. a system of controlled fusion of the physical planes of existence with the metaphysical entities, creating a state of ‘*Samadhi*’.

From discipline of the gross, intrinsic, subtle, relational, and purposive aspects of the elements of matter, one attains mastery over them. Then

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<sup>13</sup> RV: 10.121;1.5

<sup>14</sup> Darwin C., (2006), pp384, 387.

extraordinary powers appear, such as the power to be as small as an atom, as well as bodily perfection and immunity from the constraints of matter (and time).<sup>15</sup>

It requires tremendous efforts, variously described as austerity, disciplines, practices, etc., to be able to achieve this power. Many attain some degree of success and demonstrate this by performing extraordinary feats or miracles. However, if someone becomes able to achieve and control the hard task of complete amalgam of these seven dimensions, he or she is known to be enlightened because the mystery of life is then solved for him or her.

The scale of measurement designed for our three dimensional world can obviously not be applicable in a setup in which the physical and non-physical entities have fused. This will demand different parameters and scales of measurement. If a centre for a universe of this kind can be logically imagined, then this could be that very same infinitesimally small spark which was neither matter, nor energy, but perhaps an amalgam of the two that set off in perpetual motion, evolving and expanding incessantly from that point on.

*Veda Vyaasa*, the composer of the Gita, created an interlude to explain this to Arjuna in the battlefield. He did this by making Krishna demonstrate his *Vishwaroopa* (*vishwa*, the universal; *roopa*, the form). Arjuna was made able to visualise the unique spectacle of simultaneous formation and dissolution being repeated incessantly within the corpus of Krishna, the *Vishwaroopa*.<sup>16</sup> The description is truly awesome. Krishna was representing himself to be the eternal, the unknown, manifest in everything and omnipotent, and the man was represented by Arjuna. Vyaasa had paraphrased and elaborated the mantras from the Rigveda, RV 10.90, 1-15. The first mantra is: “*having thousands of heads, eyes, feet that Purusha, covering the Earth from all quarters, exists beyond the place measurable by ten fingers*”. The remaining 14 mantras describe the formation of everything that we can imagine to be in a universe and on a planet.

Much earlier, *Rishika Ambrini*, on being enlightened after contemplating on the Om ç had declared:

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<sup>15</sup> Miller, B. S., Translator, *Yoga: Discipline of freedom; The Yoga Sootra attributed to Patanjali*. (Bantam Books, 1995), pp 69, 70, Part 3, 43-45.

<sup>16</sup> “Vishwaroopa,” *The Bhagavadgita*. Verses 11. 8-13; 39-40.

I show the nurturer *Soorya* (the sun) at the head of this world; my dwelling is inside the Space and within the ocean; I pervade all the regions from there and touch that heaven by radiance; beginning to create all the regions, I flow as wind; remaining far than the heaven, and further than this earth, I become all this by fame. (Rig. 10.125:7, 8.)

Was she claiming to be that central point of the universe?

This state of super-consciousness (also referred as the Cosmic Consciousness), the resultant amalgam of all planes of existence, i.e. the final vector, is described by various words like the God, the Father, the Holy Ghost, Buddha, Jehovah, the Brahma, the Supreme Divine, Allah and others. Many great souls like Jesus, Buddha, and the great Yogis of the past must have experienced that state to be able to declare ‘I am He’; ‘I am the son of God’; *Aham brahmosmi* (I am Brahma), *Shivoham* (I am Shiva). Perhaps Black Elk, the great visionary American Indian, had meant the same when he said, “At the centre of the universe dwells the great spirit. And that centre is really everywhere. It is within each of us.”<sup>17</sup>

It felt great to be told that this ‘tiny me’ was the centre of universe.

However, this revelation does not appear to recognise the existence of an infinite number of universes. So could this not be extrapolated to mean that the innumerable and apparently unconnected galaxies are essentially the constituents of one whole cosmos raised from the same original spark which has no centre or periphery?

This was eloquently put forward by the congenitally blind Rishi *Deerghatamaa Auchythyā*, in around 2000 BC, as “it is one entity but the learned call it by many names.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Black Elk,” [www.quoteswave.com/picture-quotes/410414](http://www.quoteswave.com/picture-quotes/410414), (Accessed on 16th March 2016).

<sup>18</sup> RV: 1.164, 46

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP: THE SOURCE OF SUFFERING

Dispassionate analyses of the forces driving human civilisation through the ages unequivocally demonstrate that the leader-follower concept has enhanced the human ego, generated hatred, and created divisions and unequal societies. This concept has propelled most of us towards limitless personal greed and selfishness. This binary classification of human beings as leaders and followers is at the root of our unhappiness and discontent, leading to strife and violence. Should we not therefore establish an alternative system of values which would inspire us to develop a benevolent and humane way of doing things?

One of my earliest memories is a question which my home tutor in my father's house asked me when I was about eight years old. I had made many mistakes in the simple arithmetic homework. He had patiently corrected them and asked me a question. The conversation had gone something like this:

- Teacher: "Do you know how many kinds of people are there?"  
Me: After a pause and then beaming, "Four! Tall and short, and man and woman."  
Teacher: "There are only two – think again."  
Me: After being thoroughly deflated. "I cannot think."  
Teacher: "That is correct. There are only two kinds of people - those who think and those who do not think."  
Me: [Speechless and staring at him with fury].  
Teacher: "Do you know what thinking does to a person?"  
Me: [Shaking head, responding in the negative].  
Teacher: "Those who think become leaders and those who do not think become followers."  
Me: "Are you a leader?"  
Teacher: "All teachers are leaders."  
Me: "Who is a follower? Am I a follower?"  
Teacher: "You will be, if you do not think, and neglect your work."  
Me: "I do not want to be a leader."

- Teacher: "That is ok. You will always have to carry out orders."  
 Me: "I want to order others."  
 Teacher: Pointing to the badly done homework. "Then you must start thinking."

My teacher was a well-meaning, kind soul. He never punished me physically and always attempted to teach me certain values. But he was indeed a leader who did not know that he was teaching the wrong things to a young and vulnerable mind. He was following the standard way of teachers and obviously had not developed sufficiently to be able to analyse, conduct research and assess the results of his own convictions and actions. He was teaching by rote, although it would appear that he was pursuing a novel way of influencing his pupils. I still remember this conversation which proves that he had been extremely effective. He made quite an impression on me. Unfortunately, I too learned by rote and subsequently reproduced this concept for my children and students. I too was admired by them. It took me a long time to realise that this concept of leadership was wrong, and I must have harmed many of them. I can now only seek their forgiveness.

How I wish that that conversation had gone on something like this instead:

- Teacher: "Do you know how many kinds of people are there?"  
 Me: After a pause and then beaming. "Four! Tall and short; and man and woman."  
 Teacher: "Yes, but there are more. Like fat and thin, white and brown, strong and weak, and many others."  
 Me: "So? Does this matter?"  
 Teacher: "No, it does not. But what they do matters."  
 Me: "What do they do?"  
 Teacher: "Some think and others do not think."  
 Me: "I cannot think."  
 Teacher: "You can think but do not seem to wish to think."  
 Me: [Speechless and staring at him with fury.]  
 Teacher: "Do you know what thinking does to a person?"  
 Me: [Shaking head, responding in the negative].  
 Teacher: "Those who think help others and those who do not think become selfish."  
 Me: Still angry. "Do you help others?"  
 Teacher: "Yes. All teachers should be helpers."  
 Me: "Am I selfish?"  
 Teacher: "You will be, if you do not think and neglect your work."  
 Me: "I do not want to be selfish."

Teacher: Pointing to the badly done homework. "Then you must start thinking."

Unfortunately, this conversation did not happen.

There has been sufficient information collected over the last three millennia for us to ascertain the direction of the evolution of human civilisation. How should we assess the success of our civilisation? Do we see happiness or misery around and ahead of us? Is the purpose of human development not the quest of happiness and peace to us all?

Should we evaluate the means or the results? In terms of means to succeed, we have certainly made tremendous advances in our knowledge and scientific achievements, as well as in the accumulation of vast wealth. Why is it that even the most successful leaders appear to be unhappy most of the time? Do we actually feel happy and consider ourselves blessed and fortunate when we see misery and destitution among others around us?

We have learnt to accept that the amount of personal possessions and power of any kind, be it political, economic, religious or evangelical, are the main parameters of success achieved by an individual. This was clearly demonstrated by the victory of Mr. Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election in the USA. He has become the leader of the free world, as journalists declared on TV.

In the wider sphere, such as in the corporate world, we have learnt to determine the success or failure of a company by looking at its balance sheet. Universities are judged by their ranking order as determined by the income generated and the number of students admitted to their campuses. The size of the congregation seen in a church or a place of worship, and the amount of donations collected there, determine whether it is successful. Britain became great because of its conquests of large parts of the world; the sun never set in the Empire thus conquered.

Never are assessments made in terms of happiness of the work force, the lives saved, the truths taught to students, self-confidence, or moral strengths imparted universally to the congregation.

It is essential to dissect the concept of leadership in the modern world in order to understand the untold damages being inflicted upon humanity. Leadership is based upon a model of a many-tiered hierarchy. This top-down procedure is universally followed. This is manifest in every field;

the most inflexible and perhaps effective example of this system of bureaucracy is seen in the military and among religious establishments.

All leaders fall into one of the three primary groups: economic, religious and political. Although apparently different, they all have the same central ethos which ensures that they are placed on a pedestal among their followers. It is also necessary to look at the common method(s) and tools of leadership. The exercise will not be complete and scientific if we do not also evaluate the target groups who are led or influenced.

The top executives in industries, like CEOs, presidents, managing directors, executive chairmen and general managers, are primarily motivated by the desire to achieve success in their enterprise. More often than not, their success is defined as the enhancement in the net monetary value of their enterprise. This must be achieved by whichever method is likely to work—pushing the effort ruthlessly up to, and sometimes beyond the furthest boundary of ethics, law, norms and human conscience. They invariably influence their colleagues and staff to embrace this concept who, in turn, disseminate the message towards their own subordinates. This greed for success is accepted by them all. The fear of failure to achieve the targets leads many workers to experience anxiety and also to drug addiction, marital discord, and souring of interpersonal relationships with colleagues and friends.

What the world saw in Vietnam in the early 1960s is a classic example of this kind of greed which is currently being seen in many parts of the world. The current unrest in the Middle East, Africa, the Ukraine, Turkey and Latin America are purely economic issues in reality, put before the world by their patrons, i.e., political leaders, in the guise of defending human rights and values. These conflicts are created to benefit the financiers, the tycoons, the dealers in arms and ammunitions, and related industries, because obviously only they and no-one else are the beneficiaries of these great tragedies.

The resulting loss of lives, the plight of refugees, the agony and abuse of young girls and mothers cannot be forgiven by any thinking man. We bear witness to the slaughter of civilisation and the future of the younger generation in many parts of the world. Never is there 'enough'; the insatiable greed overcomes every human sentiment. Should our businessmen aspire to be leaders, to be so successful as to be judged by their contributions to unthinkable human tragedy?



How have religious leaders influenced our civilisation? Inter-religious wars, either blessed or initiated by them for the past 2000 years or more, have resulted in massive massacres and human displacements. This has continued until now in some form or other, across many parts of the world. The warring nations which practice the same faith get their clergy to bless their murdering armies. Each side claims to be fighting the righteous war until one side becomes victorious. Eventually, only the vanquished political leaders get lambasted by the clergy and punished by the people on the victorious side; the brethren of the same faith are never disowned by the faith nor tried for their war crimes.

This is not, of course, always the only contribution from our religious leaders. I know personally of one instance where the Church decided to abolish a cruel and inhuman practice that was prevalent in their country. A very old patient of mine, a retired Chaplain from a country in Africa, told me that the Church there did not support apartheid. They felt that the only way to show the ruthless government there that all human beings were equal in the eyes of God was to consecrate a black man as the chief of the African church. This patient was one of the few who had been tasked with scouring the countryside seeking bright black boys to bring to Pretoria and educate them with a view to this placement. It was he who had found a chubby 12 year old boy, smiling with luminous eyes, that became famous the world over. He became the Archbishop there and greatly helped to purge the curse of unjust segregation.

Organised religion has also helped greatly the development of arts and crafts, and shown great compassion and help with education and health all over the world. However, the huge churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, tombs and pyramids containing enormous treasures clearly denote the blessing by the religious leaders of a feudal system which exploited other humans, abused their rights and caused unimaginable poverty, servitude and misery upon countless millions. This trend has continued in different guises.

It used to be customary for a Chaplain to bless the ship carrying the cargo of slaves to return and make many more successful voyages during the slave trade. We can see that most religious leaders hold enormous powers and live a life of comfort that is not available to the poor and destitute who they purport to support. Who, or what, kind of a religious leader do the novices wish to emulate?

Political leaders have undoubtedly changed the direction of the growth of human civilisation. This is a relatively new development in terms of history, being barely 400 years old. The transformation from a mostly feudal, ancient system of governance to the current concept of democracy and social justice started becoming apparent, particularly among Christian nations, after the French revolution. All political leaders aspire for great powers which enable them to make the change. However, many of them do not wish to relinquish their positions, as seen in many nations with dictatorships and monarchies. Lord Acton said, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Mr Putin has demonstrated how enormous executive powers can be cunningly acquired by manipulating even a democratic system. Modern political leaders are very similar to the ones of the past whom they have replaced.

Unfortunately, some politicians who brought many good ideas and caused social transformation leading to a better way of life also became so dogmatic in their views and methods that many suffered mercilessly. Is it not an irony that the simple politician who begins his or her vocation by serving the people becomes their master, when established as their successful leader? Is this right?

