

# If You Want Peace

- Swami Medhasananda



**H**oly Mother Sri Sarada Devi made a significant statement just five days before her passing away in the following circumstances: A crying devotee asked Holy Mother at her death bed what would happen after she had gone. Holy Mother answered, "Why do you fear? You have seen the Master, Sri Ramakrishna. But I tell you, if you want peace don't find fault with others, find fault with yourself. Just learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger. The world is your own."

First of all, she said not to fear as the devotee had seen Sri Ramakrishna, the Master. This means not only seeing the Master, but also understanding and following his teachings. All who had come across the Master and the Mother did not get rid of fear nor get peace unless they followed the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother to the best of their abilities.

Then Holy Mother tells us that if we want peace we should not find fault with others, we should find fault with ourselves and learn how to make the whole world our own.

Everyone wants peace. Holy Mother's prescription for peace is very simple. She does not ask us to do spiritual practice, meditation, japam (repetition of mantra) and rituals for long periods. She prescribes none of all that, but bids us not to find fault with others. Soon we find this is actually a most difficult thing to accomplish.

If we make a self-analysis, we see how many times a day we find fault with those with whom we live. A wife finds fault with her husband; a husband finds fault with his wife; mother-in-law finds fault with daughter-in-law and vice-versa; and children do the same thing with their parents; all the time we find faults with our neighbours, with colleagues and with others.

Sometimes we may not give vent to our disapproval in order not to make our relationships strained, but the canker in the mind remains. So when we try to practice Holy Mother's instruction we find how difficult it is to do. Finding fault in ourselves is also equally difficult as we are inclined to glorify whatever little virtues we have and ignore our defects, while we use the opposite standards when we judge others.

Why do we have a natural tendency in finding faults with others? There are two main reasons for it : a spiritual reason and a psychological reason.

Holy Mother said that Mahamaya, the great Enchantress, has given people a nature that does not find fault with themselves, but in others, so that people do not become liberated and the play of the world can continue. In fact, if we should see our own faults, we would try to rectify them ourselves, and by practicing this religiously, we would become pure. If we become pure, we become spiritual, and if we become spiritual, we then become realized. This is what Mahamaya tries to prevent so that her play with the world can continue. This is the spiritual reason of our finding faults in others and not finding them in ourselves.

The psychological reason is that we feel that we are superior to others. By finding defects in others we feel that we are free from such defects, or at least we are affected by them in a lesser way. So we now see that the root problem is our ego, which is the greatest obstacle in spiritual life and getting rid of this ego is so difficult.

There was a road side restaurant where many travelers would stop for eating; but at one point the number of customers started decreasing. After several unsuccessful attempts to improve the situation, the owner decided to consult a Zen Master who lived in the vicinity. He visited the Master and openly explained his problem. The Zen Master suggested that the name of the restaurant should be changed. The owner of the restaurant was surprised at this advice when the Master suggested further that the new name of the restaurant should be "Six Stars Restaurant" though the signboard displaying this new name should only display a logo of five stars.

The owner was totally perplexed at such a queer suggestion, but the Master insisted to try his method and come back later to report the result. What happened was that many travelers passing by noticed the mistake in the restaurant sign and went into the restaurant to call the owner's attention to it. But once they were in the restaurant, they were so impressed by the nice way it was arranged and the pleasing smells that they would stay and order a meal. After a short time the restaurant's business soared again. This story is just one example about the human nature's inclination to point out the mistakes of others, which evidently speaks of one's ego.

Swami Vivekananda once indicated another psychological reason of such fault finding. He said that we see imperfections in others as we ourselves are imperfect. He gave this example: Suppose that a child is in a room where some money was left on a table. A thief enters the room and takes the money. The child will never think of that person as a thief, as the concept of stealing is not in the mind of the child. Such a concept is there in the mind of an adult, but not in a child's mind. So Swamiji said that we should cry when we see imperfections in others, because as long as we see imperfections in others, it means we also have imperfections in us.

How to get rid of this problem of fault finding so that it can lead to peace? First we should use discrimination, impressing again and again on our mind that finding faults in others is not good, it means degrading ourselves, narrowing ourselves.

When we take some nice food we enjoy it. But if there is someone not eating, he then is not enjoying it. But in the case of fault finding both the person pointing out someone else's faults and the one listening to the criticism enjoy it. This is like a spicy sauce for the conversation.

But there is also a positive method to solve it, which consists in finding virtues and good things in others. This will not only elevate us, but it will help in elevating others who are at fault as well. Great men always find the virtues in others and ignore their vices, and it is thus they transform the wicked and sinners.

Once Sri Ramakrishna had sent one of his young devotees to Girish Chandra Ghosh, a reputed playwright and actor and also a close devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, but at the same time a great addict, in order to ask him to purchase some candles for him. When the devotee reached the house of Girish in Kolkata, he found him intoxicated. Girish was very happy when the devotee told him that Sri Ramakrishna had requested some candles from him, but he expressed his happiness by using abusive language towards Sri Ramakrishna, as that was

the way he expressed himself. This saddened the devotee very much. Girish, however, had the candles purchased and given to the devotee, who returned to Dakshineswar and complained to Sri Ramakrishna about the behavior of Girish Chandra Ghosh.

Sri Ramakrishna asked his devotee if the verbal abuse was all Girish had done, when the devotee had to admit that Girish had also prostrated himself several times in the direction of Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna lived. Sri Ramakrishna then pointed out to the devotee how he had reported the foul language used by Girish, but not his show of devotion and respect.

Flies often land on filth, but bees never do. They only alight on flowers. Our ideal should be that we behave like the bee, not like a fly. It is a challenge for us how to find virtues and good aspects in others.

Here is a story about a monastery where five or six Catholic monks lived together, but would not get along well. Plenty of devotees used to visit the monastery at one time, but later the number of visiting devotees started to decrease. The monks tried different ways to stop the decline in devotee visits, but none worked.

So the abbot, the head of the monastery, went to the bishop and asked for advice, and at the same time he presented his complaints about the other monks pointing out the defects in each of them. The bishop listened and then he surprised the abbot by saying that a saint was there among the monks of his monastery.

The abbot returned to the monastery pondering the information received from the bishop and then reported it to his brother monks. From that very moment all the monks sought to find out who among them was this saint. In doing so they started discovering the virtues and good qualities of each brother monk, something they had completely ignored until then.

Since this change in attitude of each monk towards one another, mutual respect and love started developing, completely changing the atmosphere of the monastery. As a result of the changed atmosphere, devotees again started pouring to the monastery.

The message of this story is that if we try to see the good aspects of those who live around us, our relationship with them becomes better. In that way we can really love others. As Holy Mother says, just try to make the whole world your own, and we can practice that by practicing mutual love and respect. This is a surest way to get peace and to give peace. ■

# The Basic Features of Indian Philosophy

- Book Summary by Suneel Bakhshi

*Summarized from the book "An introduction to Indian philosophy", first published by Calcutta University in 1939, written by Satishchandra Chatterjee, formerly head of the department of philosophy, Calcutta University, and by Dhirendramohan Datta, formerly professor of philosophy, University of Patna.*

For long years now, I had been trying to patch together a framework to understand the foundations or core tenets of Indian philosophical thought, but without the benefit of a formal education in the subject, I found it difficult. More recently, on a visit to Haridwar, India from Tokyo, I came across this wonderful book at the suggestion of my teacher, Swami Nityasuddhananda of the Ramakrishna Mission in Haridwar. I found this well constructed book to be most easy to understand, and have tried below in this brief summary to extract some of the key general introductory points. I have also summarized the opening chapter on Vedanta, among all the schools of Indian philosophical enquiry, the one that has the greatest appeal to my own mind. There may well be better books available to people more knowledgeable or better versed in the subject, but I would still recommend this book to all generations of interested readers.

## 1. The Nature of Philosophy

Philosophy in its widest etymological sense means "love of knowledge". It tries to know things that immediately and remotely concern man. What is the real nature of man? What is the end of this life? What is the nature of this world? Is there any creator of this world? How should man live in the light of his knowledge of himself, the world and God. These are some of the many problems, taken at random, which we find agitating the human mind in every land, from the dawn of civilisation. Philosophy deals with problems of this nature. As philosophy aims at knowledge of truth, it is termed in Indian literature, "the vision of truth" (darsana). Every Indian school holds, in its own way, that there can be a direct realisation of truth (tattva-darsana). A man of realisation becomes free; one who lacks it is entangled in the world. ( Vide Manu-Samhita, 6.74: "Samyag-darsana-sampannah karmabhirna nibadhyate; darsanena samsaram pratipadyate." )

Though the basic problems of philosophy have been the same in the East as in the West and the chief solutions have striking similarities, yet the methods of philosophical enquiry differ in certain respects and the process of development of philosophical thought also vary. Indian philosophy discusses the different problems of Metaphysics, Ethics, Logic, Psychology, Epistemology, but generally it doesn't discuss them separately, instead, it does so, together. This tendency has been called by some thinkers to be the synthetic outlook of Indian philosophy.