We have learnt to accept the easy way out by adopting the ‘majority decision’ as the most democratic way of doing things, since unanimity is very difficult to achieve. This used to be correctly reported in the past as the ‘split decision’- splitting the people! In doing so, we choose to ignore the fact that this can only be good for those who are within any given group. This always leaves dissension and generates conflict. Can we learn from the enormous political and social upheaval in Britain, caused by setting a simple majority to decide the results of referenda for Scottish independence and ‘Brexit’? Is it possible to find a method of consensus or maximum agreement among the stakeholders to arrive at a decision?

Wilkinson and Pickett declare, “Equality is better for everyone.”<sup>1</sup> Although the authors have methodically and irrefutably demonstrated that an unequal society in terms of unacceptable levels of wealth distribution, jobs, health, etc., fares worse than those economies where these variables are perhaps acceptable, they have not gone into subjective aspects like motivation, happiness and mental satisfaction, which are the driving forces for us to accomplish success. One could argue that total equality may take

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson, R., Pickett, K., *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. (Penguin Books, London, 2014).

this drive away from us. But why do we forget the principle of equitability? Equitability means 'fair to all parties' as dictated by reason and conscience.<sup>2</sup>

Should our sociologists, psychologists and economists not actively search for a system of governance that allows us to do things together in an equitable manner? They can begin by trying to find the reasons for dissent serially until they reach so deep into the human psyche that the main factor that prevents us from 'thinking first for others and not for ourselves' becomes apparent. Once this is brought out into the open and discussed by opposing groups, a common solution acceptable to all except a few can always emerge. This system should help us to abolish our selfishness and greed inherent in the very concept of 'me and mine' and 'you and yours'.

Is the most intelligent species in this world ever likely to design a new society in which common good and mutual satisfaction can prevail for a good part of the population?

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<sup>2</sup> This term appears to be used more in maritime matters and in legal parlance than in common occasions. But as the following synonyms would show, this could become the mantra for contentment in a society. The synonyms are: even handed, just, right, fair, due, reasonable, proper, honest, impartial, rightful, unbiased, dispassionate, unprejudiced and non- discriminatory.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## THE FEET OR THE HANDS: RESPECT OR RESTRAINT

It was nearly midnight. A lone student was deeply immersed in his studies, straining in the dim light of the prescribed 40-watt bulb of a table lamp. He was leaning back on his chair with his feet inadvertently resting over the pages of opened books, oblivious of time, the scattered text books, the bones of a human skeleton and the atlas of human anatomy on his desk. All was quiet and peaceful. Suddenly, this was shattered by the angry shout of a powerful voice. The student jolted himself out of the chair, almost colliding with the tall, bearded, furious looking Swami. That student was me. The person shouting at me was the warden of that establishment. Recently re-reading Swami Vivekananda's sermons given in Chicago<sup>1</sup> had brought back the memory of this incident that had occurred nearly 46 years ago.

I had come to know about Swami Vivekananda when I was a 12 year old boy living in Varanasi, whilst learning Sanskrit with my grandfather. It was by reading a small book in Hindi in the school library. That book described the works of the great monk. He had introduced the Indian concept of religion and spirituality to the West and had been greatly respected there, too. I also read that he had established several Ashrams (hostels) in the USA and in India, where young boys were encouraged to develop healthy minds in healthy bodies.<sup>2</sup>

For a small, underdeveloped boy who felt scared of very many things, including the few changes heralding puberty in himself, the idea that he could become strong, both in mind and body, was a great relief. I used to

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<sup>1</sup> Das S., "Swaami Vivekananda's speeches," updated 24<sup>th</sup> February 2017. *Thoughts On Religion and spirituality*, [www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda](http://www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Das, S., "*The spiritual genius of Swaami Vivekananda*," updated 15<sup>th</sup> August 2015. *Thoughts on Religion and Spirituality*, [www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda](http://www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017).

scour local libraries trying to find as many books about him as I could. I wished very fervently that I could have lived in one of those Ashrams, but that was obviously impractical at that time. Nearly five years later, I was delighted to learn that there was an Ashram near my medical college hostel. I joined that Ashram within weeks of reaching Bangalore, the city in India where I had gone to read medicine. I used to be acutely aware of my timid nature. I was hoping that I would learn about religion, spirituality and ancient philosophical concepts, while improving my physique and personality too, living in that Ashram for the next five years.

The Ashram had about 70 teenage boys, mostly in high schools and a few like me, in university. It was a disciplined place. The daily routine began at five with morning prayers, a discourse by Swami Guruji, the head of the Ashram, then one hour of compulsory exercise in the gymnasium or on the playing field, followed by breakfast and study until it would be time to leave for our respective schools or colleges. The evening assembly was at six for music and prayers for an hour, to be followed by dinner and return to our respective rooms. We were allowed one light of a 40-watt bulb over our desk and one ceiling light of the same strength; only one was allowed to be switched on at any one time which had to be switched off by nine, our bedtime. I had begun to realise that two hours of private study daily were not sufficient for me. But I enjoyed the ordered life and balanced use of time for my physical, mental and spiritual development. Out of the blue, I received a practical lesson on religion and its spirit that evening.

The day had gone as usual. I had hurried through dinner to my room to prepare for a difficult assessment. I had to face the examiner the next morning, over the structure and construction of the human leg. I soon got lost in my studies, oblivious of everything around me until startled by the sudden appearance of the hostel's warden. He was shouting at me for not switching off the light and breaking the rule of the hostel. I stood up as a mark of respect to him and apologised for being unaware of the time. Pointing at my feet, he then accused me of insulting Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. He had noticed that my feet had been on the desk over the books. This was considered unacceptable, for books were considered holy. I was aware of the custom; had always followed the tradition except for this time, and it was due to my concentration on the subject matter that I was reading. I protested that I had meant no disrespect. I had committed no sin and was devoutly worshipping the Goddess by concentrating on my studies. He did not let me go and

continued his tirade. He insisted that it was a sin to put one's feet over books.

I repeated politely that I had not done this deliberately or consciously. I tried to reason with him saying and that one did not respect one's god with a body part; one showed respect through one's mind. He glared at me and warned me of severe consequences. I do not know what came over me then. I turned around and demanded that he should be apologising to the Goddess instead, whose worship had been so rudely desecrated by him. I went on to say that my feet were as important as my hands and, hence I had definitely not insulted the Goddess. I challenged him to show me how he would do *Namaste* if he were to lose his hands. By then both of us were shouting. He attempted to hit me but I ducked and avoided the blow. Other boys came out of their rooms and the Swami departed, purple in the face, matching his robe.

I was asked to stay behind after prayers the next morning. The warden conferred with the Swami Guruji, the head of the institution, who did not ask me to explain anything but ordered me to put my head on the feet of the warden as an act of abject apology. I refused, saying that if there had been any wrongdoing, it was the warden's which had destroyed an act of worship of a devotee to his Goddess. He should be apologising to my Goddess. I admitted that the rules of the ashram had been inadvertently broken by me. Swami Guruji did not take this kindly.

I stood my ground. Eventually, I asked him whether this kind of ruthlessness on his part was conducive to a novice developing his mind, as espoused by the great Swami Vivekananda. Instead of replying, he got up from his elaborate high chair, very imposing with his long beard and bald head, and pointing his finger at me simply said that if I did not like it there, I could always leave.

I left the hostel that evening, feeling confident and holding my head high, being watched by the warden. I had lost my deposit but this was a small price to pay to learn what religion was all about. I also realised subsequently that I was no longer a timid and frightened young man. From that point on, I never felt the need to go anywhere to learn about religion. Saffron or ochre-robed Godmen often remind me of this incident. I make it a point to talk to them and other religious leaders too, whenever possible, and ask them searching questions. They seldom succeed in satisfying me.

In the cool light of reflection, I do admit that I might have overreacted to the warden. I must have been under considerable stress due to the impending examination, too. But the warden was insensitive and arrogant. He was obviously unable to appreciate a naive youngster's sentiments of a spiritual nature. Hence he did not accept my apology, accused me unkindly and threatened me in order to assert his own authority. But I remain very sceptical of the Swami Guruji. He had left me no choice when he was forcing me to lose my self-respect and succumb to his authority. I shall never know whether he knew the difference between 'religion' and 'the spirit of religion'—which I like to think is Spirituality,—probably not.

Swami Vivekananda did make worthwhile attempts to explain in Chicago that there was a vast difference between religion and spirituality.<sup>3</sup> The first sermon was, however, not well explained.<sup>4</sup> He spoke about unity in diversity, universal tolerance and that all religions were true. He had not defined what a religion was, and hence I could not agree with his latter assertion. He was more successful in introducing the concept of spirituality in his third address than in the former two sermons. But he presented this simple concept in such a complicated and elaborate manner that anyone would certainly be frozen in awe of his oratory and rhetoric, and become more confused than before.

Perhaps his mission was just to impress an unfamiliar audience with the profundity and vastness of the ancient philosophical thinking that had been going on in India for several millennia. I was therefore not surprised to note that he had presented only the sublime and esoteric concepts, carefully avoiding the ugly ideological and operational quarrels, and blatant disregard for human values which were also simultaneously prevalent there. Until that time, most men present in that conference in Chicago had assumed that he had come from a land of ignorant heathens, sinners and idolaters. The sense of his great wisdom and his grasp of the concepts of God, the soul, Brahma, the Father, the Holy Ghost, Jehovah, Allah, the Asura, and the Spirit<sup>5</sup> must have overwhelmed them. He certainly did succeed in his mission.

Perhaps the theologians and clerics gathered there were not ready to admit that their congregation could objectively think and deliberate on

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Das, S., *The spiritual genius of Swami Vivekananda*, [www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda](http://www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

these issues. For them, religion and spirituality were nearly the same; religion was the practice of spirituality. Religion imparted strength to their faith; it was a panacea or solace of weak human beings. Religion demanded conforming to the sermons as interpreted by them. Hence, this was also an effective tool for control of their folk. Swami Vivekananda observed that although most religious leaders admitted to there being different religions, they all demanded similar conformation from their followers. He had prepared his ground eloquently earlier through the story of two frogs in a well. They dared not question him. They knew that he was cleverly espousing the difference between religion and spirituality, about which they themselves were not at all clear.

I certainly agree with the simile of two frogs<sup>6</sup> in a well, which he had presented as the cause of conflict between religions. However, his own followers do not appear to realise to this day the difference between spirituality and religion. This difference is still not very clearly explained nor fully understood. We theorise, hypothesise, imagine and fantasise about many things which we do not know or understand. Enormous volumes of theological literature and scriptures have accumulated as a result of this confusion.

Simple facts do not need learned rhetoric, just as axioms do not need any proof. To my simple reasoning, spirituality liberates you, religion binds you; the former represents the innermost core, the latter represents the many layers of its covering; the former is a naked body, the latter is that body hidden in ceremonial robes. In simple terms, our spirituality transcends all customs, dogmas and differences focusing our mind into that unknown and ubiquitous entity which is the source of everything, strength, consciousness and bliss. In short, it is the spirit of any religion. Perhaps the following simple example may explain this difference.

Imagine that you have never actually chewed and tasted a grain of wheat. You wish to experience its taste. You are aware that it is the main ingredient of bread, cakes and many types of pastries. You notice the row of bakery shops in a high street displaying beautifully baked cakes, buns and breads in many shapes and sizes. They look attractive and delicious. You are keen to taste wheat and believing the cakes to have been made of wheat, buy one and eat it. It tastes delicious but does it taste of wheat? It

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<sup>6</sup> Das, S., “*The spiritual genius of Swami Vivekananda*,” updated 15<sup>th</sup> August 2015. *Thoughts on Religion and Spirituality* in [www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda](http://www.belurmath.org/Swamivivekananda). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017).



tastes sugary and spicy; it is moist and fragrant. Which of these is the taste of wheat? Spirituality is like the taste of wheat that is buried within the cake of religion. Sadly, we cannot taste wheat from the cake although it must be there, somewhere within it.

Every shop-keeper proclaims his cake to be the best wheat-based product. This is then contested by other bakers who are equally adamant that their cake is superior. The competition becomes intense, driven by the aim of attracting customers. Someone starts a special offer, others follow suit with attractive discounts. An acrimonious relationship begins to sprout among the competitors. Religious rivalry appears to be no different.

Our great religious leaders are like the master bakers wishing to do their best for the customers with their products. Their elaborate religious machinations do not enhance reality, the essence, the cause of existence, that is, the spirit on which their doctrines were originally based. Devout followers are dazzled by their presentations and fully believe in them. This is the sad state of affairs today because of which spirituality does not manifest obviously in our religions.

The layers of pretence and camouflage need to be discarded in order to expose the inner core of existence, which is the ultimate reality; the Spirit. This is the message given by ancient sages when they espoused renunciation of non-essential material possessions. This must also apply to places of worship and institutions of learning. Modern religious leaders and gurus must reflect critically upon themselves and their institutions to assess the effects of their performance and lifestyles on others whom they are supposed to guide. It would help greatly if they were to imagine a scenario of Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, or Prophet Mohammad entering our midst again. What would they have said when they saw the current interpretation and practice of what they had preached?

One cannot get the neutral, non-offending, non-partisan, pure taste of the blessed nourishing wheat by eating a cake.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## THE GARDEN OF EDEN: THE FIRST UTOPIA

I saw fascinating paintings of Eden, this imaginary garden, when I first visited the Vatican in 1981. I bought a print of Wenzel Peter's acclaimed work 'The Garden of Eden', which has hung on our bedroom wall ever since. Adam, Eve and all the animals and birds appear very content, healthy, and seem to be living peacefully in harmony. The beasts, including the lions and tigers, appear docile and not aggressive towards the smaller animals. None show violence, aggression or greed: hoarding of food and prey is not visible. Is this garden the mythical paradise? The Garden of Eden was the most valuable gift given by God to man - so believe the Christians, Jews and Muslims, who comprise over half of the world's population.