## 2. The Meaning and Scope of Indian Philosophy

Indian philosophy denotes the philosophical speculations of all Indian thinkers, ancient or modern, Hindus or non-Hindus, theists or atheists. As an example, in the ancient writings of the orthodox Hindu philosophers, the Sarva-darsana-sangraha of Madhavacharya tries to present in one place the views of ALL (sarva) schools of philosophy. In this respect Indian philosophy is marked by a striking breadth of outlook, testifying to its unflinching devotion to the search for truth. This spirit led to the formation of a method of philosophical discussion. A philosopher first had to state the views of his opponents before he formulated his own theory. This statement of the opponent's case came to be known as the prior view ( purvapaksha). Then followed the refutation (khandana) of this view. Last

of all came the statement and proof of the philosophers own position, which, therefore, was known as the subsequent view (uttarapaksha) or the conclusion (siddhanata).

If the openness of mind has been one of the chief causes of the wealth and greatness of Indian philosophy in the past, and if Indian philosophy is to continue its great career, it can only do so by taking into consideration the new ideas of life and reality which have been flowing into India from the West and the East, from the Aryan, the Semitic, the Chinese and the Japanese and other sources.

## 3. The Schools of Indian Philosophy

The schools or systems of Indian philosophy can be divided into two broad classes, namely, orthodox (astika) and heterodox (nastika). To the first group belong the six chief philosophical systems (popularly known as sad-darsana), namely Mimamsa, Vedanta, Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya and Vaisesika. These are regarded as orthodox, (astika) not because they believe in God, but because they accept the authority of the Vedas. Under the other class of heterodox systems, the chief three are the Carvakas, the Buddhists and the Jains.

The Vedas are the earliest available records of Indian literature, and subsequent Indian thought, especially philosophical speculation, is greatly influenced by the Vedas, either positively or negatively. Some of the philosophical systems accepted Vedic authority, while others opposed it. The Mimamsa and the Vedanta may be regarded as the direct continuation of the Vedic culture. The Vedic tradition had two sides, ritualistic and speculative (karma and Jnana). The Mimamsa emphasised the ritualistic aspect and evolved a philosophy to justify and help the continuation of the Vedic rites and rituals. The Vedanta emphasised the speculative aspect of the Vedas and developed an elaborate philosophy out of Vedic speculations. Though the Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya and Vaisesika based their theories on ordinary human experience and reasoning, they did not challenge the authority of the Vedas, instead they tried to show that the testimony of the Vedas was quite in harmony with their rationally established theories. The Carvakas, the Buddha and Jaina schools, on the other hand, arose mainly by opposition to the Vedic culture, and therefore, they rejected the authority of the Vedas. Such distinctions can be ultimately traced to distinctions in the methods of speculation adopted by different schools.

## 4. The Places of Authority and Reasoning in Indian Philosophy

Solutions of philosophical problems, like “ What is the ultimate cause of the world ? ”, “ Does God exist ?”, “ What is the nature of God ? ”, cannot be obtained by observation. The philosopher must employ his imagination and reasoning, and find out answers consistent with truths already established by experience. Like most other branches of knowledge, philosophy proceeds, therefore, from the known to the unknown. The foundation of philosophy is experience, and the chief tool used is reason. But the question arises here : “ What experience should form the basis of philosophy ? ” Indian thinkers are not unanimous on this point.

Some hold that philosophy should be based on ordinary, normal experience, i.e. on truths discovered and accepted by people in general or by scientists. In India the Nyaya, the Vaisesika, the Sankhya and the Carvaka schools accept this view; the Bauddha and the Jaina schools also accept it mostly. On the other hand, there are thinkers who hold that regarding some matters, such as God, we cannot form any correct idea from ordinary experience; philosophy must depend for these on the experience of those few saints, seers or prophets who have a direct realisation (darsana) of such things. Authority, or the testimony of reliable persons and scriptures thus forms the basis of philosophy. The Mimamsa and the Vedanta schools follow this method. They base many of their theories on the Vedas and the Upanishads. It is worth noting that even the Bauddha and the Jaina schools depend on the teachings of Bauddha and Jainas who are regarded as perfect and omniscient. Either way, reasoning is the chief instrument of speculation for philosophers of both persuasions.

The charge is often heard against Indian Philosophy, and chiefly against the two systems of the Mimamsa and the Vedanta that its theories are not based on independent reasoning but on authority, and therefore, they are dogmatic, rather than critical. Though these systems start from authority, the theories they develop are supported also by such strong independent arguments that even if we withdraw the support of authority, the theories can stand well and compare favourably with any theory established elsewhere on independent reasoning alone. Man, as a rational creature, cannot of course be satisfied unless his reason is satisfied. But if arguments in favour of philosophy are sufficient to satisfy his reason, the additional fact of its being based on the experiences of persons of clearer minds and purer hearts would only add to its value.

## 5. How the Indian Systems Gradually Developed

Indian systems of thought developed, not only within their circles of active followers, but also mutually influenced on another. Each philosophy regarded it as its duty to consider and satisfy all possible objections that might be raised against its views. By such constant criticism a huge philosophical literature has come into existence. Owing to this too, there developed a passion for clear and precise enunciation of ideas and for guarding statements against objections, In this sense, mutual criticism has made Indian philosophy its own best critic.

The Vedas, as noted earlier, are directly or indirectly responsible for most of the philosophical speculations. In the orthodox schools, next to the Vedas and the Upanishads, we find the sutra literature marking the definite beginnings of systematic philosophical thinking. “ Sutra ” etymologically means “ thread ”. As philosophical discussions took place mostly orally, passed down through oral traditions from teachers to students, it was perhaps felt necessary to link up or “ thread ” together the main thoughts in the minds of students by brief statements of problems, answers, possible

objections and replies to them. The Brahmasutra of Badarayana, for example, contains aphorisms that sum up and systematise the philosophical teachings of different Vedic works, chiefly the Upanishads. This work is the first systematic treatise on the Vedanta. Similarly we have Patanjali’s sutras for Yoga, and Kapila’s for the Sankhya philosophy.

The sutras were brief and therefore, their meanings were not always clear. There arose thus the necessity for elaborate explanations and interpretation through commentaries. These chief commentaries on the respective sutras were called the Bhasyas. Thus came into existence, for example, the different Bhasyas on the Brahmasutra, by Sankara, Ramanuja, and others. The followers of each interpretation formed into a school of Vedanta and there arose the many schools of the Vedanta itself.

Though the different schools were opposed to one another in their teachings, a sort of harmony among them was also conceived by Indian thinkers. So while outwardly opposed, the many positive points of agreement may be regarded as the common marks of Indian culture.

## 6. The Common Characteristics of the Indian Systems

The philosophy of a country is the cream of its culture and civilisation. It springs from ideas that prevail in its atmosphere and bears its unconscious stamp. Though the different schools of Indian philosophy present a diversity of views, we can discern in them the common stamp of Indian culture. We may briefly describe this unity as the unity of moral and spiritual outlook.

### 6a. The practical motive present in all systems.

The most striking and fundamental point of agreement, which we have already discussed partly, is that all systems regard philosophy as a practical necessity and cultivate it in order to understand how life can be best led. The aim of philosophical wisdom is not merely the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, but mainly an enlightened life led with far-sight, foresight and insight. It became a custom, therefore, for an Indian writer to explain, at the beginning of his work, how it serves human ends ( purusartha ).

### 6b. Philosophy springs from spiritual disquiet at the existing order of things.

The reason why the practical motive prevails in Indian philosophy lies in the fact that every system, pro-Vedic or anti-Vedic, is moved to speculation by a spiritual disquiet at the sight of the evils that cast a gloom over life in this world and it wants to understand the source of these evils and incidentally the nature of the universe and the meaning of human life, in order to find out some means for completely overcoming life’s miseries.

Indian philosophy is often criticised for being pessimistic and therefore, pernicious in its influence on practical life. Indian philosophy is only pessimistic in the sense that it works under a sense of discomfort and disquiet at the existing order of things. It discovers and strongly asserts that life, as it is being thoughtlessly led, is a mere sport of blind impulses and unquenchable desires; it inevitably ends in and prolongs misery. But no Indian system stops with this picture of life as a tragedy. It perhaps possesses more than a literary significance that even an ancient Indian drama rarely ends as a tragedy. If Indian philosophy points relentlessly to the miseries that we suffer through short-sightedness, it also discovers a message of hope. The essence of Buddha’s enlightenment - the four noble truths sums up and voices the real view of every Indian school in this respect; namely : there is suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there is cessation of suffering, there is a way to attain it. Pessimism in Indian systems is only initial and not final. The

influence of such pessimism on life is more wholesome than that of uncritical optimism. An eminent American scholar has rightly pointed out: "Optimism seems to be more immoral than Pessimism, for Pessimism warns us of danger, while Optimism lulls into false security." ( Vide George Herbert Palmer : Contemporary American Philosophy.