I have often wondered whether the two trees, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life, and Adam and Eve had symbolic importance. If Eve complements Adam, is the Tree of Knowledge complementary to the Tree of Life? Has the Old Testament been telling us for millennia that man must utilise true knowledge to enjoy life and when ignorance tempts him to do otherwise, that is to say, to be greedy, his paradise gets taken away from him? The Book of Revelation in the New Testament assures the faithful that after the apocalypse, a New Jerusalem will descend from Heaven. Does it symbolically indicate to us that the restoration of this ideal living will be possible after the apocalypse; after the total annihilation of our evil and ignorant nature?

The earliest (dating back to 4000 BC) concept of a well ordained, secure, content and blissful society of Aryans is revealed to us through the Rig Veda. The Rishis allegorically indicated this order and sequence in Rig.10.90 (*Purusha Sookta*) mantras. They had also cautioned about greed and the need to use wealth for the benefit of others; Rig. 10.117 (*Dhannamannadi Sookta*). Rig.121 (*Saumanayasya Sookta*) suggested the way for men in the community to live in harmony. The formula for enlightenment was given in Rig. 3.63.10 (*Gaayatree mantra*). These

guiding principles must have worked well for the ancient Aryan communities, for millennia, to pre-empt the concept of the *Satya Yuga*, the most benevolent, peaceful and happy era in their mythology. The subsequent eras, namely the *Treytaa*, *Dwaapara* and *Kali Yuga* that they had predicted would be determined by the progressively increasing incidence of violence, conflicts and unhappiness, ultimately resulting in the *Pralaya*, the apocalypse. In spite of these, that social order eventually degenerated into a cruel feudal state with a detestable caste system as witnessed in India today, probably because these lofty ideals were not being continually monitored and sufficiently reinforced. The current age is believed by many to be that last era, the *Kali Yuga*. The Greek poet Hesiod, 750-650 BC, probably a contemporary of Homer,<sup>1</sup> had also theorised that the universe had five eras - the Golden age was the first and most ancient. This corresponds with the *Satya Yuga*.

Buddha, in 563 BC, greatly distressed by the detestable caste system and prevailing religious malpractices, suggested the Eightfold path. He encouraged all to seek refuge in *Buddhi* (enlightenment) and in *Dharma* (duty). He established the *Sangha* - the commune. Subsequently, his feuding followers broke up into several factions to serve their own interests.

Kung Chieu (Confucius, 551-479 BC) preached of the qualities required for an 'accomplished man'. He proclaimed that the *jen* (affectionate and indulgent mind) and *shu* (respect for others and oneself) were cardinal needs for the members of a benevolent society. Another Chinese philosopher Mo Tzu, 490-403 BC, felt that a new egalitarian society was needed which condemned the lust for profit, luxury, accumulation of wealth and for developing military power. He suggested that there should be universal frugality, uniform regulation of expenditure and strict respect for the laws. He identified family selfishness as the principal source of conflicts and preached generalised altruism. Sadly, he was soon confined to the archives.<sup>2</sup>

Plato, in 346 BC, in *The Republic*,<sup>3</sup> suggested the creation of a perfect society, a utopia, managed by 'the guardians', reminiscent of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gill N.S., *The five ages of man (Hesiod) in Greek mythology*. (Thought Co., 2015). <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-five-ages>. (Accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> Feb 2016).

<sup>2</sup> "Mo Tzu, 490-403 BC," [www.philosophy.hku.hk/ch/moemcnyred.html](http://www.philosophy.hku.hk/ch/moemcnyred.html) (Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Waterfield R., *Plato: The Republic*. (The Folio Society, OUP, reprinted 2007).

traditional Aryan caste system with the fusion of Brahmins and Kshetriyas into one class, the ‘benevolent aristocracy’. He was very concerned for the continuing ‘education’ of the guardians, lest this benevolent aristocracy succumb to sheer greed, and degenerated into dictatorship. He was indeed prophetic, as shown by the emergence of the cruel feudal states and detestable caste system in India.

Mohammad, 570 AD, came as the saviour warrior, a prophet preaching a new religion and prompting his followers to a *jihad* (destruction of sin and sinners, rampant in his time) to ultimately establish *Jannah* (paradise) on earth. Those who would indulge in the *jihad* would be rewarded in paradise. But the *hadith* of the prophet is largely misinterpreted by his self-proclaimed agents who, being powerful and influential, are successfully helping to create not a *Jannah* (paradise) but *Jahannam* (hell) on earth.

Many in the past have addressed the theme of ‘the land of milk and honey where everyone is happy, equal, and free from misery’—the concept of Shangri la; of a utopia. Tao Yuanming (in 421 AD) produced a famous book, *The Peach Blossom Spring*, which narrated the story of a Chinese fisherman who accidentally entered a secluded place at the end of a river and discovered a paradise.

Sir Thomas Moor’s *Utopia* published in 1516 (in Latin) reiterates these earlier fantasies.<sup>4</sup> The fictional society described is not dissimilar to the ones described in Satya Yuga.

James Hilton, in 1933, presented the fantasy of Shangri la in *Lost Horizon*, probably inspired by the Tibetan legends of beyuls, i.e. the hidden lands established by Padmasambhava as secret places for the Lamas.<sup>5</sup> The experiments on establishing utopian communities began in the colony of Carolina in 1670 AD, and spread to other states in the Americas, USSR, Israel and eventually Pondicherry in 1968.<sup>6</sup> Sadly, all of these appear to have been unsuccessful in their objectives. Many assume, without critical evaluation, the cause to have been ‘greedy management’.

Observing that all religions had assisted the rulers in creating an unequal and unjust society, i.e. a very parochial and primitive system, the concept of utopia began to reappear in the guise of socialism in around

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<sup>4</sup> Moor, T., *Utopia* (Latin), 1516; Leuven, English translation, 1684. (Amazon Classics, USA, 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Hilton, J., *The Lost Horizon*. (Summerdale Publishers Ltd, UK, 1933).

<sup>6</sup> “Utopia”, [www.auroville.org](http://www.auroville.org). (Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

1700 AD.<sup>7</sup> This, in the truest sense, was the appropriate interpretation of the Rishis, the philosophers and the prophets. Sadly, the socialist leaders themselves began to emulate the people whom they intended to replace. Their greed continued to be the dominant inspiration in politics. As a result, the last century suffered two world wars, the Russian and Chinese revolutions, the Pol Pot massacre, the Vietnam war, Bosnian ethnic cleansing and massacre, the mass killings in several states in Africa and South Central America, the Syrian civil war with its innumerable killings, disappearances and refugees—all adding up to more human destruction than in any previous century in recorded history.

Do we consciously think of the many homes which remain unlit and mired in the darkness of poverty and deprivation, while the fortunate few enjoy their festivals with lights, extravagant splendour and pomp, as always? Whether it is Deepavali, Christmas, Eid, Thanksgiving, Passover, or the birthday of Buddha, all festivals are the celebration of sharing, good will and love. Is it not our greed that makes us ask our respective gods on these occasions for additional prosperity and wealth for ourselves? Are these festivals not the appropriate occasions for reflection on the current irrational distribution and accumulation of resources in this world?

The primitive order is still ruling supreme. A vast proportion of the world's population is living in poverty and misery. The mass murder and exodus from Syria, Africa, Central America, south Asia numbering millions along with civil wars and military coups have continued unabated. The controllers of the world economy, i.e. the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the developed nations, have established poverty elimination programs and millennium goals with little effect in terms of reduction of wars, overall poverty and the exodus of refugees.

The interfaith movement and atheism have become lucrative businesses and teaching institutions. Several organisations are thriving on this concept by highlighting inequality and creating more uncertainties in our unhappy society. Undeterred, film makers and writers have continued to use the theme of utopia and eugenics in their fantasy productions.

It is our history which guides us in the present, and guides us into the future. It is therefore important to observe that the Rishis, philosophers, prophets, the dreamers, and the common man have all aspired to Heaven on Earth, in some form or other. Equally, all have pointed the way to

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<sup>7</sup> Marx, K., Engels, F., *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848. (Penguin Books, 1980).

achieving this blissful state by seeking enlightenment, in particular, through knowledge. The *Gaayatrie* mantra, the first edict of Buddha, Jesus saying 'seek and you will find', the messenger of Allah teaching 'seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim', and the state of Jen espoused by Confucius, have all repeatedly inspired us to seek knowledge; in turn this helps us to discern the truth, the ultimate reality, bliss. The latter is the ultimate realisation of utopia, the establishment of the Golden Age, the Satya Yuga, the Jannah, the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem on earth.

We need to realise, however, that many were deliberately denied access to this esoteric knowledge for a very long time. The self-styled 'agents of God' made sure that these archives were kept beyond the reach of most men and closed to all women for several centuries. They justified their actions and words by misrepresenting mantras, sermons, Hadiths and edicts as they chose. To make themselves more effective, they brought about the concept of rewards doled out by God or punishments inflicted in His name. All this enhanced a deep-seated fear of the unknown, which was reinforced by belief in superstition. Mankind, scared and unhappy, plunged into servitude, poverty and misery.

The powerful religious leaders and rulers complemented each other, and the result was limiting the flow of wealth to a small elite. This generated a feudal order in society which Plato had feared and prophesied about in *The Republic*.<sup>8</sup> This feudal system romanticised greed, whether for power, lust or wealth.

In the midst of the grime and poverty, one only needs to look at the pomp and luxury in churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, ashrams and vihaaras. Many Gurus and heads of religious orders in their opulent habitat, their extravagant habits, bank accounts and banks, appear to convey that religions have become synonymous with 'cults' and transformed into gigantic multinational commercial enterprises, thus utterly failing the majority of mankind.

If we seek to access and disseminate true knowledge, we need to establish new independent institutions which seek the truth. Our universities are not truly independent, having to function within the restrictions imposed on them by the founding religious, commercial or political norms, and dogmas. One needs institutions which are self-

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 2007.

sustaining and independent of the government, commerce, religion and politics.

These should be deemed universities, providing post graduate courses and conducting deep doctoral research into the substance and applicability of common beliefs and values which influence us all in our daily lives.<sup>9</sup> We need to examine the reality within the theology, philosophical edicts, philology and semantics, religions, scriptures, astrology, Yoga, complementary medical practices, anthropology, ancient history, *Vaastu (Feng sui)* and heritage, which have become huge commercial enterprises.

Professors and their pupils in these institutions should have total protection and support to publish their honest research truthfully and without fear of punishment or persecution. Such knowledge as this, well researched and supported by incontrovertible facts, will enhance our inner strengths and faith within ourselves by dispelling untruths and superstitions. Teachers too, need to learn along with the seekers all the time, as advised by Confucius: “Wisdom can only be acquired after an effort lasting every minute of one’s life by control of the smallest details of conduct by observation of the values of life in society.”<sup>10</sup>

We have seen that the universities based on religious doctrines have been thriving for centuries. Surely, these novel institutions of learning, based on universal human values of equality, fraternity, mutual respect, probity, trust and benevolence, can also flourish.<sup>11</sup> A few universities of this kind spread across the world will generate sufficient objective data for society at large to encourage our religious, political and business leaders to be proactive with human values. They will need to control and reduce their greed and falsehoods for fear of losing hold over their following.

The products of these universities will be enlightened parents. Only enlightened parents can nurture their children to develop into morally strong and confident adults, that is to say, the parents-to-be who will continue this new tradition. The initial tiny ripple from a small novel university could slowly spread and gain momentum, thus heralding a real Shangri la. The institutions of this kind will take a few generations to

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<sup>9</sup> Gautam, P C, “Academy of Ancient Studies: a concept paper”, KGSS, Kathmandu, 2014, pp 5-6

<sup>10</sup> Gernet, J., “Confucius (551-479 BC)” in *A History of Chinese Civilisation*; The Folio Society, London, 2002, pp 81-82

<sup>11</sup> Gautam, P.C., 2014.

become effective, and eventually the enlightened society shall be automatically transformed into a lasting utopia.

Although every religion exhorts us to seek knowledge, many preachers denounce this quest as atheism and demand blind faith. Hence, alternatively, yet another incarnation of a prophet or Krishna is unlikely to reverse this system. The cycle of falsehood and mental debauchery will begin to prevail soon after his death.

Unless the greed factor among leaders and administrators is supplanted by a quest for knowledge of the truth and enlightenment, utopia on earth shall remain literally as a 'no place'—as dictates its literal meaning in Latin—a fantasy land which will never come into existence.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# IGNORANCE MIRED IN KNOWLEDGE: THE NEGLECTED HERITAGE OF MANKIND

The Rig Veda is very relevant to modern times. Its mantras are of great significance to historians, linguists, philologists, anthropologists, philosophers, theologians as well as the common man. Besides the profound philosophical deliberations, astronomy, science, medicine, history and politics, the mantras in the Rig Veda provide repeated instructions for righteous living, emphasise the preservation of nature, describe the importance of wealth earned by honest means, and encourage generosity to others in need. These principles are sorely needed in modern society.