### 6c. The belief in an eternal moral order in the universe.

The outlook which prevents the Indian mind from ending in despair and guarantees its final optimism is what may be described as spiritualism after William James. "Spiritualism", says James, "means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope." "This need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast. Those poets, like Dante or Wordsworth, who live on the conviction of such an order, owe to that fact the extraordinary tonic and consoling power of their verse." (Pragmatism, pp. 106-107.) The firm faith in "an eternal moral order" dominates the entire history of Indian philosophy, barring the solitary exception of the Carvaka materialists. It is the common atmosphere of faith in which all these systems, Vedic and non-Vedic, theistic and atheistic, move and breathe. The faith in an order - a law that makes for regularity and righteousness and works in the gods, the heavenly bodies and all creatures - pervades the poetic imagination of the seers of the Rg-veda, which calls this inviolable moral order Rta. (Cf. Rg-veda, 1.1.8, 1.23.5, 1.24.9, 1.123.13, passim)

This idea gradually shapes itself (a) into the Mimamsa conception of Apurva, the law that guarantees the future enjoyment of the fruits of rituals performed now, (b) into the Nyaya-Vaisesika theory of Adrsta, the unseen principle which sways even over the material atoms and brings about objects and events in accordance with moral principles, and (c) into the general conception of karma, which is accepted by all systems. The law of karma in its different aspects may be regarded as the law of the conservation of moral values, merits and demerits of actions. This law of conservation means that there is no loss of the effect of work done ( krtapranasa) and that there is no happening of events to a person except as a result of his own work ( akrtabhyupagama). The law of karma is accepted by the six orthodox schools, as well as the Jainas and the Bauddhas.

The law of karma helps us to explain certain differences in individual beings, which cannot be explained by the known circumstances of their lives. Some of them, we find, are obviously due to the different actions performed by us in this present life. But many of them cannot be explained by reference to the deeds of this life. Now if some good or bad actions are thus found to produce certain good or bad effects in the present life, it is quite reasonable to maintain that all actions - past, present and future - will produce their proper effects in this or another life of the individuals who act. The law of karma is this general moral law which governs not only the life and destiny of all individual beings, but even the order and arrangement of the physical world.

The word karma means both this law and also the force generated by an action and having the potency of bearing fruit. All actions, of which the motives are desires for certain gains here or hereafter, are governed by this law. Disinterested and passionless actions, if any, do not produce any fettering effect or bondage just as a fried seed does not germinate. The law, therefore, holds good for individuals who work with selfish motives and are swayed by the ordinary passions and impulses of life and hanker after worldly or other-worldly gains. The performance of disinterested actions not only produces no fettering consequences but helps us to exhaust and destroy accumulated effects of our past deeds done under the influence of attachment, hatred and infatuation, or of interested hopes and fears, and thereby leads to liberation. With the attainment of liberation from bondage, the self rises above karma and lives

and acts in an atmosphere of freedom. The liberated one may act for the good of mankind, but is not bound by his karma, since he is free from all attachment and self-interest.

A distinguished Danish philosopher, Harald Höffding, defines religion as "the belief in the conservation of values." It is again this faith in "an eternal moral order" which inspires optimism and makes man the master of his own destiny. It enables the Indian thinker to take present evil as consequence of his own action, and hope for a better future by improving himself now. There is room, therefore, for free will and personal endeavour (purusakara). Fatalism or determinism, therefore, is a misrepresentation of the theory of karma. Fate or destiny (daiva) is nothing but the collective forces of one's own actions performed in past lives (purva-janma-krtamkarma). It can be overcome by efforts of this life, if they are sufficiently strong just as the force of old habits of this life can be counteracted by the cultivation of new and opposite habits.

### 6d. The Universe as the moral stage.

Intimately connected with this outlook is the general tendency to regard the universe as a moral stage, where all living beings get the dress and the part that befit them and are to act well to deserve well in future. The body, the senses and the motor organs that an individual gets and the environment in which he finds himself are the endowments of nature or God in accordance with the inviolable law of karma.

### 6e. Ignorance is the cause of bondage and knowledge is necessary for liberation. But mere theoretical knowledge is not sufficient.

Another common view, held by all Indian thinkers, is that ignorance of reality is the cause of our bondage and suffering, and liberation from these cannot be achieved without knowledge of reality. i.e.. the real nature of work and the self. By "bondage" is commonly meant the process of birth and rebirth and the consequent miseries to which an individual is subject. "Liberation" (mukti or moksha) means, therefore, the stoppage of this process. Liberation is the state of perfection; and, according to some Indian thinkers, including the Advaita Vedantins, this state can be attained even in this life. Perfection and real happiness can, therefore, be realised even here, at least according to these chief Indian thinkers. The teachings of these masters need not make us wholly unworldly and other-worldly. They are only meant to correct the one-sided emphasis on the here and now - the short-sightedness that worldliness involves.

But while ignorance was regarded as the root cause of the individual's trouble, and knowledge, therefore, as essential, the Indian thinkers never believed that mere acquaintance with the truth would at once remove imperfection. Two types of discipline were thought necessary for making such understanding permanent as well as effective in life, namely, continued meditation on the accepted truths and a practical life of self-control.

### 6f. Continued meditation on truths learnt is needed to remove deep-seated false beliefs.

The necessity of concentration and meditation led to the development of an elaborate technique, fully explained in the Yoga system, but yoga, in the sense of concentration through self-control, is not confined to that system only. The followers of these views believed, in common, that the philosophic truths momentarily established and understood through arguments were not enough to dispel the effects of opposite beliefs which have become part of our being. Our ordinary wrong beliefs have become deeply rooted in us by repeated use in the different daily situations of life. Our habits of thought, speech and action have been shaped and coloured by these beliefs which in turn have

been more and more strengthened by these habits. To replace these beliefs by correct ones, it is necessary to meditate on the latter constantly and to think over their various implications for life. In short, to instil right beliefs into our minds, we have to go through the same long and tedious process, though of the reverse kind, by which wrong beliefs were established in us. This requires a long intellectual concentration on the truths learned. Without prolonged meditation the opposite beliefs cannot be removed and the beliefs in these truths cannot be steadied and established in life.

### 6g. Self-control is needed to remove passions that obstruct concentration and good conduct.

Self-control (samyama) also is necessary for concentration of the mind on these truths and for making them effective in life. Mere knowledge of what is right does not always lead to right actions, because our actions are guided as much by reason as by blind animal impulses. Unless these impulses are controlled, action cannot fully follow the dictates of reason. This truth is recognised by all Indian systems, except perhaps the Carvaka. It is neatly expressed by an oft-quoted Sanskrit saying which means : " I know what is right, but feel no inclination to follow it; I know what is wrong but cannot desist from it. "

These impulses are variously described by different Indian thinkers; but there is a sort of unanimity that the chief impulses are likes and dislikes - love and hate (raga and dvesa). These are the automatic springs of action; we move under their influence when we act habitually without forethought. Our indriyas, i.e. the instruments of knowledge and action (namely, the mind, the senses of sight, touch, smell, taste and sound, and the motor organs for movement, holding things, speaking, excretion and reproduction) , have always been in the service of these blind impulses of love and hate, and they have acquired some fixed bad habits. When philosophic knowledge about the real nature of things makes us give up our previous wrong beliefs regarding objects, our previous wrong beliefs about those objects , have also to be given up. Our indriyas have to be weaned from past habits and broken to the reign of reason. This task is as difficult as it is important. It can be performed only through long, sustained practice and formation of new good habits. All Indian thinkers lay much stress on such practice which chiefly consists of repeated efforts in the right direction (abhyasa).

Self-control, then, means the control of the lower self, the blind, animal tendencies - love and hate - as well as the instruments of knowledge and action ( the indriyas ). It should be clear that self-control was not merely a negative practice, it was not simply checking their indriyas, but checking their bad tendencies and habits in order to employ them for a better purpose, and make them obey the dictates of reason.

It is a mistake to think, therefore, as some do, that Indian ethics taught an asceticism which consists in killing the natural impulses in man. As early as the Upanishads, we find Indian thinkers recognising that though the most valuable in man is his spirit (atman), his existence as a man depends on non-spiritual factors as well; that even his thinking power depends on the food he takes. (Chandogya Upanishad, 6.7). This conviction never left the Indian thinkers; the lower elements, for them, were not for destruction but for reformation and subjugation to the higher. Cessation from bad activities was coupled with performance of good ones. Thus we find even in the most rigoristic systems, such as Yoga, where, as aids to the attainment of perfect concentration (yoganga), we find mentioned not only the negative practice of the "don'ts" (yamas) but also positive cultivation of good habits ( niyamas). The yamas consist of the five great efforts for abstinence from injury to life, falsehood, stealing, sensuous appetite and greed for wealth ( ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, and aparigraha ). These are to be cultivated along with the niyamas, namely purity of body and mind, contentment, fortitude, study and resignation to God.

That the action of the indriyas is not to be suppressed but only to be turned to the service of the higher self, is also the teaching of the Gita, as would appear from the following : " One who has controlled himself attains contentment by enjoying objects through the indriyas which have been freed from the influences of love and hate. " (Bhagavadgita, 2.64)

### 6h. Belief in the possibility of liberation is common to the systems. Liberation is regarded as the highest good.

Lastly, all Indian systems, except the Carvaka, accept the idea of liberation as the highest end of life. All negatively agreed that that the state of liberation is a total destruction of sufferings which life in this world brings about. A few went beyond this to hold that liberation or the state of perfection is not simply negation of pain, but is a state of positive bliss. The Vedanta thinkers belong to this latter group.

## 7. The Space-Time Background

In addition to the unity of moral and spiritual outlook described above, we may also note the prevailing sense of the vastness of the space-time world, which formed the common background of Indian thought and influenced its moral and metaphysical outlook.

We are reminded in modern day astronomy that each speck of nebula observable in the sky contains "matter enough for the creation of perhaps a thousand million suns like ours." Our imagination feels staggered in its attempt to grasp the vastness of the space-time universe revealed by science. A similar feeling is caused by the accounts of creation given in some of the Puranas. In the Visnu-Purana, (Part 2, Chap 7) for example, we come across the popular Indian conception of the world (brahmanda) which contains the fourteen regions (lokas) of which the earth (bhutala) is only one and which are separated from one another by tens of millions (kotis) of yojanas, and again the infinite universe is conceived as containing thousands of millions of such worlds (brahmandas).

As to the description of the vastness of time, the Indian thinker, like the modern scientist, feels unable to describe it by common human traits, The unit adopted for the measurement of cosmic time is a day of the creator Brahma. Each day of the creator is equal to 1000 yuga or 432 million years of men. This is the duration of the period of each creation of cosmos. The night of the creator is cessation of creative activity and means destruction or chaos. Such alternating days and nights, creation and destruction (srsti and pralaya), form a beginningless series. In this manner Indian thinkers in general, look upon the universe as beginningless (anadi); there is nothing like an absolute first in such a series.

With this overwhelming idea of the vast universe as its background, Indian thought naturally harped on the extreme smallness of the earth, the transitoriness of earthly existence and the insignificance of earthly possessions. If the earth is a mere point in the vast space, life was a mere ripple in the ocean of time. Myriads of them come and go, and matter very little to the universe as a whole. Prosperity and adversity, civilisation and barbarity, rise and fall, as the wheel of time turns and moves on.

The general influence of this outlook on metaphysics has been to regard the present world as an outcome of a past one and explain the former partly by reference to the latter. Besides, it sets metaphysics on the search for the eternal. On the ethical and religious side it helped the Indian mind to take a wider and detached view of life, prevented it from the morbid desire to cling to the fleeting as the everlasting and persuaded it always to have an eye on what was of lasting, rather than of momentary,

value. While man's body is limited in space and time, his spirit is eternal. Human life is a rare opportunity. It can be utilised for realising the immortal spirit and for transcending thereby the limitations of space and time.

## A brief sketch of the Vedanta System

This system arises out of the Upanishads which mark the culmination of the Vedic speculation and are fittingly called the Vedanta or the end of the Vedas. As seen previously, it develops through the Upanishads in which its basic truths are first grasped, the Brahma-sutra of Badaranaya which systemises the Upanisadic teachings, and the commentaries written on these sutras by many subsequent writers among whom Sankara is well known. Of all the systems, the Vedanta, especially as interpreted by Sankara, has exerted the greatest influence on Indian life and it still exists in some form or another in different parts of India.

The idea of one Supreme Person ( purusa ), who pervades the whole universe and yet remains beyond it, is found in a hymn of the Rg-veda. All objects of the universe, animate and inanimate, men and gods, are poetically conceived here as parts of that Person. In the Upanishads this unity of all existence is found developed into the conception of One impersonal Reality ( sat ), or the conception of One Soul, One Brahman, all of which are used synonymously. The world is said to originate from this Reality, rest in it, and return into it when dissolved. The reality of the many perceived objects in this world is denied and their unity in the One Reality is asserted ever and again : All is God ( sarvam khalu idam Brahma. ) The soul is God ( ayam Atma, Brahma ). There is no multiplicity here ( Neha nanasti kincana ). This soul or God is the Reality (satya). It is infinite consciousness ( jnana) and Bliss (ananda).

Sankara interprets the Upanishads and the Brahma-sutra to show that pure and unqualified monism is taught therein. God is the only Reality, not simply in the sense that there is nothing except God, but also in the sense there is no multiplicity even within God. The denial of plurality, the unity of the soul and God, the assertion that when God is known, all is known, in fact the general tone that pervades the Upanishads, cannot be explained consistently if we believe in the existence of many realities within God. In the Vedas, creation is compared to magic or jugglery; God is spoken of as the Juggler who creates the world by the magical power called Maya.

Sankara, therefore, holds that, in consistency with the emphatic teaching that there is only One Reality, we have to explain the world not as a real creation, but as an appearance which God conjures up with his inscrutable power, Maya. We perceive the many objects in the One Brahman on account of our ignorance (avidya or ajnana) which conceals the real Brahman from us and makes it appear as the many objects. When the juggler produces an illusory show, the cause of it from his point of view is his magical power; from our point of view the reason why we perceive what we do, is our ignorance of the reality. Applying this analogy to the world-appearance, we can say that this appearance is due to the magical power of Maya in God and we can also say that it is due to our ignorance. Maya and ignorance are then the two sides of the same fact looked at from

two different points of view. Hence Maya is also said to be of the nature of Ignorance ( Avidya or Ajnana). Lest one should think that Sankara's position also fails to mention pure monism, because two realities - God and Maya - are admitted, Sankara points out that Maya as a power of God is no more different from God than the power of burning is from fire. There is then no dualism but pure monism ( Advaita ).

But is not even then God really possessed of creative power ? Sankara replies that so long as one believes in the world-appearance, he looks at God through the world, as the creator of it. But when he realizes that the world is apparent, that nothing is really created, he ceases to think of God as Creator. To one who is not deceived by the magician's art and sees through his trick, the magician fails to be a magician; he is not credited with any magical power. Similarly, to the few who see nothing but God in the world, God ceases to have Maya or the power of creating appearances.

In view of this Sankara finds it necessary to distinguish two different points of view, the ordinary or empirical (vyavaharika) and the transcendental or real (paramarthika). The first is the standpoint of unenlightened persons who regard the world as real; our life of practice depends on this; it is rightly called, therefore, the vyavaharika or practical point of view. From this point of view the world appears as real; God is thought to be its omnipotent and omniscient creator, sustainer and destroyer. Thus God appears as qualified ( sauna ) by many qualities. God in this aspect is called by Sankara, Saguna Brahma or Isvara. From this point of view the self also appears as though limited by the body, it behaves like a finite ego (aham). The second or the real (paramarthika) standpoint is that of the enlightened who have realized that the world is an appearance and there is nothing but God. From this point of view, the world being thought unreal, God ceases to be regarded as any real creator, or as possessed of any qualities like omniscience, omnipotence. God is realized as One without any internal distinction, without any quality. God from this transcendental standpoint ( paramarthikadrsti ) is indeterminate, and characterless; it is Nirguna Brahman. The body also is known to be apparent and there is nothing to distinguish the soul from God.

The attainment of this real standpoint is possible only by the removal of ignorance ( avidya ) to which the cosmic illusion is due. And this can be effected only by the knowledge that is imparted by the Vedanta. One must control the senses and the mind, give up all attachment to objects, realizing their transitory nature, and have an earnest desire for liberation. He should then study the Vedanta under an enlightened teacher and try to realize its truths by constant reasoning and meditation. When he is thus fit, the teacher would tell him at last : " Thou art Brahman ". He would meditate on this till he has a direct and permanent realization of the truth, " I am Brahman ". This is perfect wisdom or liberation from bondage. Though such a liberated soul still persists in the body and in the world, these no longer fetter him as he does not regard them as real. He is in the world, but not of the world. No attachment, no illusion can affect his wisdom. The soul then being free from the illusory ideas that divided it from God, is free from all misery. As God is Bliss, so also is the liberated soul. ■

# Personal Peace

- Stephen Cotton

In everyday life we hear a lot of talk about personal stress, how to manage our negative emotions, how to deal with stress. I feel that this is a very important activity in this ever changing world. What we don't hear about very often is personal peace. If we manage our personal stress, then we can also manage our personal peace.

Most of us can understand what stress is, as we feel it every day. In fact stress is a natural survival mechanism. But maybe some of you are struggling to understand what I mean by personal peace. The peace I am talking about has nothing to do with politics, culture, countries, war, or the absence of war. The peace I am talking about is on an individual level. I feel this world has so much focus on conflict and negative emotions. Yes the world is tough and we must do many things to survive and become successful in the world.

In a western country owning a big house and car can be a goal in life and a sign of success. In other countries owning a bicycle can make a huge difference in a person's life and is a sign of success. No matter what the circumstance of your life - no matter what success is for you... you will have to deal with some kind of stress and worry. When we remove all the material aspects of our surroundings - we find that the things we worry and have stress about are very similar to each other. So this got me thinking, if stress and negative emotions can be similar all over the world, then can the positive emotions also be similar?