The memory of the world register spans ten pages and has listed the Rig Veda as a piece of world heritage, “30 Rig Veda manuscripts dating from 1800-1500 BC have been included in UNESCO’s memory of the World register, a compendium of documentary heritage of exceptional value.”<sup>1</sup> The citation reads as follows:

The Vedas are generally known as the scriptures of the Hindu community. However, being among the first literary documents in the history of humankind, they transcend far beyond their identity as scriptures. The Rigveda, the oldest among the four Vedas, is the fountain source of the so called Aryan culture in all its manifestations that spread beyond the Indian sub-continent to large parts of South- and South East Asia, as well as parts of Central Asia. This valuable treasure of the ancient world has been preserved in the form of manuscripts in India and handed down over centuries from generation to generation.

This citation succeeds in espousing the importance of the Rig Veda, sufficiently enough to be included in the register of the World Memory, but does little justice to its contents and its implicit wisdom. Perhaps it is this superficial impression, as expressed above—prevalent for the past few

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<sup>1</sup> Mukul, A., *Times of India*. (New Delhi, 21st June 2007).

centuries—that has led to a plethora of claims, counter-claims and confusion regarding this heritage.

The opinions on the Rig Veda, as seen in the published literature, range from this being an invaluable piece of heritage to man, to a worthless piece of literature; a set of religious prayers of a nomadic race, to profound philosophical wisdom; a mine of all secret knowledge, to the rant of a scared provincial race. There is no unanimity on its antiquity, its origin or its authorship. Unfortunately, there is no authoritative and objective commentary on the Rig Veda in any language which can be accepted by the scholar and the general reader alike, which can shed light on the truth of the Vedas and answer these questions.

*Veda* means knowledge in Sanskrit which is the language of composition of these documents. There are four Vedas, namely the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Saama Veda and the Atharva Veda. These are commonly referred to as the source of knowledge, the manual of rituals, the prayers and hymns of devotion, crafts and the occult, respectively. In the simplest terms, the Vedas may be regarded as the anthology of the ancient Aryan civilisation. These compositions go back to the time when Aryan society was beginning to develop into complex systems. The period of Vedic literature has been variously estimated to be from 4000 to 200 BC, judging by the style of composition of various mantras by the Rishis, and the historical facts inherent in them.

Every Hindu ritual in India begins and ends with the recitation of a Vedic mantra. All the mantras of the Rig Veda appear like prayers at first. These are not arranged in any scientific manner, grouped and sequenced according to the date of composition, subject matter and importance. These come to light only after painstaking and elaborate *Anwaya*, i.e. logical and grammatically correct order of the individually separated words in the mantras.

Although the vast majority of educated households in India do not take an active interest in learning and teaching the Vedas, most of them take pride in the belief that these ancient documents are their precious heritage. Some Brahmin boys are encouraged to memorise Yajurveda to initiate them into the priesthood that will follow.

A fifth of the world's population considers the Vedas to be the bedrock of their culture which has not only saved it from oblivion, unlike so much literature of other ancient civilisations, but also maintained it intact and

alive over many millennia. They firmly believe that this has been possible due to the edicts given by the Vedas. Perhaps the Vedas could have been more meaningful and acceptable to the modern Indian, and to everyone outside India, if only the interpretation of the mantras had been unanimous. This would have demonstrated its relevance to modern living; it has not happened.

The present generation of Indians do not wish to be mired in the apparently conflicting and seemingly improbable concepts put forward by priests and gurus, comprising the message of the Vedas. It is therefore not surprising to witness the waning of interest in the Vedas which, at best, are merely considered to be the relics of a bygone era, irrelevant to the modern scientific world; the recitation of the mantras at auspicious events being just a mark of respect for ancient traditions. Even the citation quoted above refers to its relevance to the past only. This is unfortunate.

The fundamental question therefore is this: Why are scholars' interpretations of the Rig Vedic mantras so diverse?

Indian scholars have looked at this literature mainly from religious perspectives. This trend was established by Saayanacharya, the royal priest who wrote an extensive commentary on it in 1455 AD. This has since remained the gold standard of reference for all subsequent scholars, although some have posited alternative interpretations. The latter day Indian scholars like Sri Aurobindo, Kapali Shastri, Swami Dayananda and Sri Ram Sharma Acharya, who challenged Saayana's commentaries, did not provide an authoritative translation which would be acceptable to other scholars. Indeed, they too followed the old tradition of personal and subjective interpretations and, not surprisingly, differed from one another too.

I am of the opinion that the translators in any of the significant publications did not do a scientific and honest job of remaining within, and working from, a focused approach on the words of each mantra.<sup>2</sup> I believe that they have chosen to be commentators. This does not get unanimous acceptance as the true meaning of the mantras. Consequently, it has created major uncertainty and confusion which has thrown the Rig Veda into controversy.

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<sup>2</sup> Gautam, P.C. (Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bhavan's Book University, Mumbai, India, 2014).

I set about doing a word for word translation of all the Rig Veda's mantras, with the help of five other scholars. The meaning of every word had to be unanimously agreed upon. The exacting methodology required the translators to remain strictly within the confines of the words in the mantras'. I can say with confidence that at the least six scholars agree with this work!

This painstaking exercise showed that the 409 Rishis had given their observations and opinions as mantras, several millennia ago, on practically everything relating to our society today. There are indeed many different subjects, ranging from quantum theories, astronomy, mathematics, ecology, medicine, genetics, prayers and rituals, philosophical concepts, theories of creation, historical facts, anthropological and social information regarding antiquity, implements of war, politics, and much more. Surprisingly, these observations are still valid and can stand up to any scientific scrutiny today.

Any attempt at trying to understand the Vedic mantras in India is discouraged by the traditionalists, commonly through expressing patronising statements e.g. "the mantras have *aadidaivik*, *aadibhautic* and *aadhyatmic* connotations (spiritual, materialistic and philosophical); the literal translation alone is not sufficient to understand them. Only an enlightened guru can interpret them correctly." This kind of generalisation cannot be true.

Not all the mantras are loaded with secret meanings or sublime philosophical or divine revelations. Even if they are, the words always give a clue as to their inherent meanings, however far-fetched they may be. As a matter of fact, there is no statement or action, ranging from the sublime to the base, in this world which does not have, or cannot be interpreted from, at least three perspectives. The Rig Vedic mantras are no exception. The following is one of many such examples.

*Trihi sma maanhaha shrathayowaitasenota sma mayowyatyai preenaasi  
Pururuwoanutay ketamaayam raajaa me weera tanwastadaasi.*

Rig 10.95.5

Word for word translation: O *Pururavaa*; three times; your; in the house; (I) had gone; me; of the day; hurt me with penis; and; without co-wife; (you) me; pleased; O brave; king; (you) my; of the body; that; had been the (giver).

One does not need to seek great education from an enlightened guru to understand this mantra in which Urvashi admits that she and Pururavaa enjoyed sexual intercourse three times daily when his other wife was not there. Of course, the physical act of copulation can be sublime, divine and creative too! There are many more mantras which are self-explanatory.

The Rig Veda in India remained an obscure religious text which many were not allowed to study but whose hymns continued to be recited in various rituals. The interest in the Rig Veda in India resurfaced in academia with Bala Gangadhar Tilak and Swami Dayananda Saraswati in the 1880s. Tilak determined the origin of the Rig Veda at around 4000 BC.<sup>3</sup> Swami Dayananda wrote the Rig Veda Bhashya in Hindi giving the most unusual commentary of the mantras.<sup>4</sup> He passed away before he could complete this work. But he was able to criticise the ritualists and also revive Indian patriotism. As a result, a new cult was produced which also elevated the importance of the Vedas, thus reinforcing its religious importance.

Revived patriotism in India has continued to inspire many contemporary Indian historians, like Srikant Talageri,<sup>5</sup> to attempt to rewrite the history of the Aryans and generate more controversy.<sup>6</sup> The discovery of the Indus Valley civilisation has further complicated the interpretation of the mantras.<sup>7</sup>

Professor Kashyap produced a complete English translation of Rig Veda, using chunks of phrases of the mantras and attributing philosophical meanings to all of them.<sup>8</sup> His work on Rig Vedic mantras as having philosophical secrets has been supported by another great scholar, Sri

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<sup>3</sup> Morgan, WK, ed., *The religion of the Hindus*. (Motilal Banarasisdas, New Delhi, 1953).

<sup>4</sup> Dayananda, S., *Rigveda Bhasha bhashya*. (Dayananda Sansthan, New Delhi, 1934).

<sup>5</sup> Talageri, S., *The Rig Veda: a historical analysis*. (Aditya Prakashan, New Delhi, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Swati, IVC, [www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/history/facts-about-the-indus-valley-civilisation](http://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/history/facts-about-the-indus-valley-civilisation). (Accessed 13th October 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Kaur, R., *Myth of the Aryan*, [www.mapsofindia.com/myindia/history/the-myth-of-the-aryan/](http://www.mapsofindia.com/myindia/history/the-myth-of-the-aryan/). (Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2016).

Shastri, S., ed., *yaska pranitam niruktam (nighantu sahitam)*. (Parimal Publications, New Delhi, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Kashyap, R.L., *Rigveda Samhita Vol I-X*, (Sri Aurobindo Kapali Shastri Institute of Vedic Culture; Bangalore, 2012), pp 23.

Ramchandra Rao, who asserts that all the mantras have three meanings; *adhibhautika*, *adhidaivika* and *adhyatmica* (the physical, the spiritual and the philosophical). This is similar to Saunaka's assertion, of circa 1900 BC, who restricted himself to 400 complex words in his work, the *Nirukta*, the famous etymological study produced in Sanskrit. We find no evidence of generalisation like this by him for the entire corpus of the Vedas. Bibek Debroy and several Indian writers have added their personal opinions and interpretations in English, which are similar to the western scholarly work described earlier.<sup>9</sup>

However, faithfully carrying out word for word translation from Sanskrit into English is fraught with enormous difficulties, mainly due to the manner of composition of the mantras and the unavailability of equivalent English words. The mantras are not arranged in proper sentences, and many are in phrases. There are riddles, innuendos, disregard for grammar and repetition of words and phrases without appearing to add any substance to the mantra. In some cases there is more than one context for each mantra. There are several instances when no coherence is seen between the mantras within the same *Sookta* (the poem). The subject matters change suddenly—in mid mantra, at times—making accurate translation very difficult.

Often a translator is required to combine multiple words in English to convey the appropriate meaning of one Sanskrit word. At times, one has to use the original Sanskrit words as a proper noun, although the word is a common noun. The following examples may illustrate these instances: 'Yagna' in Sanskrit was translated by Wilson as 'sacrifice' which has been constantly used by all English translators, essayists, commentators and scholars all over the English speaking world. This has done a great disservice to the Rig Veda by giving an erroneous interpretation of its mantras because 'sacrifice' does not convey the essence of the *Yagna*. The *Nirukta* has given 15 meanings for *Yagna* to be used appropriately in different contexts or settings. These are *medha*, *yagnya*, *adhvara*, *widatha*, *naarya*, *sabanam*, *hotraa*, *ishti*, *devataataa*, *makha*, *vishnu*, *indu*, *prajaapati*, and *dharma*. Of all these names, *medha*, meaning to kill, is the closest to the word 'sacrifice'. But sacrifice has been used universally and inappropriately. All available English translations refer to *Yagna* as 'sacrifice'. Just as it would not be appropriate to describe dew, juice, mist,

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<sup>9</sup> Debroy, B.B., Debroy, D., *The Holy Vedas*; 14th edition. (BR Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2015).

fog, vapour, rain, snow, ice, sleet, frost or cloud as 'water', not all the synonyms of *Yagna* can be termed 'sacrifice'.

*Dharma* has always been translated into English as 'religion'. The current concept of religion is very different from the Vedic concept. Spirituality and religion are taken as synonymous by the western and Islamic scholars. The Vedic concept of *Dharma* is the expression of the characteristic or property by which one is identified, and this also means duty or the expected action according to prescribed norms. Monier Williams gives the following meaning of *Dharma*: 'that which is established or firm, steadfast decree, statute, ordinance, law, usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty, right, justice, virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, good works, holding to law, doing one's duty'.<sup>10</sup>

*Anna* in Sanskrit is similarly used in a variety of ways; any single word in English, for instance, food or cereal, does not describe its true meaning. *Deva* or *Devata* has always been translated as 'God'. This too has many different connotations, ranging from a polite, civilised address to the ultimate divinity. Although all the hymns are dedicated to one or more *Devata*, they do not always mean that the addressee is the supreme or the ultimate divinity.

The Rig Veda was first translated fully into English by Professor H.H. Wilson. The first volume of his extensive work was produced in 1850: the sixth and last in 1888. He based his work on the commentary of *Saayanacharya* (Sayana), the royal priest in the court of King Veera Bukka (Wakkaraaja) in the Kingdom of Vijayanagara, in south-central India (1350-79 AD). There are some undeniable inconsistencies in this commentary due to the influence of religious rituals, probably because he was the royal priest. This is clearly unacceptable.

Professor Wilson was a doctor in the British imperial army. He had learnt Sanskrit and translated *Vishnupurana* (Vishnupurana) from Sanskrit into English. He subsequently became the first Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University and began the translation of the Rig Veda. It is unlikely that he would have been permitted access to actual

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, M., (1851 London); Dictionary, English and Sanskrit. (Asian Educational services, New Delhi, 2001) pp839. See also A Sanskrit English Dictionary: 4th edition. (Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 2005).

performances of religious rituals or to discussions with great scholars of the Vedas in Kolkata, India, where he was stationed in the early 1800s.

His apparent frustration is seen where he admits that;

...to the religious rites at which they are to be repeated, I have been unable to make use of this latter part of the description, as the ceremonies as chiefly indicated by their titles alone and their peculiar details are not to be determined without a more laborious investigation than the importance or interest of the subject appeared to me to demand...