I could talk a lot more about love, empathy, caring and compassion - and how these emotions also connects us all. But I want to bring the focus back to personal peace. So what do I mean by personal peace? For me it is a peace we feel within our body that is not related to our feelings for another person... it is a state of calmness, joy and love for our self. Some refer to this as a blissful feeling. For me bliss is the opposite of excitement. It has an underlying calmness to it. In my life I have found several ways to achieve a feeling of personal peace.

The first and most influential way for me to find personal peace has been through breathing practices. Just by sitting in a chair, closing my eyes, slowing my breathing down and making it repetitive; I found that I was able to bring into my body a feeling of calmness. For many years I practiced slowing down my breathing and over time that feeling of calmness grew to a feeling of joy and then a feeling of love for myself. So this breathing practice, of simply slowing down the breath has been an integral part of my personal peace practice.

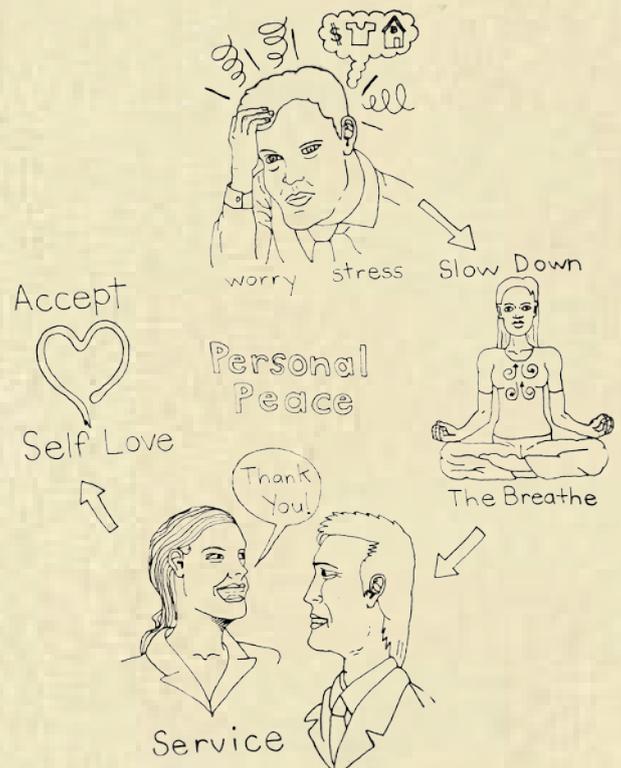
The breathing practice was the seed for my personal peace practice. And I state that it is a practice, something I need to work at each day. So why was this feeling of calmness so important? Why is personal peace important? I found that when I was regularly practicing my personal peace, then I was generally happier and managed stress better. So when I felt myself getting stressed- I would take a few deep breaths and very quickly I could calm myself. So this was one benefit of having a personal peace practice. Another benefit is that my body was regularly filled with positive emotions, which made my thinking change. My thinking started to focus on the good things in my life. I started to believe in myself. I started to

respect myself and respect those around me.

One change in thought that happened - was my views of violence and if it is required or not. There are many opinions on this subject - and I don't wish to discuss the merits of each point of view. My personal peace practice got me thinking about violence, I decide that for myself I would use my strength and abilities to protect the innocent, like children and animals, and in general I would practice non-violence. So this meant I had to find non-violent ways to resolve conflict. And when I define non-violence, it also includes verbal non-violence as well as physical non-violence.

So this meant that I had to change how I spoke to people, as well as how I acted towards them. Since my personal peace practice had helped me to focus on the good in my life, then I was able to see the good in others too. For me this extension of my personal peace practice was a great help and meant that my personal relationships became more meaningful. This doesn't mean that all my interactions had positive outcomes. What this meant was, that no matter how someone spoke to me I would always speak to them in a respectful manner. More often than not - I found that if you spoke to someone respectfully, then they would listen to you and treat you respectfully.

Another influence of my personal peace practice, was that I didn't need things from others, as I was at peace within myself. So this meant I had the space to really listen to another person's point of view. My personal peace practice helped me to become a better listener. Also I found that I was able to hold onto my own point of view without being threatened by others opinions.



Another important aspect of my personal peace practice was to do some volunteer work. In the developed countries we have these very well defined boundaries around charity and volunteer work. But what it really means is doing things for other people besides from your family and friends. It is serving your community. And when I did my volunteer work after achieve something I had this feeling of joy. Helping others and giving back to my community added to my personal peace practice... when I was doing the work I was thinking how this was helping others, I focused on how my actions would help another person. And when you see a smile on another person's face it also puts a smile on your own face too. So I found that my volunteer work really help me to extend my personal peace practice.

In the beginning my personal peace practice started from a desire to feel happy. Over the years it has grown to me feeling happy and peaceful about my place in the world... it has allowed to be more accepting of myself and of my circumstances. And by extending the practice a little bit at a time it has come to be a great support in my life. And this all leads to a jewel that I found... that acceptance is a very important part of my personal peace practice. By learning to accept myself and to accept that I am in the world for a purpose - I realized that true peace came

by accepting the circumstance I was in and then to realize there was a purpose to these circumstances. When I did this, another feeling of peace flowed over me. Thus comes the saying - I have made peace with my life.

Although my personal peace practice supported me in many ways and had a lot of interesting benefits, it doesn't mean that the world was all perfect and happy. In fact I had some very challenging and stressful life events. And in all honesty - I don't think I would have coped well, if I didn't have my personal peace practice to help me get through it and overcome my challenges. And in this world where there is so much stress and challenges... I think we need a feeling of personal peace to help us to get through the day.

For me personal peace isn't about turning the world into a peaceful place. For me personal peace was about having a calmness and joy within myself - no matter what the circumstances are in the world. I am no guru - I am just an ordinary person who struggles with life just like many others. But what I have found is that my personal peace practice has brought many benefits and I want to encourage others to start their own practice today. ■

**Below is a brief translation of Japanese article 森のライフスタイル研究所～ (Mori no lifestyle research institute), that appears on page# 56.**

“The Lifestyle Research Institute of Forest” or in Japanese, “Mori no lifestyle” is a non-profit organisation established in May 2003. Our aim is to use the energy and strength of the young generations of city-dwellers for the protection and development of the country's forest.

From ancient times, trees have played a vital role in Japanese society. They are the natural treasure of the country. They are used to build houses, furniture, and many different tools. Wood was also used as a fuel. Instead of the traditional wood, concrete is mainly used to build houses nowadays, and natural gas or electricity are used as a fuel. Due to the lack of demand in wood, there is a decline in the maintenance and proper care of forests.

Our organisation's aim is to revive these forests and to keep beautiful resources for coming generations. Though we are not professionals, we have a vision. We try to bring back the importance of wood, and try to build a connection with the forests into the daily lives of city people. Our motto is “[To] enjoy doing the right thing”. In our case, doing the right thing means to plant and take care of trees and to protect the forest. Creating a forest is a long-term project lasting about 50~100 years. We think entertainment is required for the progress of this project, so we keep activities such as barbeque, apple-picking, wine testing, etc. I believe our work impacts the local economy too.

From 2009, we started inviting young people from the urban areas to Nagano to plant trees and weed in barren lands or ski slopes. At present, Mori No Lifestyle is undertaking six forest projects in the Nagano and Chiba area. With the help from volunteers from different companies, we have revived the forest area near Kujikuri beach in Chiba which were destroyed in the 2011 tsunami. Many Indian volunteers also participated in the event.

To call for help, we use the internet. By introducing this to the radio station and TV, participants are increasing by the day. We do many talk-shows and seminars in the Tokyo area regarding knowledge about trees. Once or twice in month, we arrange tours to Nagano and Chiba to plant or revive the forests. Other than this, from 2014, we have started a new project of outdoor activities for mothers and children of single mothers. We arrange bus tours for these kids who lack outdoor activities.

Henceforth, we plan on pursuing our motto. If this article interests you, please contact us through our website:

<http://www.slow.gr.jp/>

*(Translated by Meeta Chanda.)*

# Morality in the Mahabharata

- Shoubhik Pal

When we read books or watch movies, we don't realize sometimes that we are subliminally placing all the characters on a black and white spectrum: whether he/she is good or evil. While the concept of the 'grey' character has been enhanced and explored in recent decades, some of us still categorize characters in epics (Ramayana, Mahabharata) as either good or evil, unable to form any characterization in the middle. In the Mahabharata, the norm presupposes that the Pandavas are good, primarily because they are the protagonists along with the fact that the supreme deity Krishna is on their side. Likewise, this same phenomenon applies to the Kauravas, considered to be the antagonists of the epic saga.

What sets the Mahabharata apart from most other epics is its resounding moral ambivalence. Sympathetic characters like Dronacharya, Bhishma and Karna participate in Duryodhana's army in the war, making it difficult to choose a particular side to support for this war. Making it more difficult is the fact that the deaths of these great characters were caused by rule-breaking partaken by the Pandavas. Yudhisthira, famed for being one of the most honest characters in the saga, had to intentionally lie to Dronacharya in order to stem the damage being done to the Pandavas' army by the famed teacher. Had Krishna not induced Yudhisthira into lying, Dronacharya would not have died and continued to decimate the Pandava army. The same case occurs with Karna, who steps out of his chariot to fix his broken wheel. The rules of war at that time indicated that a warrior cannot be killed if he is out of his chariot. However, the great Krishna once again goes against these rules, prompting Arjuna to rid of the famed warrior once Karna is at his most vulnerable.



This brings us to the perceived main antagonist of the entire saga – Duryodhana. The Kuru king's biggest vice might be boiled down to the fact that he questioned Krishna's dharma. While this may seem outrageous to some people taking into account Krishna's apparent divinity, let us consider the fact that Krishna was viewed as a normal human being by Duryodhana. The Kuru king, upholding the Kshatriya values at that time, is being challenged by Krishna's new-age dharma, holding no claims to changing the world except for the fact that it is the desire of the Gods. A normal person might be skeptical to these claims, something Duryodhana is. While there are numerous evil acts that Duryodhana does commit, (events of the dice game, attempted drowning and poisoning of Bhima, burning of the lacquer house, etc.) it would be foolhardy to say that the

Pandavas have not committed sins of that magnitude or even worse. Even during Duryodhana's demise by Bhima breaking his thighs, another war crime induced by Krishna, the Gods salute his adherence to Kshatriya values till the very end, indicated by this prose: "When the Kururaja's words came to their end, Bharata, a great shower of wonderfully fragrant flowers rained down". This is in strict contrast to how the Pandavas are treated by the Gods after Duryodhana's demise, seen through "Seeing such marvels and the worship offered to Duryodhana, those Pandavas led by Vasudeva became ashamed. Hearing from the sky about those they had slain unrighteously (adharmatah)- about Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Bhurisravas – the Pandavas lamented, pained with grief."

Despite the fact that Krishna is seen to be clairvoyant and divine, it is surprising to believe he envisaged that a proper political system could be formed after such a devastating war. The obvious result was that the war left India in a much poorer state than what it was beforehand, leading to the political unity of India being crushed into small kingdoms again. Yudhisthira was unable to lead effectively, and Krishna's aim of achieving a co-operative corporate administration was extinguished before it could even be realized. If Krishna was truly a clairvoyant supreme deity, he would have been able to ascertain that such a war would lead to these consequences.

Many believe that the reason for the Mahabharata's character inconsistencies lies in the fact that Vyasa's original took years to write, leading to structural deficiencies. Another reason is that there are various authors who depict different circumstances in their versions. SaralaDas' version provides a

sympathetic backstory to Shakuni, a character considered to be arguably the most wicked character in the epic. In that version, Shakuni's entire family was imprisoned by Duryodhana. In a barbaric way, he used to offer only one meal a day to the entire family. When deciding whether this solitary meal should be equally split between the entire family or given to just one member, the Gandhar kingdom chose the latter. Shakuni was given all the meals at the expense of all of his family members dying as a result. This is a possible explanation to Shakuni's various disfigurements, thought to give him a sinister look in the Vyasa's original. In this version, Shakuni was a man looking to dismantle the entire Kuru clan on the basis of revenge for Duryodhana's eradication of the Gandharvas. Taking this version into account, Shakuni's evil deeds now have an element of redemption attached to them.

Overall, the Mahabharata is one of the most richly written epics in Indian mythology, particularly due to the ambivalent characters present. This piece is not to lay insults on Krishna and the Pandavas but to provide examples where these ethereal beings broke rules pertinent to those times. Additionally, the Kauravas are seen as symbols of pure evil by many Indians, but I argue here that they are not as evil as people condemn them to be. In conclusion, the Mahabharata has undergone various changes and different versions, but the themes of mortality, divinity, duty and achieving victory through any means remain pertinent even today. ■

# My Dadu (Maternal Grandfather)

- Dipankar Dasgupta

**I**t was the summer of 1966. We were leaving Delhi, the place I had literally grown up. We were very distraught. I was going to lose all the friends I had known for my entire life (so to speak). We bid farewell with watery eyes. We were going to Calcutta, a city full of our relatives. We arrived, right in the middle of summer vacation. From the train station we went straight to Central Park, an address that would always be etched in my memory. A place where my Dadu and Didima made us feel truly at home. Dadu would always be there for us. We would come in, take off our shoes at the end of the first set of stairs, and greet him with a smile. Some times, while Baba was still paying the taxi, his voice would float over the aroma of Didima's cooking. It was a familiar voice, always reassuring and making us feel at home. We loved visiting Mamabari. There was always something new, some special dish Didima had made, or a story Dadu had to tell us. The story of how he had lost his umbrella on the bus to Gariahat bazaar was amusing, yet so real. He had boarded the bus at Krishna Glass factory. The bus was crowded. In order to save himself from falling, he had to hold on to the "side" and "roof" handles, using both his hands. His umbrella, with its "U" shaped handle, was hanging from his bicep. His "stop" arrived and he pushed his way through the crowd to get down. "It is starting to rain, where the umbrella is" – well it was too late, somebody had conveniently picked it up. I guess you can call it "pick umbrella" rather than "pick pocket".

In 1972, I joined IIT Kharagpur. The first few months were hell. Early seventies was boom time for "ragging". All of us looked forward to Friday afternoons. We used a get-a-way rickshaw to take us from the Chemistry Laboratory straight to the Rail Station. Sometimes we had to crouch behind the tattered "rain protecting" canvas cloth, to prevent being seen by the wandering eyes of a "senior". The bus ride from Howrah station to Jadavpur, built up my anticipation of a good night's sleep at Central Park. Dadu and Didima were my saviors. Snatching me away, even though for two days, from the clutches of those evil "Seniors". It was always reassuring to hear Dadu's voice. It reminded me - there was still some good left in the

world. Sitting on the table with Dadu and Didima for dinner was a feeling, hard to explain. The food was delicious; no words I use can do justice to Didima's culinary skills. When the large clock in the middle bedroom struck 9:00 o' clock, food was served. There was no room for delay. Dadu did not want it any other way. This was a reflection of his character - discipline makes a man great. Sunday nights were always gloomy. Next day I had to leave to face the unpleasant music. Dadu always reminded me of the next weekend. "You are coming, right". Those words felt like a warm hug. "Of course I will, can't miss Didima's cooking for the world".

I graduated from IIT in 1977 and was offered a job in Calcutta. My dilemma was to find a place to stay. For Dadu and Didima, it was not even an item for discussion – "Of course you will stay with us". I was truly elated. Bus number 41A took me straight to my destination of work. Some days walking back from the bus stop (Krishna Glass factory), and nearing our neighbor's house (the Artist), I would hear Dadu's distinct voice, a couple of decibels above the ambient noise. The conversation always felt familiar. Most probably giving someone advice, or providing someone with reassuring words. Dadu always had time for others. Since "Jetha Dadu" was suffering from the after effects of a severe stroke, Dadu was the patriarch of the family. He was more than willing to shoulder the responsibility, as if it was his duty to help every member of the extended family. Some days, I would come back home to find a "not so familiar" face in the sitting room. Dadu would be sitting on the chair, next to his large desk, listening intently. There would be some exchange of words; soon the person would leave, feeling a little better. Dadu always had a way of making people feel good about themselves.

I remember Dadu as a pillar of integrity, courage and selflessness. He helped others not for self-gain, but because of a sense of duty and responsibility. I feel privileged that he touched my life in so many ways, making me, hopefully, a better person. ■





## Diaries 2014

- Udita Ghosh

As the title would suggest, this is literally just modified excerpts from an internal dialogue, not a structured thought-out article or prose. In the summer of 2014 I had the most wonderful opportunity to conduct research for my master's thesis on refugees living in urban areas (not in camps), amongst the local population, in developing countries (about 80% of the world's refugees are in developing countries). I surveyed 3 different refugee communities in New Delhi, India, interviewed a number of them, and meanwhile got to explore Delhi and its nooks and crannies like never before. God bless the Delhi Metro for my increased mobility! This however, is not just about my research; rather these are candid thoughts based on all of these experiences, and a few lessons learnt, that I ruminated while taking the metro back most days and typing furiously on my smartphone as if I was telling a friend. This is as much about *Dilwaalon ki Dilli*<sup>1</sup>, as it is about the communities I researched. You may imagine me telling you these things excitedly without you asking for, or even deserving such nuisance.

(Meanings of non-English words in footnotes)

June 22, 2014

What an amazing day!

I left home at around 3:30pm, and a bumpy rickshaw ride later, took the metro from Mayur Vihar I to the centre of this ginormous city, before changing lines at Rajiv Chowk to trek up north to Vidhan Sabha. Why? To meet with the folks at the Tibetan Settlement Authority in Samyeling Settlement in North Delhi – or as it is colloquially known: Majnu ka Tilla. Was running half an hour behind but the people at the office were quite accommodating when I called to let them know. And then another poor rickshaw driver trekked me up to “Majnu ka Tilla”. Awesome name, I say. But the poor guy had to use all his body weight to haul us up the sloping road with the sun glaring down sizzling our heads - maybe he had also had a tiring day. But let's be honest - that's his Everyday. I don't have body issues, but I wished myself to be lighter the whole way, and even pictured myself comically getting down to help push the rickshaw up with him many times.