He goes on to write that,

...it is inferable from some passages that human sacrifices (*nara bali*) were not unknown, although infrequent, and sometimes typical; but these are the exceptions and the habitual offerings may be regarded as consisting of clarified butter and the juice of the Soma plant. (Wilson, H.H., 1850)

The translation by Wilson faithfully reflects the gargantuan work of Sayana and also his own guesswork, causing a great injustice to the sublime messages of some mantras. He had singlehandedly undertaken a huge and difficult task. As in Sayana, he appears not to have been able to distinguish the meaning of some important Vedic words and rituals from the post-Vedic interpretations. The meaning 'sacrifice' attributed to *Yagna* is distinctly a post-Vedic interpretation. This was realised by Professor Monier-Williams (who succeeded Wilson at Oxford) nearly half a century later, who gave the meaning of *Yagna* as “worship, devotion, prayer, praise; act of worship or devotion, offering, oblation, the Yagna; the former meanings prevailing in Veda, the latter in post Vedic literature.”<sup>11</sup>

The translation of the Rig Veda in verse by Professor Griffiths is an exquisite literary marvel. The poetic interpretations of the mantras leave the reader with uncertainties regarding their actual meaning, even if one were capable of comprehending the beautiful verses.

Sri Aurobindo<sup>12</sup> provided a philosophical interpretation of nearly half of the Rig Veda in English and differed greatly from Sayana. Kapali Shastri based his discourses and writing on the Rig Veda (translated into

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, M., 1851, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*. (4th edition Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Aurobindo, S., *The Secret of the Vedas with Selected Hymns*; vol 15; The complete works of Sri Aurobindo. (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 1998), p 14.



English) on the work of Sri Aurobindo. The latest monumental English translation and commentary produced by Professor Kashyap is based upon the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and Kapali Shastri. He has teased out the mantras into phrases and given their interpretations. He too humbly admits that “My aim is to bring the spiritual interpretation of the Veda to the attention of the wider audience of Veda lovers who may not be experts in Sanskrit.”<sup>13</sup>

Another publication, with about ten percent of the mantras translated into English, is *The Rig Veda, An Anthology* by Professor Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty. This is a collection of mantras grouped according to the subject matter into 14 sections, and is comfortable to read. One begins to get a bit uneasy, however, when she herself admits that

I have retranslated several hymns used in my earlier publications.... translations made ten years from now would probably be equally different from these, and with good reason. Translators are, to paraphrase Charles Long, painters rather than photographers, and painters make mistakes. (O’Flaherty, W.D., 1981)

The works of our classical artists can compete with any photograph to show even the tiniest detail. I would argue that a leaf would always be recognised as a leaf if it is painted like one and not like the blob of green in an impressionist painting which may represent a leaf. However, this honest and humble statement attempts to establish the fact that any translation done by any one individual, however learned, may not stand the test of time, i.e. be acceptable to many in terms of accuracy and authenticity.

This kind of independent and personal interpretation has continued among other great scholars in many other languages. No-one attempted to reorganise the words of the mantras in a logical sequence based on grammar and as intended in the mantras. As a result, each translator and commentator came up with his own version.

According to the great Sanskrit historian Professor Macdonell, this tendency had been observed by Professor Roth, the founder of Vedic philology. I quote Professor Macdonell:

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<sup>13</sup> Aurobindo, S. (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1952). Kashyap, R.L. (Sri Aurobindo Kapali Shastri Institute of Vedic Culture, Bangalore, 2012).

This great scholar propounded the view that the aim of Vedic interpretation was not to ascertain the meaning which Sayana or even Yaska, who lived eighteen centuries earlier, attributed to the Vedic hymns but the meanings which the ancient poets themselves intended. Such an end could not be attained by simply following the lead of the commentators... The commentators, therefore, simply preserved attempts at the solution of difficulties, while showing a distinct tendency towards misinterpreting the language as well as the religious, mythological and cosmic ideas of a vanished age by the scholastic notions prevalent in their own. (Macdonell, A.A., 1900)

Another difficulty encountered by researchers is the persistent tendency among many translators to base their interpretations on the literature of later periods. These are quoted as evidence for their interpretation of the mantras. If the premise that the Vedas are the most ancient compilations is to be honoured, then we must accept that we have nothing to compare them with; an authentic translation must therefore attempt to seek the answers solely from within the mantras. The vast collections of subsequent literature are, nonetheless, useful in forming an understanding of the complexity of the idea inherent in the mantras, and to apprise one of the different opinions which exist among the scholars.

This kind of disregard is shown by modern historians in India too, while formulating their opinions on Aryan History. It is regrettable that these historians, when studying Aryan history, derive their conclusions from a great deal of associated evidence when the only document that can give them authentic information, namely, the mantras of Rig Veda, is not scrupulously examined for all the clues.

Since ancient Sanskrit literature is practically based upon the Vedas and its off-shoots, the 'neo-Sanskritists' in Europe interpreted the literature without having the benefit of a deep understanding of the philology of Sanskrit and the sources of ancient Indian mythology. Hence, their misinterpretations of some obscure texts have remained deeply entrenched in western scholars' thinking as true facts.

More recently, western scholars who have gone deeper into philology and semantics in Sanskrit literature than the earlier ones, are nevertheless so influenced by the prevalent Greek-Roman, Hebrew-Christian philosophical thought, religion and mythology, that their interpretation and explanation of the Vedic mantras are based upon these influences. All of them regard the Vedas as religious literature, but are unable to accurately

interpret whether the religion depicted by these mantras is monotheistic, henotheistic, polytheistic or pantheistic.

Unfortunately, even Macdonell himself could not rid himself of his earlier assumptions and biases, as is evident from the example he gives:

The following stanza from the last funeral hymn (X. 18) is addressed to the widow, who is called upon to rise from the funeral pyre and take the hand of her new husband, doubtless a brother of the deceased, in accordance with an ancient marriage custom:

*Rise up; come to the world of life, o woman;  
Thou liest here by one whose soul has left him.  
Come: thou hast now entered upon the wifehood  
Of this thy lord who takes thy hand and woos thee*

[RV: 10.18.8]. (in Macdonell, A.A., 1900)

The exact word for word translation, according to the *Anwaya* of the mantra, is as follows:

O woman; to the living world; aiming; rise; dead; of this dead; near (why) sleep; come; your; performer of marriage; (holder of the hand); impregnator; of the husband; this; to the offspring; aiming; be in control. A coherent and accurate translation can thus be produced:

O woman! Aiming to the living world, rise. Why sleep near this dead? Come. Be in control, aiming at this offspring of your husband, the impregnator, the holder of hand.

The idea of a wife lying by the dead body of her husband on the funeral pyre was taken from a much later custom, mentioned in Manu Smriti. The poem (*Sookta, Rig 10.18*) is centred on the dead warrior who is about to be buried, not cremated. The idea that the brother of the dead man was now the new husband was perhaps taken from Greek and Roman customs. The translator completely overlooked the exhortation to the widow to look after the child born of her husband, and was obviously not able to take himself back to the custom of the ancient Vedic period when the mantra was composed.

The grieving widow in the mantra was being encouraged to overcome her sorrow by making her aware of the need to safeguard her child, who had become fatherless. She was certainly not being asked to take another husband at that tragic moment, before the body had even been buried. This kind of callous disregard for the sentiments of a widow, and a mother, who

was lying grieving beside the body of her husband, cannot be justified, even by appeal to poetic license.

This is one of many instances of the Rig Vedic mantras which have been misinterpreted, thus leading on to the suggestion of a barbaric culture being prevalent in India during the Vedic period. So why did a great scholarly person like Macdonell, who had great regard for ancient Indian wisdom, suggest these inaccuracies?

The art and science of translation is extremely difficult. It is essential to know the origin language's grammar, and to use it correctly. It is essential to be sensitive to the nuance of the original statement. It is also essential to ascertain the context of the verse, remaining within the words of the mantra and indeed within the Sookta. Finally, one must try to dispel all preconceived ideas and biases before attempting to translate correctly.

Another factor which must be given great importance is the style of the composition of mantras. We find that the language of the Rig Veda is full of riddles, incomplete metaphors, elliptic or dense expressions, fragmented messages and disrespect for grammatical accuracy. The ancient language was called *Deva Vaani*, and not governed by the strict grammar rules of modern Sanskrit, subsequently espoused by Panini in the 4th century BC.

The modern scholarly work published by Professors O Doniger,<sup>14</sup> Brereton and Jamison<sup>15</sup> reflect their blind faith in the earlier works, particularly of Saayana, Max Muller,<sup>16</sup> Griffiths, Roth, Oldenburg, and subsequent social customs and literature which do not possess the means of unravelling the complex mantras. Jamison and Brereton assert that this is not their collective and unanimous translation.<sup>17</sup>

Professor Wilson remarked in the preface of his translation of Vishnu Purana;

it is the boast of inductive philosophy that it draws its conclusions from the careful observations and accumulation of facts; and it is equally the

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<sup>14</sup> O'Flaherty, W.D., *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*. (Penguin books, London, 1981), pp 12.

<sup>15</sup> Jamison, S.W., Brereton, J.P., *The Rigveda: the earliest religious poetry of India*. (South Asia Research; OUP, 2014), p 25.

<sup>16</sup> Max Muller, F., *A history of ancient Sanskrit literature, so far as it illustrates the primitive religion of the Brahmans*; Indian edition; AES reprint. (Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1993), pp 33.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

business of all philosophical research to determine its facts before it ventures upon speculation. This procedure has not been observed in the investigation of the mythology and traditions of the Hindus. Impatience to generalise has availed itself greedily of whatever promised to afford materials for generalisation; and the most erroneous views have been confidently advocated, because the guides in which their authors trusted were ignorant or insufficient.<sup>18</sup>

Sri Aurobindo succinctly explains the need for a translator to be cognisant of the prevalent cultural background in order to translate any literary work. He states,

when we write in a recognised and conventional imagery, *Lakshmi* and *Saraswotee* refuse to dwell under one roof, the European reader may need a note or a translation of the phrase in its plain unfigured thought, 'wealth and wisdom seldom go together' before he can understand but every Indian already possesses the sense of the phrase. But if another culture and religion had replaced the Puranic and the Brahminical and the old books and the Sanskrit language had ceased to be read and understood, this now familiar phrase would have been as meaningless in India as in Europe. Some infallible commentator or ingenious scholar might have been proving to our entire satisfaction that Lakshmi was the Dawn and Saraswotee the Night or that they were two irreconcilable substances or one knows not what else.<sup>19</sup>

It is our past which has shaped our present, and which will largely determine our future.

This great piece of human heritage contains beauty, wisdom and knowledge invaluable to mankind. I cannot improve the eloquent statements given here as quotes<sup>20</sup> to illustrate the importance of the Vedas. Henry David Thoreau said,

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson, H.H., *The Vishnu Purana: a system of Hindu mythology and tradition*. (John Marley publisher; Oxford, 1840), pp 66

<sup>19</sup> Aurobindo, S., *The Secret of the Vedas with Selected Hymns*; vol 15; The complete works of Sri Aurobindo. (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 1998), p 14.

<sup>20</sup> Gewali, S., Bajaj, B., *What is India? A book of quotations*. (Academic publications, Shilong, India, 2009).

Voltaire, F.M., *Thinkexist.com*, <http://www.quotes.thinkexist.com/quotation/i-am-convinced-that-everything-has-come-down-to/763398.html>. (Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

... whenever I have read any part of the Vedas, I have felt that some unearthly and unknown light illuminated me. In the great teaching of the Vedas, there is no touch of sectarianism. It is of all ages, climes and nationalities and is the royal road for the attainment of the Great Knowledge. When I am at it, I feel that I am under the spangled heavens of a summer night.

Contrary to the widely held view that the Vedas developed following the ancient Greek invasion of India, many noted scholars from both the east and west have implied that it was the knowledge in the Vedas which had subsequently inspired the ancient Chinese, Egyptian and Greek civilisations. Among these scholars are Georges Ifrah, the French author of *The Universal History of Numbers*; Leonard Bloomfield, the American linguist; Leopold Von Schroder, the German indologist; Roger-Pol Droit and Francois Voltaire, the French philosophers; Professor Okakura, the Japanese philosopher and Hu Shih, the great Chinese philosopher and writer.

The celebrated philosopher and philologist Professor Max Muller has stated that,

the Veda has a two-fold interest: it belongs to the history of the world and to the history of India. In the history of the world the Veda fills a gap which no literary work in any other language could fill. It carries us back to times of which we have no record anywhere, and gives us the very worlds of a generation of men, of whom otherwise we could form but the vaguest estimate by means of conjectures and inferences. As long as man continues to take interest in the history of his race, and as long as we collect in libraries and museums the relics of former ages, the first place in that long row of books which contains the records of the Aryan branch of mankind will belong forever to the Rig Veda. ...I maintain that to everybody who cares for himself, for his ancestors, for his intellectual development, a study of the Vedic literature is indeed indispensable.<sup>21</sup>

The literary merit of the Vedic mantras is unsurpassable. In spite of the absence of universally accepted grammar during those days, the construction of the hymns and their play on words are exquisite. The profoundly exhilarating experience of listening to these melodious mantras, when recited correctly by a group of hymn singers, will confirm this beyond any doubt.

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<sup>21</sup> Max Muller, F., (1993), pp 33.

There are many mantras which are timeless in their imagination, aspirations and message. The last mantra in the Rig Veda is perhaps even more important today than when it was conceived. This is the formula for world brotherhood, peace and prosperity for today.

May your thoughts also be similar to your actions.

May your hearts be similar.