Right. Majnu ka Tilla and the Tibetan folks, I am happy to announce, are just naturally cool! The settlement is an insanely cramped place. I have never been to Tibet – not even the parts like Ladakh that are in India – but I could understand wishing to be back up there in the cool climates rather than in Delhi in summer is such a narrowly stuffed neighbourhood, with homes, markets, shops, offices, restaurants and monastery etc.

Two ladies in their Tibetan dresses, with the open smile on their beautiful *pahadi*<sup>2</sup> faces welcomed me. With very little fuss and confusion they figured out what I intended to do (research refugee livelihoods) and who would help me with this. I was bewildered at their helpfulness, but as my helper explained to me later, anyone who wants to learn about the Tibetans situation, is always welcome. There is a deep passion for their cause. Exile is something maddening for sure.

1 *Dilwaalon ki Dilli*: Literally means “Delhi, of large-hearted people”, which is phrase associated with Delhi, partly because of the similar sounds of the name “Dilli” (Delhi) and the Urdu/Hindustani word for ‘heart’ “Dil”.

2 *Pahadi*: mountainous, or associated with mountain-dwelling people

When I got out, feeling accomplished for getting it together on my own, two sleepy stray dogs blocked my way completely on the winding staircase and were completely unconcerned by my desire to get out. So I went back and forth for 5 minutes like a fool, even tried to coax them to move unsuccessfully, and finally deciding that yes I would after all step right between both their heads, squeezed out next to them with no incidence (even acknowledgement), dignity restored. This is a feature of Majnu Ka Tilla – completely peaceful stray dogs everywhere, who you can feed your leftover food to, and pet, as you would. They're chilling there like everyone else.

I decided to explore the skinny marketplace, and having walked 10 steps down, saw the sign “AMA Cafe, **Free wifi**” and immediately changed plans. Thus with a whoop of glee and no further thought, I stepped upstairs and pushed into a rather plush, could-be-in-Canada-for-all-I-know cafe full of young hip Tibetans (with some serious styling game), with an array of fun baked goods and best of all - wifi! I admit – free wifi when you're travelling is the equivalent of heaven. I could not have felt more at home. The place was buzzing with young Tibetans and others who looked like Delhi University students. Had some excellent coffee, bought slices of cakes and made the best of my free wifi, ventured down and promptly decided to contribute to greater refugee productivity by buying excellent silky scarves as *omiyage*<sup>3</sup>, thinking in my head “Well, I'm not going to bargain with refugees!” Feeling happy enough with my short splurging, I gave the ladies big smiles (who smiled back more freely than most Delhiites) and left feeling accomplished, thanking the Research Gods over and over that finally I would get to embark on my dissertation research interviews.

So today: 26.6.2014 - even better. Kunchen (name changed for confidentiality) had me wandering around behind him wide-eyed through the tiny winding streets of Majnu ka Tilla. Very easily he took over the role of guide, and led me to my interviewees. He had me eat a very Tibetan-soy-flavoured soup, called Laping (laap-hwing) – the stall owner rolled out a sheet of a pale yellow dough, stuffed it with a mixture of meat and spices, rolled it up and chopped it into spicy stuffed noodles – truly delicious. I pride myself on having a decent tolerance for *jhaal*<sup>4</sup>, but I am no Tibetan. When things got rough, they poured in the soy soup to help me out. Like a child in wonderland, I gulped up everything with my mouth and eyes, while Kunchen took over the role of a big brother-style guide, in between organizing events and I have no idea what else, and I comfortably relied on the man.

The first guy I had interviewed was so calm and relaxed. I sat in his little Tibetan souvenir store, and asked him my list of questions, learning very quickly that I would have to modify them and ask many many follow ups, even while struggling to avoid what we call “leading questions” in academic research. All this while Kunchen sat in with me to make sure it was all going well – not what I had planned in my mind. The young store owner was only too obliging, so much so that I wanted to buy something there for gratitude. But then the issue of ethical review popped into my head along with my supervisor Amanda's voice, telling me sternly that we cannot mix charity or activism with the procedure of academic research. Unfortunately, by then “Safe Space”, “Power Balance” and such standards were meeting

3 *Omiyage*: souvenir

4 *Jhaal*: spicy, specifically meaning very hot, not lots of spice, in Bangla.

with my friend Compromise. Those went out the window when Kunchen decided to stay and chill in my interview and jump in with his own answers. I recorded his separately, made some notes to account for his influence in my interview when evaluating responses qualitatively, and heaved a sigh of relief when he had to leave in between. Voice recording also went for a toss veery quickly, when my iphone ran out of recording space. I took the fastest notes of my life, while smiling a lot and totally getting invested in everyone's life. And I may also have stressed out one guy, with my questions about his life and his ambitions and what he wanted to pursue. But hey, I listened and I cared, at least. This was an interesting shock to my system. Amongst my networks, and in the Indian mainstream, everyone is always ambitious and wanting to get somewhere better, do more, be more. It may be the pervasiveness of Buddhist philosophy of shunning desire, but it sounded to me like the youth in Majnu ka Tilla that I met, were not particularly interested in wanting a lot more.

Here's the thing: I'd become too used to American-tv-style discussions about people's hopes, dreams and feelings, and to having fully articulate discussions with friends who think, plan and rationalize these things, like myself, all the time. This is not the norm – this social network-fed habit to promote, describe and define ourselves for easy public consumption on social media, like mini-celebrities, all the time. Millions of people don't talk like this, don't live like this, or think like this. But it doesn't mean that they haven't figured their lives out, or even that not having an ambition is bad. There are, still, a myriad of ways to be in this world.

Time was against me for sure. On my last day at Majnu Ka Tilla, it got more and more late sadly for the last guy, who I interviewed while in a race against the setting sun, very eager to talk though he was. A happy man, making the best of his resources, having emerged from a very modest background and yet made a very good deal of it. I'll try to remember his story. And all of theirs. There was the old lady, who had come to India when the Dalai Lama did, like thousands of other Tibetans, and spent her youth doing construction work on roads, selling *Hing*<sup>5</sup> on Delhi streets, and winter clothes in the seasonal Tibetan markets. There was the man who had grown up watching his mother build roads near Dharamshala, while he and his little brother sat on the side of the road. There was the girl who had walked across from Tibet, over Nepal before coming to India with her uncle to flee the Chinese authorities. And there was also the salty Tibetan butter tea (*po cha* or *bod cha*) that I may never like.

Overheard on Delhi Metro.

Girl 1: Hey how did you find the exam?

Girl 2: I don't know...I found the logical reasoning part hard.

Girl 1: Oh I *toh*<sup>6</sup> didn't. I had to practice that for [name of other exam]. They have that also. There are 3 sections; section X [some section type], logical reasoning, and..uhh.. non-logical reasoning....\*continues chattering\*

Self: \*snorts with laughter and types furiously on Iphone, as another Auntie moves closer to "adjust" herself into the tiny sliver of empty space, on the seat next between me and the next passenger\*.

The monsoon rains in Delhi don't come completely without warning – the sky turns a beautiful radiant blue grey, and the winds start to dance and pirouette long before the shower starts. The leaves appear a brighter green on the large

trees shimmying to the gusts, and casually tell you of their anticipation. If you get caught unprepared then, don't blame us, they all seem to say.

But they tell you naught of the unabashed force and sheer madness with which the rain will drench, and the lunatic glee with which it will dance away till its fit is done, of the chuckling streams that will take over the roads momentarily and the earthy aroma that will envelope the atmosphere.

On a July afternoon, in between the hustle to complete my research interviews and to get work done at the bank in CR Park, I had found a leisurely half hour where I must wait for the bank to open again after lunch, and the highlight of my day was to be the solitary trip to the "Kaalibaadi" – the beautiful temple dedicated to the mother Goddess; her of the blackened body, and fiery reddened eyes and tongue hanging out in her fit, her of the skulls adorning her neck and her of the rage of raw divinity. The temple here that houses this divinity is as tranquil as She is wild; all vast white domes and earth-coloured murals. This is one of my favourite places – I have no affection for religious spots when in northern India, but this is one temple I can say I love. Everything from the marble steps, the vines hanging off the pillars and the artwork depicting the lives of the Gods, feels real, modest, and sincere, with a special simple beauty and cleanliness, which is after all, Godliness.