May your mind be similar. (RV: 10.191.4)

The Vedas have received recognition from many great scientists, theologians, philosophers and writers of the east and west. The great British mathematician, philosopher and co-author of Bertrand Russell's *Principia Mathematica*, Alfred North Whitehead, asserts that,

the vastest knowledge of today cannot transcend the 'Buddhi' of the Rishis in ancient India; and science, in the most advanced stage now, is closer to Vedanta than ever before". Francois M Voltaire admitted that "the Veda was the most precious gift for which the West had ever been indebted to the East."<sup>22</sup>

Julius R. Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, said "What we shall find in modern physics is an exemplification, an encouragement and a refinement of old Hindu wisdom."<sup>23</sup> The Nobel Laureate Werner Heisenberg observed that "after conversations about Indian philosophy, some of the ideas about Quantum Physics that had seemed so crazy suddenly made much more sense."<sup>24</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great Unitarian Minister, states "The Vedas haunt me. In them I have found eternal compensation, unfathomable power and unbroken peace." The great astronomer, noted for his computation of Haley's Comet, discovered that "the motion of the stars calculated by the Hindus before some 4500 years vary not even a single minute from the modern tables of Cassine and Meyer."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Whitehead, A.N., "Vedanta is the most impressive metaphysics the human mind has conceived," [www.Quotefancy.com](http://www.Quotefancy.com). (Accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Patel, R., "Oppenheimer: Access to the Vedas is the greatest privilege this century may claim over all previous centuries," *Hindu Human Rights Online Magazine*, 12th August, 2012. (Accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2017.)

<sup>24</sup> Heisenberg, L., "What is a physicist's take on Vedanta," [www.quora.com/April30.2016](http://www.quora.com/April30.2016). (Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Gewali, S., Bajaj, B., (2009).

Careful study of the Rig Veda has demonstrated that this is indeed a great piece of world heritage which is mired in controversy due to the misinterpretation of some of its mantras. It is not possible for any one individual to interpret all the mantras correctly. I am reminded of the parable of five wise blind men and the elephant, as told by Buddha. I wonder why he did not ask them to confer with each other to try to arrive at the correct conclusion. Maybe they would have been able to describe the beast accurately and conclude that it was an elephant!

Surely, a dedicated group of scholars with expertise in many different subjects, working together and collectively seeking the most plausible meaning and interpretation of every mantra, could arrive at a unanimous and acceptable commentary on the Rig Veda. If India or UNESCO truly believes the Rig Veda to be a piece of world heritage, is it not essential that the knowledge, wisdom and philosophy inherent in it should be made available to the modern world in a contemporary, acceptable and authentic manner?

Should this source of knowledge remain veiled by the ignorance of a few scholars and the custodians of our culture?



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### THE BHAGAVAD GITA: FACTS AND DISTORTIONS

Once, my seven year old daughter had found herself a seat on my lap and, putting her arms around my neck, had demanded to know what I was watching on television. I *shushed* her and continued to watch the scene from the famous series known as *Mahabharata* where Lord Krishna was telling Arjuna that he had the right to perform an action but had no right to its results. She heard that and asked me, “How could a God have said that? Sounds so funny.” After watching a little more she began to giggle, repeating, “You have no right, no right at all.” I have often reflected on that and several related verses since, beginning to wonder whether my young daughter had intuitively realised the truth.

The Bhagavad Gita (BG) is believed to be a sermon given by Lord Krishna, the mortal incarnation of the God Vishnu, to his favourite cousin Prince Arjuna, on the battlefield of the great war of Mahabharata. The Krishna Consciousness Movement—identified by head-shaven, saffron-robed men and women chanting ‘*Hare Rama Hare Krishna*’, chiming cymbals in their hands—seen in many major cities across the world, is based upon the legend and teachings of Lord Krishna. Literally, BG means ‘divine song’ in Sanskrit. No other piece of literature outside the Christian world has had more learned commentaries and translations in multiple languages as the BG. Famous people such as Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, R W Emerson, Mahatma Gandhi, and many others, have been greatly impressed by the BG. This information intrigued me. I decided to study the BG objectively, reading excellent works by Adi Sankaracharya, Swaami Yogananda, Swaami Prabhupaada, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Jaya Dayal Goenka, Barbara Miller, and several others for references. This kind of comparative study by the most learned scholars showed broad differences in their interpretations of many verses. This prompted me to study further and reflect on the text.

I felt that the verses in question were too numerous to be the original conversation because there could not have been sufficient time on a

battlefield to give a leisurely sermon to Arjuna. He was the greatest archer who had just precipitated a major crisis by throwing away his weapons, getting out of his chariot and kneeling on the ground, totally broken down. In that situation, Krishna had to be precise and specific with his instructions. But the BG has several verses which appear to have been paraphrased from earlier verses, and apparently opposing the earlier instructions. This would be inappropriate in a crisis situation.

I began to suspect that the BG which we read today must have been modified and tampered with over the millennia. Therefore the accuracy and authenticity of the verses and their learned commentaries needed to be examined in a scientific manner. The reason for doubting the established commentaries of great scholars was not within their knowledge and intellectual honesty, but in their methods of translation.

If we accept the BG to be a distillate of the Rig Veda, as has been generally agreed since it is also called the fifth Veda, then we have to remain within the confines of its verses and the corresponding original Vedic mantras only. It is also widely accepted that although the war of Mahabharata was fought at least 4700 years ago, it describes the events up until the lifetime of Veda Vyasa, who is believed to have lived around 1200 BC. Hence any verse in the BG which appears to reflect thoughts or practices not prevalent during this period must be suspect. This can be discerned by the context in which the verse is composed. In addition, it is imperative to be aware of the correct grammar, etymology, allusions, and prevalent culture in which a verse has been composed. It is also necessary to be as objective and neutral as possible while translating the verses.

I found that many esteemed scholars had not always adhered to this essential self-discipline. I also discovered religious bias in the learned commentaries. In principle, any good translator must be unbiased.

Difficulties were further encountered during the interpretation of the verses in the BG and in their correlation with the Vedic mantras. One such example is the word *Dharma* which has been erroneously translated as religion. The Rig Vedic mantras do not identify any cult or sect as 'religion'. They practiced righteousness which was personalised. This *Dharma* constituted the characteristics of the designated duties of a person, as specified in the original concept of *Varnadharma*. The duties were considered eternal, and the system was therefore called the *Sanaatana Dharma*, i.e. the duty that is forever present. The BG has many verses which mention the latter day rituals and their prescribed conduct.

This suggests that the verses in the BG which connote other religions, must have been later additions. This fact needs to be kept in mind during the interpretation of the verses in the BG.

The Vedic concept of the all-encompassing supreme divinity was presented as that which was unborn, formless, omnipotent, omnipresent, manifest in everything, whether living or not.<sup>1</sup> Hence the two verses in which Krishna declares that He would repeatedly appear on earth to destroy the evil-doers to re-establish the eternal values and to support the righteous<sup>2</sup> appear illogical and ridiculous from the Vedic point of view. However, if we accept these verses to have been later additions, they make sense because by this time the decadent society had sprouted several cults and religions, including Buddhism, which proved so powerful. Hence the orthodoxy of the Brahmins had to firmly establish the concept of the incarnation of God. There is no mention of Lord Krishna in the Rig Veda. Krishna is the embodiment of one such incarnation, and the threat of ritualistic hereditary Brahminism delivered through Him to non-believers was an appropriate action for self-preservation. This trend has continued, laying claim to nine to 20 incarnations of Vishnu so far!

Most learned scholars disregard the prevalent Vedic culture in *Dwaapara Yuga* and this is evident, for example, in the translation and commentary of verses in the BG.<sup>3</sup> According to the codes of conduct practiced during that time, it was accepted that, initially, everyone was born as a *shudra* (unskilled, unclassified).<sup>4</sup> It was only after the appropriate upbringing, performing prescribed actions, education, training and skills that a man would take up a *varnadharma*, i.e. would be entered into an appropriate colour (caste). Hence the excuse given by Arjuna not to fight; the fear of producing half-caste children who would eventually destroy the *kula dharma* (the lineage) is misappropriated; it is clearly outside the culture of that period. These verses strongly refer to the despicable hereditary caste system of later millennia and hence could not have been the original verses in the BG composed by Veda Vyaasa. Moreover, some scholars might argue that Arjuna was being prophetic, since he and his four half-brothers were from different biological fathers who did eventually destroy that society!

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<sup>1</sup> BG: 4.6

<sup>2</sup> BG: 4.7, 8

<sup>3</sup> BG: 1.41-44

<sup>4</sup> Manusmriti 2.28 and Atri Smriti 141-142

If we confine ourselves to those verses in the BG which might have been the original composition of Veda Vyasa, we can find three essential messages that correspond to Vedic philosophy. Firstly, the Vedic mantras incessantly espouse the fulfilment one's duty, living righteously and in contemplation, and seeking knowledge. Secondly, in every mantra, the Rishis pray to everything and everybody around them as the manifestation of the ultimate divinity which never manifests itself in its own form, for it has none. Lastly, they acknowledge the invulnerability and immortality of the soul which Veda Vyasa has nicely paraphrased in the BG.<sup>5</sup> This has been described as the *Purusha* in Rig Veda.<sup>6</sup> In the BG, Krishna demonstrates this concept of ultimate divinity as the paradoxical *Vishwaroopa*.<sup>7</sup>

These three Vedic concepts have been paraphrased in the BG as the *Karma Yoga*, the *Bhakti Yoga* and the *Gyaana Yoga*. It is interesting to note that each of the methods is linked with Yoga (the synthesis). Simply put, this means the total synthesis of all physical and mental consciousness. This is to provide a method by which a person may attain or reach Krishna, the ultimate divinity, the *Purusha* or the *Parameshwara*. This is the state of eternal bliss called, and variously described by seers, prophets, saints, philosophers and quantum physicists as Heaven, the Devaloka, the House of the Father, Nirvaana, the Jannat and Super-consciousness.

But attaining such a state is not an easy task. This was perhaps realised by KDV when he composed the verse:

*Na tu maam sakyesev drashtum, aneynaiva swachaskshushaa  
Divyam dadaami te chakshuhu pashya mey yogamaishwaram* (BG: 11.8)

You cannot see me with your (ordinary) eyes. I give you special eyes so that you can perceive my Yogic prowess.

But to do that, Arjuna had to accept the following command.

*Sarva dharmam parit்யेjya maamekam sharanam braja  
Seek refuge unto me alone, discarding all (that you think is) Dharma.*

He must have been telling him to quit all false dogmas and prejudices and only seek knowledge from the very source of all, i.e. Himself, since during the Vedic period there were no other cults. The *Dharma* was as

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<sup>5</sup> BG: 2.23, 25, 29

<sup>6</sup> RV: 10.90

<sup>7</sup> BG: 11.5-13, and the *Parameshwara*.

described above. Hence this exhortation to a seeker could have been misinterpreted by a latter day saint, a philosopher or a cunning priest to entice people practicing Buddhism and other faiths, to return to earlier ways of life when there had been no organised religion. There are many other examples in the BG which an interested reader can discover for himself by studying this systematically. As an example, we can start by interpreting the very first verse according to the correct methodology, as outlined above.

*dharmakshetrey kurukshetrey samaweta yuyutsava  
mameka pandavaschaiwa kim kurbata Sanjaya. (BG 1.1)*

The first two words in this verse have been translated by many to mean ‘the holy land of the Kurus’: Kuru refers to the dynasty of the blind king, Dhritarastra (*Dhri-ta-raash-tra*).

The legend of Dhritarastra, the blind king, would suggest that he was well compensated for his blindness. He was very brave, as proven in earlier battles; he possessed strength equivalent to 1000 elephants; he could shoot unerringly by aiming for the source of sound (*shabda-vedee*) and so on. He was also a very pious man, although overwhelmed by his love for his sons which was perhaps his only flaw.

Let us now examine the word *Kuru*. It is in fact a composite word: *ku* and *ru*. *Ku* in Sanskrit is an adjective, signifying something which is very bad and undesirable. *Ru* means a cacophony, an unearthly noise. Hence Kuru must be the very apt description of the horrible din and cacophony of noise made by the warring armies poised for battle, rattling their weapons and producing marshal music. The grammar and etymology of the word Kuru suggests this to be an adjective, i.e. a description of a sound and not a noun signifying an area of land.

The extraordinary prowess of the blind king has also gone unacknowledged by the translators. It is this *ru* that the blind king had probably heard with his heightened sense of hearing. This view is supported by references seen in the subsequent verses (12-19) of the BG; the last verse stating “the din reverberated through heaven and earth.” Although the land was in the kingdom of the blind king, he would be unlikely to claim that, as his own. Any place of pilgrimage was recognised as belonging to the pilgrims in the name of its presiding deity. The king would only be a custodian, and not be the master of a place of pilgrimage. This tradition could be seen up until recently in India, where the Maharajas never claimed themselves to be the masters of the land of

pilgrimage or the temples of the presiding deity within their states. This appears to be a universal convention. I am not aware of any pope claiming ownership of the Vatican or a Sankaracharya (one of the four Hindu religious heads) doing the same for a *Matha* or *Dhaama* (the sacred places and institutions).

Taking into consideration all these cultural, historical, grammatical, etymological contexts, and the likely situation and time frame relevant to this verse, the correct translation would indicate that the blind king was asking Sanjay what were they—he and his brother’s progeny who had assembled to fight—doing to turn the *Dharmakshetra*, a serene place of pilgrimage, to *Kurukshetra*, an unwelcoming land of horrible din.

The BG is an exquisite and inspirational piece of poetry; truly a part of humanity’s heritage. It is lamentable that a group of academics has not come forward to produce a collective and unanimous commentary on the BG; one which is correct, logical and supported by facts. Dharma Kamata<sup>8</sup> looks into the historical and related aspects of the BG, however, we need research, as outlined above, into several other aspects of this ageless and eternal song which is revered all over the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Kamata, D., *The Untold Story of the Bhagavad Gita*. (KPS Kamath Publication, Cape Girardeau Missouri, USA, 2013).

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### THE MAN WHO CREATED KRISHNA: THE IMMORTAL MAN

*A storm looked imminent. The clouds were gathering with vengeance to submerge the Earth. The mendicant was restless on the riverbank, for he needed to cross the flooded river before nightfall. No boatman was in sight to ferry him across the river. A strong gust of wind made him stagger and stumble unto the side of a small rowing boat moored there. He smelt a whiff of an exotic fragrance. Just then the clouds parted a little letting the bright rays of the sun illuminate the pit of the boat. The bundle of rags that he had noticed earlier moved to reveal a young maiden who had wrapped herself in a thick cloak. She had obviously been disturbed by the fall of the mendicant on her boat. Suddenly, she let out a scream and clutched at her stomach. The mendicant was bemused. He thought that she had become afraid of him.*

*“Do not be afraid, child, for I bring you no harm,” he said, raising his hand in assurance.*

*The girl looked at him and smiled her thanks.*

*“Would you row me across the river, child?” he asked.*

*“I would, but I have a tummy ache,” she said.*

*The mendicant looked at her face, made a sign of blessing and recited a short prayer.*

*“Your tummy pain is now gone,” said he. The abdominal discomfort had indeed disappeared. “Just wind,” she thought.*

*She gestured him to get into the boat and began to row across the river. The mendicant got in, crossed his legs and sat in the correct posture of meditation.*

*“Tell me when we reach the other bank,” he said and closed his eyes in deep meditation.*

*They had reached near a small island in the estuary of the river when the girl let out a soft scream again and clutched at her stomach. The mendicant was too deep in his meditation to hear this. The girl then knew that it was not wind but the labour pains of imminent child birth. She moored the boat and lay on the sand. A baby boy was born. It was the scream of the baby boy which disturbed the meditation of the mendicant. He opened his eyes, and saw the girl and a new born baby lying on the sand. He had obviously not realised that the girl was pregnant since the light had not been bright and she had wrapped herself well.*

*The girl was in deep distress. She was wailing softly and trying to suckle the infant in vain, with her budding, dry breasts.*

*The mendicant was perturbed and furious. She was already an untouchable by caste, being the daughter of a fisherman. She had become unchaste by having had sexual intercourse before getting married and to top it all, had now given birth to a baby. He could not be sitting on the same boat with her until she had been purified on the eleventh day after childbirth. How was he to cross the river now?*

*“You unchaste prostitute! How did you dare to defile my sanctity?” he shouted in fury.*

*The poor girl began to sob uncontrollably and was barely able to whisper repeatedly that she was innocent. The mendicant was unconcerned and continued with his tirade. Just then, a gust of strong wind carrying an exquisite perfume passed by his nostrils. For a split moment, the cloud parted and fully revealed the angelic face of the sobbing girl with the baby on her bare chest. He had smelt the same fragrance earlier too, he recollected. He stopped his tirade and demanded to know who the father of the baby boy was.*

*“He was the son of Brahmaa, the Creator,” she said, without giving his name.*

*“Every man is a son of Brahmaa, the Creator” he murmured.*

*“What was his name?” he persisted. The girl fell silent. The mendicant realised that she was the source of the exquisite fragrance. He looked at her carefully for the first time. All the signs of a chaste demeanour were*



*there, even though she had just given birth out of wedlock. He also noticed the signs which indicated that she would become a great lady in future. Then he knew that she was no ordinary girl.*

*“I shall help you if tell me everything, otherwise I shall take your boat and go away, leaving you and your son here as prey for the wild animals and vultures.”*

*The girl, who was already thinking of ending her life, was now terrified by the prospect of death of her innocent barely born baby. “No,” she wailed.*

*Then she said haltingly, “Paraashara was his name. He forced me to have sexual intercourse in this very boat in the middle of the river. When I cried, he took pity on me and gave me this fragrant body odour. He also told me that I would give birth to a son who would be great and famous forever. He told me that I would remain a virgin in spite of everything. I wish he had not said that because now I cannot feed my baby; my breasts did not become full of milk. What am I to do?”*

*She started to cry again, squeezing her breasts to get a drop of milk.*

*The mendicant believed that the girl was telling the truth.*

*He took charge of the situation, saying, “Providence must have sent me to be here with you. I shall name this child Krishna, since he is so dark. He is born here, hence this island becomes his father. His surname shall be Dwaipaayana.” The mendicant took a handful of water from the river and reciting a prayer, he blessed her and her baby; both were thus purified.*

*“I shall take this baby with me to the holy Kailaash in the north and look after him in my hut there. This is best for you both,” he asserted, firmly.*

*The girl was greatly relieved. She believed him when he said, “Your son shall always come to you when you need him.” Her angelic face lit up in a fleeting smile of gratitude, and the rivers of the heavens emptied through her eyes while handing over the baby to that strange man. Sobbing and exhausted, she fell into a deep sleep.*

*The mendicant looked compassionately at the exhausted virgin mother with the divine fragrance and blessed her, saying, “You shall forget all*

*this until your old age.” When she woke up the next morning, there was no sign of the birth of the baby, nor of the boat.*

*The infant Krishna grew up nurtured by nature. His playmates were the calves and the heifers that belonged to the mendicant. The cows nourished him. The boy became a diligent pupil and learnt from his foster father until he had nothing further to teach him.*

*Knowing that his death was imminent, the old mendicant called Krishna one day to come near him. Then he divulged the story of his birth explaining that he was the grandson of Brahmaa, the Ultimate Divinity and that he had been born to preserve the world that his grandfather had established.*

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*Krishna Dwaipayana Vyaasa (KDV) lived in ancient times. Little is known regarding his birth and early life. Hence, I imagined the above to be the story of his birth based on folklore. He is regarded to be the author of the gigantic epic known as Mahabharata (MB). Known the world over, the Bhagavad Geetaa (Gita, BG) is a part of this epic. Srimad Bhaagabata Mahaapuraanam (SBM), the monumental book with 18,000 verses which he had produced earlier, is a unique collection of historical facts, philosophy, and presents human values interspersed with mythical stories. The other 17 Puraanas (mostly mythologies) are also attributed to him. SBM praises the Vedas in the chapter of dedication as “Veda Stuti” (in praise of the Vedas), which establishes the fact that the Vedas were indeed the inspiration for his works.<sup>1</sup> The Vedas comprise the oldest literature available to man, which he had compiled into four books. These three documents provide unique insight into the life and works of KDV, who should be rightly regarded as the saint who has given the most, not only to India, but to humanity at large.*

### **Aryan society prior to KDV**

There are 409 Rishis (sages) mentioned in the Rig Veda. The earliest seven Rishis were *Atri, Washistha, Bharadwaaja, Kashyapa, Gotama, Jamadagni and Wishwaamitra*. Only scant information is available on them but their mantras are very profound. The other Rishi who was

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<sup>1</sup> Srimad Bhaagavata Maahaapuraana (SBM): *Veda Stuti*: 10. 87

elevated to divine status was *Rishi Brihaspati*.<sup>2</sup> The first person entrusted with the tasks of developing and establishing the social structure was *Rishi Manu*. The rest of the sages appeared subsequently, and each one contributed his or her visions which became part of the broader collection Vedic mantras. It became clear to me that three fundamental concepts were promoted to develop the ancient Indian civilisation. They were:

1. Defining the objective of human existence
2. The process of achieving the first objective
3. Establishing a culture which would propel humanity towards the foregoing lofty ideals

The philosophical deliberations and visions expressed in many of these mantras lead to the fundamental objective of defining human existence, that is, the widely debated issues of the reality of the self, the question of creation and creator, the concept of God or godlessness, the right way to live leading eventually to enlightenment, and death in its myriad aspects. The mantra for this enlightenment was given by Rishi Wishwaamitra, which continues to be widely recited, even after so many thousands of years, and is known as the *Gaayatree mantra*.<sup>3</sup>

The process of achieving this objective was demonstrated in the mantras given by Rishi Brihaspati. He basically postulated that there was more than one way of achieving the ultimate goal. His mantras clearly demonstrated that any action was alright, provided it led to enlightenment and bliss. This encouraged the systems of Yoga vs Tantra; the philosophy of austerity and renunciation vs *Chaarwaak's* carefree luxurious lifestyle etc., to subsequently develop.

Rishi Manu had established the egalitarian social order in which the duties, rewards, punishment and justice were clearly laid out for everyone.<sup>4</sup> There was equality of birth, and no job was superior to another. No-one was born with a label into any institution or category, but had to earn membership of the group by virtue of his/her knowledge and skill. All the members of their society were included in the four groups, each group being a pillar of the huge edifice of the Aryan culture.

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<sup>2</sup> RV: 10. 67; *Rishi Brihaspati* with divine status.

<sup>3</sup> RV: 3. 62. 10; *Gaayatri Mantra*.

<sup>4</sup> RV: 10. 90; 8.27-31; *Rishi Manu*

This system was described as *Varnaashrama* - the ‘institution of colours’. This system of identification of a group of individuals has persisted in the world to the present day, as evidenced by the ‘colour’ awarded to individual houses of a school or teaching institution, clubs and the security forces. All the recipients were equal and each group was characterised by its own expertise which had to be performed as part of clearly laid out duties, known as *Varna Dharma*. These two components constituted the ‘*Sanaatana Dharma*’ (the eternal duty), loosely synonymous with ‘the religion practiced by the Aryans in ancient India.’

I was intrigued by the original system of *Varnaashrama* and *Varnadharmā*. This was the original concept of utopia based on meritocracy, established several millennia ago!

### Society during KDV’s lifetime

Sadly, this kind of meritocracy had degenerated into a cruel and inhumane autocratic system, and was dominated by bizarre rituals known as *Karma Kaanda* by KDV’s lifetime. This had continued to degenerate even after KDV’s time, when Alexander the Great reached the west bank of the Indus River.<sup>5</sup>

KDV must have noticed the lofty principles of the Vedic mantras being openly flouted for nefarious gains by the hereditary *Brahmins*, the self-styled learned clergy patronised by the ruling classes. The rulers proclaimed themselves to be divine incarnations and entitled to rule as they pleased. The ‘Institution of Colours’ based on meritocracy and dignity of labour had degenerated into an appalling system of patronage and birth-right.

The original system proposed by Rishi Manu had been corrupted almost beyond recognition. Women were being considered as the personal possessions of men. They were obliged to be cremated alive along with the dead bodies of their husbands. Slavery was rampant. Society was rife with many undesirable traits, among them, debauchery, destruction, deceit and

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<sup>5</sup> Megasthenes, the General left behind by Alexander on the west bank of the Indus, had identified the people living there as ‘the Indus’ (the Hindus) and described their lifestyle and religious practices (*vide Indica*). The English translation of the then prevalent hereditary caste system, untouchability, sectarianism and cruel feudalism became ‘Hinduism’ in due course. This name has stuck since. Similarly, the Indu became ‘Indi- an’ in English.

irresponsibility, similar to what we are experiencing today. The egalitarian society envisaged by the founding seers had become a morass of crime, greed, violence, and injustice. The Upanishads were being obviously ignored. Lies and deceit were rampant. The famous *Gaayatree* mantra exhorting the quest for knowledge and wisdom (just like Sabita, the first light of dawn that lifts the darkness of the night) were hardly being practiced. They were recited merely as prayers without comprehension of their significance or purpose. The gurus taught that personal emancipation was the cherished objective of an individual. Disregarding the vows taken by kings during a coronation to serve their subjects, a cruel autocratic or feudal system of governance had become the norm.

### **KDV as social reformer and philosopher**

It is believed that KDV lived near Damauli, in the foothills of the Himalayas, about 100 kilometres west of Kathmandu. He was married to Pingalaa, the daughter of the highly respected Rishi Jabaali, who belonged to the most superior Brahmin caste. He lived the life of a householder with her in an Ashram (a hermitage) where they raised their son, the famous Suka Deva. He had established an academy (*Gurukula*) adjacent to a cave, subsequently named after him as Vyaasa Gupha, where he had received enlightenment. KDV was the preceptor of the academy. Vyaasa means 'the divider', alluding to the division of the Veda into four compilations.

KDV appears to be the first sage who brought the concept of 'moral ecology' into focus by repeatedly bringing forward a myriad of human values amidst social conflicts and their solutions. He has given the two following formulae for the emancipation of mankind.<sup>6</sup>

*dharmo rakshati rakshatah* (righteousness is the ultimate security).  
*satyameva jayate, naanritam* (only the truth prevails, nothing else).

The sequence of KDV's works suggests that he first sought to simplify the Vedic mantras to make them more relevant and user-friendly. He charged four of his pupils with the task of compiling each of the four works into a book, known as Rig, Yajur, Saama and Atharva Veda. The Rig Veda is an anthology of the Aryan culture, describing their philosophy, social customs, and history, and includes some prayers. This was obviously meant as a guide for all. The Yajurveda was a compilation of the mantras which are used in various rituals- social, religious and

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<sup>6</sup> SBM: 1. 4. 15-20; KDV contemplating social conditions.

others. The mantras in the Saama Veda are for music and hymns. Atharva Veda largely covers trade, magic, crafts and related aspects.

KDV must have hoped that simplifying the huge number of mantras by dividing them into four groups would once again remind people to modify their behaviours and return to righteous living. But there were not many people who knew the mantras. Those Brahmins who knew them had already disregarded many of them and produced their own manuals, known as *Braahmana*. The net effect of this hard work by KDV and his pupils obviously did not produce the desired effect.

Undaunted, he produced the SBM and the Puraanas to explain history, philosophy, humane values and righteous living. He charged his son Suka Deva, with the responsibility of propagating this teaching. Incidentally, *Suka* is the word ‘parrot’ in Sanskrit. His son might have recited the SBM by rote, or parrot fashion—the stories were heard, but debated by few; SBM also did not produce the desired effect. Moreover, being a very large treatise, it was beyond the reach of most men.

Although enlightened, and though he was regarded as *Maharshi* in the Vedic tradition, KDV neither preached nor established a cult or following. However, he tried to educate. He remained undeterred and finally produced his best work. KDV modified several stories from the SBM, gave human identity to many good and bad character traits, and wrote the epic Mahabharata (*Jaya*), which is much smaller than the SBM. He put the essence of the Rig Vedic mantras into a song and cleverly inserted a singing interlude into the drama on the battlefield. This is known the world over as *Geetaa*, the divine Song (Gita, BG). One needs to read the stories in this epic which are full of symbolism. It only takes about 20 minutes to sing the BG.

KDV did this by projecting himself first as the most lowly of the low, as illustrated in the story of his birth. He had to be a very courageous man to do so. It is very likely that he was projecting himself as the perpetrator of various nefarious actions to demonstrate many undesirable practices which were being done in the guise of obedience, duty and divine will in the society of his time. The story of *Mahabharata* is interesting, but very complex too. Some important highlights are given below.

His mother had become an empress and the widow of the emperor Shantanu by that time. The empire was being managed by the empress as a regent since no heir to the throne had been born.

Prince Bheeshma, the original heir to the throne, had ignored his vows which he had to take on being anointed to be the crown prince. It was a solemn promise to serve his people as the king in waiting. Instead, he had opted to be the protector of his stepmother's sons and grandsons.

KDV was summoned by his mother for help. His two half-brothers had died without leaving an heir. The empress needed an heir to the throne to perpetuate the royal dynasty. He fathered three additional sons on the behest of his mother, with the childless widows of his two half-brothers and their maid. KDV was short and heavy set with long matted hair and beard, looking grotesque and frightening when he had arrived to impregnate them. One of the princesses could not bear to look at him and shut her eyes throughout their intercourse and subsequently produced a blind son.

KDV was not aware at first that the other widow had sent her maid to him instead. The maid enjoyed the sexual intercourse and gave birth to a saintly wise son who grew up in court to become the counsellor to the kings. Being born of a slave, he was not given the title of a prince.

After being reprimanded by the empress, the second widow too subjected herself to having intercourse. She had become yellow (pale) with fear, eventually producing a son with a yellow complexion.

The epic is a fascinating account of two sets of cousins, both sets being KDV's biological grandsons, fighting for the kingdom which, in reality, was not the inheritance of either group. It is the account of the prevalent society at that time, described as a story of conflict between the Paandavas and Kauravaas, the sons of the yellow and the blind princes. This escalated into a world war, fought in northern India. No modern sitcom can equal this drama which contains the opposite of everything ever known or felt by man. It has survived the test of time but is wrongly regarded and classified as a religious treatise.

The role of Krishna, a cousin to the princes, was that of a charioteer to the Commander in Chief, Prince Arjuna, who had become so overcome with awe at seeing the vast armies on both sides, that he was ready to surrender and accept defeat at the outset. Krishna then gave him a great pep talk—like a commander to his troops in battle, admitting all responsibility for the war, and put in the distillate of the Vedas into that famous song, the BG. This song has been uttered like a prayer by millions

since that time, making KDV the most remembered (immortal) author of all times.

The Mahabharata was called a righteous war. Millions were killed. The cousins on one side of the family were all killed. Most of the generals, friends and relatives on both sides were killed. The victorious brothers felt dejected at the end, and decided to quit everything. But they all had to go to hell first, which they obviously deserved. Clearly, KDV did not believe that there could be any righteousness in which there was maiming and killing.

It is hard to imagine that a great sage like Rishi Paraashara would have stooped so low as to rape a minor while crossing the holy Ganges. Legend has it that Rishi Paraashara was the son of the god Brahma. KDV thus portrayed his own biological father as the rapist and child abuser. Did this mean that the Brahmins had begun to perform debauchery, and could still get away with being the exalted sons of the god Brahma?

It beggars belief that KDV, whose lofty ideals and principles are in abundance in the innumerable philosophical discourses and dialogues in the Puraanas and the Mahabharata, and who was a great believer in the necessity of righteous living, would have committed the gross and heinous act of adultery—*Parastreegamana*—with the chaste widows of his own half-brothers and their maid. He is said to have done this at the behest of his mother. Did this demonstrate that an ignorant mother could make her son commit wrongful deeds?

KDV was obviously an enlightened genius with the courage to challenge the orthodoxy and social inequalities of his time. One must assume that KDV projected himself deliberately in that fashion, to illustrate that a lowly birth and an unattractive physique did not stop a man from rising to be a *Maharshi* - a great Rishi. He was a great social reformer.

He used contemporary and historical events expertly in his epic, the Mahabharata, to illustrate various characters in the drama. We find William Shakespeare too adopting similar techniques in his plays, as in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, though it is unlikely that he ever would have read KDV's works.

KDV would have been regarded as an untouchable of illegal birth by the Brahmins and not allowed to marry a girl from a superior caste. But he was rightly accepted as a Brahmin by Rishi Jabaali, who believed in the



original concept of *Varnadharmā* whereby one gets allocated to an appropriate colour group (caste) by virtue of one's education, knowledge and skills appropriate to that colour. He chose to mock the notion of the need to continue one's lineage and challenged the prevailing caste system with inherent inequalities (apartheid).

Even if one were to accept that KDV committed adultery to continue the lineage of the emperor Shantanu, the husband of his mother, it does not make any sense, because KDV did not carry the genes of the Emperor Shantanu. He was mocking the false belief and pretence of the need to continue one's genealogy. KDV is known to have advised *Gaandhaari*, the wife of his blind son Dhritarashtra, to incubate her miscarried embryo to produce 100 sons.

The character of Prince Bheeshma deserves critical assessment. Had he accepted inheritance of the throne, the war and its disastrous consequences would have been avoided. He was a very sentimental youth devoted to his father. When his father became smitten with lust upon seeing Satyawati, the fisherman's daughter, he made a promise to give up his inheritance and also remain celibate, in order to avoid potential conflicts surrounding the succession of the kingdom in the future. These two vows enabled the Emperor Shantanu to get married to Satyawati. Prince Bheeshma remained true to his word until his last.

KDV did not hide the fact that Prince Bheeshma, although famous for his bravery, skills in warfare, strong resolve and steadfastness in his word, had also done several wrong things. For example, he abducted three princesses to be married to his two half-brothers who were probably incapable of sexual intercourse. This is implied in their names *Chitraangada*, (like a picture organ, rather than a real) and *Vichitraveerya*, ('the uniquely gendered'). Prince Bheeshma ignored promises he had given as a Crown Prince in order to please his lust-infatuated father. He did not protect Draupadi. He consistently ignored the ignoble machinations and deceit practiced by the Kauravaas, his grand-nephews. KDV made Bheeshma suffer a long and agonising death on the battlefield as his penance, although this was explained as the latter's dying wish. This was the time when he explained the meaning of righteousness to Yudhishthira, the victorious grand-nephew, as described in the *Anushaashana Parva* in the Mahabharata.

Was KDV indicating that, however benevolent and praiseworthy, an incorrect action taken to prevent a disaster actually made the consequences

much worse than what was intended? The whole of the Mahabharata war was a result of this wrong action taken by Bheeshma. Indeed this turned out to be the greatest war of succession.

KDV must have been a great supporter of women's rights and their duties, too. He made Lord Krishna the ultimate refuge of all the Gopinis (the lowly cow-girls) of Mathura and Brindaavana. He had elevated the status of women to divine, the consorts of God, the Creator in the SBM and the Puraanas. Clearly more needed to be done.

In the epic Mahabharata, therefore, he had also developed the character of Draupadi, a fiery princess who openly practiced polyandry by taking five husbands in order to assert her rights as equal to those of men, who were allowed polygamy. The cousin of her husband had tried to disrobe her in the presence of many relatives and elders of the court. She had complained to the emperor and senior patriarchs who remained silent. When directly confronted by Draupadi, the great grandfather-in-law, Prince Bheeshma decreed in the court that the rich and powerful could develop their own laws! She did not accept this and protested further.

Draupadi had not received any help or justice. She then prayed to Lord Krishna to save her, which he did. She left her hair loose as gesture of defiance and vowed to take revenge by getting the molester killed. She eventually succeeded. The mother of the cousin of her husband, Queen Gaandhaari, had worn a blindfold since the time of her wedding to the blind prince Dhritarashtra, who had become the emperor later. She chose to be the meek personal and devoted property of her husband, and to serve him, producing 100 sons for him and living in a palace. This act of blindfolding herself is also explained by some as an act of profound love of Queen Gaandhaari to her husband.

It is very likely that KDV was reminding women of their duties too. He was clearly disapproving of the custom that women turned a blind eye to all the wrongdoings of their husbands and sons. If only Queen Gaandhaari had kept her eyes open, and acted as a dutiful and responsible queen of the realm, the disastrous war might have been avoided and her sons would not have been killed.

A critical study of the epic Mahabharata reveals the deep insight into Indian society around 1200 BC.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> MB: Aadi Parva; 62. 23.

Perhaps KDV lived and wrote much later than the battle of Mahabharata, widely believed by Indian scholars to have spanned from 3067 to 2559 BC.<sup>8</sup> Western scholars think this to have been written in 300 BC. The Avesta, dated around 1200 BC, mentions a great sage, possibly KDV, visiting from the East. Indeed, Monier Williams believes KDV to have been born around 1100 BC.<sup>9</sup>

There is another 'myth' that KDV dictated the Mahabharata to Lord Ganesha, and permitted him to write the texts, if he could understand them. I find it amazing that 'Krishna' is the lynchpin in this epic because the Rig Veda does not mention either 'Ganesha' or 'Lord Krishna'. The mantras of the Rig Veda which describe the exploits of Indra mention a Black King (*Krishna*, black) whom Indra had fought with by the river Sharanavati, probably in present-day Afghanistan. Has KDV given his own name, Krishna, to the flamboyant hero in the epics who provided the solutions for salvation of mankind through the Gita?

My suspicions were confirmed when I found that KDV had himself given the following two hints to indicate that it was his name that he had given to Lord Krishna of SBM, the Mahabharata and the Gita. Hence, I am inclined to believe that Lord Krishna of the Mahabharata was his alter ego.

There is a story of the Gopinis (the maids, the cow-girls) in SBM. Once they became very upset and saddened by the flooding of the river Yamuna which made it impossible for them to cross it. Their lover, Krishna, was waiting for them on the other bank, hungry for the butter and cheese which they had brought for him. Then KDV had appeared and asked them to explain their problem. After having heard them feeling sorry for Krishna who was hungry, he asked them, "What about poor me? I too am hungry." Then the Gopinis gave him some butter and cheese, hoping that he might help them somehow. He ate and enjoyed the food enormously. The Gopinis thereafter asked for his help in crossing the river. He smiled and walked a little away from them.

He stood by the bank of the river and commanded it. He said, "If the Lord has eaten through me, you shall split and let the maidens go to the

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<sup>8</sup> Achar, N., "The date of Mahabharata war based on astronomical data", 2004, [youtube.com/watch?v=uplsKrMatdc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uplsKrMatdc). (Accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2017). Balakrishna, S., et al, "Dating the Kurukshetra war," [www.indicstudies.us/Astronomy/Greatbharatwar.Htm](http://www.indicstudies.us/Astronomy/Greatbharatwar.Htm). (Accessed on 2nd October 2017).

<sup>9</sup> BG: 18.75; Sanjaya identifying Krishna.

other side.” The maidens thought that he was humouring them, but were very surprised to see that indeed the river split (like the River Jordan for Joshua, mentioned several centuries later, Joshua 3,13; 5,18) and all the waters became confined by the two walls, clearing a path for them to cross and reach the other bank. They ran to the other side and found their beau fast asleep. They woke him up and said that they had brought the butter and cheese for him to eat. He burped and said that someone had already brought him butter and cheese and made him eat so much that he had no further desire to do so.

Although this story might have been told to illustrate that any job done in the name of God reached Him, it also might mean that Krishna and KDV were one and the same. This is also supported in verse 18.75 of the BG. In this, Sanjaya gratefully acknowledges KDV as the person who made him hear the supreme secret of Yoga while relaying the conversation live from the battlefield. He had been given special powers of vision and hearing to do so. This discourse was actually being given by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield. Sanjaya therefore must have recognised KDV in the guise of Krishna. This is the only time Sanjaya acknowledges KDV as the author of the Gita.

It is not possible to delve in detail into the myriad theories about KDV, who has remained the most influential sage of all times. He is regarded in Indian mythology as one of the eight immortals.<sup>10</sup> He has certainly become immortal through his teaching materials in the form of the four Vedas, SBM, the MB and the BG.

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<sup>10</sup> The names of the immortals are Naarada, Wibheeshana, Hanuman, Baali, Parashuraama, Maarkandeya, Ashwathhaamaa, Veda Vyaasa, and Kripaacharya. There is no unanimity over their number; some claim there are seven and others, eight or nine immortals.

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