Here I sat – the sole visitor, in the height of the July afternoon, and breathed in the peace and calm, composing and processing my thoughts and experiences. My thoughts immediately went to my Dadu – my mother's father. There are a few people I enjoy watching pray, and my Dadu was one who, when he prayed, felt as though, was cleansing us around him, and that somehow vicariously I was praying through him. Pray is too simple and shallow a word, and the English language has no equivalent for "pujo", where the engagement with a higher power doesn't appear like a daily request-making exercise from our personal genie, or a sycophantic chant for pleasing our so-called maker. No, it was never thus when Dadu prayed. Thinking of Dadu, I sat in the temple and spoke with my mother on the phone, watching the grey sky grow darker and the winds grow stronger, shaking yellow petals down from the Krishnochurha tree my bench was under. Finally, noting that the break was almost up and the rains were on their way, I wrapped up and waving to the man who had told me where the gate was open (Him: "*Bhalo kore mondir dekhte parlen to?*") I walked out of the temple, down the steps, and avoiding the little gathering of *vella*<sup>8</sup>-looking young men just standing around aimlessly chatting near the temple, crossed over to the opposite sidewalk on the street. No sooner has I gotten to the street corner to turn onto the main road that would take me to the CR Park market where the bank is, it began to rain.

Great, I thought, and flinging a hand towel over my head, I took shelter under one massive tree, and was impressed about how well it actually did shelter me. The rain gods must have overheard my thoughts.

It began to POUR.

I love the monsoon rains. They bring me joy. But with a laptop and phones in my bag - and an hour to the bank's closing, I needed to stay dry-ish.

Just then an autorickshaw drove over right to my corner and parked itself under the same tree. I hesitated. The auto driver then called me in to take shelter under his auto roof, saying that he had no intention of looking for passengers in this heavy rain. Hugely relieved at the offer of shelter, I jumped right in. Within a few minutes a skinny, wizened elderly grandma in a white saree came over and snuck in next to me. We sat there

<sup>7</sup> *Bhalo kore mondir dekhte parlen to?*: Were you able to see the temple properly?

<sup>8</sup> *Vella*: colloquial Hindi word for someone who has nothing productive to do with their time, and looks jobless

<sup>5</sup> *Hing*: Asafoetida (spice)

<sup>6</sup> *Toh/to*: emphasis word

the 3 of us listening to the rain *tandav*<sup>9</sup> for the next half hour. I shared my sandwich with the grandma - the auto bhaiyya told me "Abhi roti khaakar aen hai" (I've just had lunch) and offered us water.

The rains. Well they did. And they rained like they knew their own beauty and didn't want to hide it. It poured and poured. And the earth smelt like heaven, and the pitter-patter sounded like some heavenly *tabla*<sup>10</sup>, so much so that I couldn't help admire the shower even as my clock was ticking down to the time I had to get to the bank by. From the gaps between the make-shift curtains on the side of the auto, I could see raindrops bouncing and dancing on the shallow stream the roads had become. Finally after a point, when we had chatted and waited and listened to the rain in reverent silence as well, and it was clear that respite was not close, the man suggested that he drop me to the street corner at the No. 2 Market, a few minutes away, and take the lady on for her ride to Nehru Place.

Regular helpfulness from a benevolent stranger. With all the awareness of taking his help while he could be out making bucks, and wanting to show how immensely grateful and touched I was throughout this experience - with many awkward thanks I leapt off into the rain, eventually bouncing gradually over to the bank at 3:20, with many a stop under the tarpaulin shop covers.

Today there is such a deficit of trust between the classes in India, who appear to be getting further and further away - especially for young women who have to think like they are constantly in danger, or for middle and upper classes who seem to live in constant paranoia that they are about to be ripped off by the working classes, labourers, domestic help, just anyone - the normalcy of our situation, away from these dynamics, was incredibly refreshing. The equality of our situation was perfect.

I confronted this situation over and over again all summer. On multiple occasions I found myself assisted by complete strangers, and always not very well-off, whose kindness came free of charge - something most people would hardly believe of Dilliwalas<sup>11</sup>! Particularly when it was my research subjects - asylum seekers in Delhi - who were so gracious that I really struggled with not having anything to offer as help in return. Afghans, particularly - who are, I found, more able to navigate

the cultural and linguistic maze of Dilli, to set up bread and bakery shops or Afghan restaurants in the streets near Jangpura, with of course regular hassles created by our lovely Delhi police. These men, running tiny shops or restaurants (some with classic mud-ovens where they bake Afghan breads and cakes) were not only working non-stop in the July heat, but were also at that time, fasting all day for Ramzan (Ramadan). Invariably, these hard-working men, taking time out of their work to talk to me about their situations (at the request of UNHCR reps, who helped me contact them) never once failed in their courtesy of offering me food or drink, and vehemently refused to be compensated for it. Despite the ethics of social science research echoing in my head, that I could not accept anything from them when interviewing, and my own ethics of not wanting to accept favours from people who were clearly struggling to make ends meet in a foreign country; I eventually had to accept defeat for my own ego, and recognize that first and foremost my obligation was to the person across from me, and I had no business being disrespectful to them.

I could go on and on about the conditions these folks were in - the oppressive heat of the 2 feet square room where one man sits baking bread and cakes in a large mud oven all day alongside a single table fan; or the tiny grocery store another man is trying to run to cover his rent, whose dentist wife can no longer work since they had to flee Afghanistan after someone shot at her and injured her leg for good - and how all of them were struggling to pay rent, to take care of their families, to put their children through school in a foreign country, with zero protection against people waiting to advantage of them. Consider such people insisting that you take free food and drinks, even offering that you have lunch with their children (who were not fasting during Ramzan).

This was my dilemma. And I decided that the self-respect and the emotion of the person in front of me at the moment trumped all other considerations.

What I have learned it - many times people need your help, whether in labor or in monetary assistance. Equally, sometimes, you must allow others the respect and dignity of helping you. And take it, with grace and heartfelt thanks. I know I will strive to do this better in future. ■

9 *Tandav*: a classical dance, expressing violent rage through dance, associated with God Shiva.

10 *Tabla*: traditional drums, consisting of a pair of hand drums.

11 *Dilliwalas*: Delhi-ite

*P.S. There were many other memorable incidents wandering through Delhi, involving rickshawallahs, momos, late-night drives to India Gate, and most bewildering conversations overheard on the Delhi Metros that were not noted down, but add to the mosaic of the Delhi Diaries, which culminated in the successful submission of my thesis in August 2014.*

# The Strange Letter

- Tapan Das

**B**abu was the youngest of his three brothers, all brought up well by their father who worked at a steel plant. All the brothers were settled comfortably in life, the eldest a lecturer in a government college, the second one a system engineer in a bank and Babu worked as a publishing consultant in the private sector. They lived separately, each with his family, while their mother preferred to stay at the ancestral home in the village. That is how she had preferred to live after her husband's death.

One fine Sunday morning, Adhikari uncle, a reputed lawyer and a family friend, requested all of Babu's family members to assemble in his house, which also served as his chamber, to read out their father's will to all, including to Babu's mother. The family gathered, some brimming with expectation and excitement, knowing very well that their father was a man of means. As the will was read out, it became known that Babu's eldest brother got the two storied home in Kolkata along with the garden area, while the roof right was given to Babu, in case he wanted to build a floor for himself. Babu was free to sell it too, but would have to do so only to his brother for a mutually agreed consideration. His second brother got a 500 yards plot of land in a good location at Garia and a fixed deposit of Rs.10 lakhs. Babu was passed on his father's share of their ancestral property, which comprised of the 'thakurbari', a large pond named 'Pratapdighi', and some cultivable land. He was entrusted to organize their annual Durga Puja that had been traditionally performed at the family home, and also the Durga idol, which was made of bell metal by their forefathers.

Not quite expecting this legacy, Babu was rather baffled at this at first. His mother preferred to stay alone after his father had passed away. She was a simple but strong lady, firm in her opinions and wishes, not easily swayed by her daughters-in-law. She was entitled to her husband's pension of Rs.10000 every month and she also enjoyed the monthly income she received for the fixed deposit of Rs 200000 at the post office, for which Babu was the nominee and also got some amount towards the proceeds of the share crops. The division of property, made Babu's brothers very happy.

Her mother clearly told everyone that after her death the fixed deposit will be for her youngest son. Babu was the only one to visit his mother frequently and to tend to her needs. While in Kolkata, his mother would visit all her sons, pulled by the affectionate tie with her grandsons and granddaughters but always preferred to stay with his youngest son.

One day when all the brothers were together at a close family function their father's friend sent a set of letters in envelopes with the names of each of the three brothers written on it by their late father himself. The brothers became apprehensive at the arrival of these letters out of the blue. Each letter contained the same similar riddle, handwritten by their late father himself.

"A simple soul goes to heaven  
And throws three pebbles to earth,  
The bigger hits the scare crow;  
The second hits the square pond  
The third may take time to land

But will be blessed by the mother's hand.  
Only the one who cares the mother till end?  
Would deserve my love from heaven  
Then the ageless blind Bramah, from the Queen's land,  
Will bow its head, into the master's hand  
Let Indra's fury lead you to the blue marvel  
And be the best in the family help in 'squaring the circle'.  
Else the eldest should 'will' along a tough riddle to the next gen."

After an initial reading, the two older brothers frowned and scratched their heads and finally just threw the letter away, assuming it to be their maverick father's whim.

After his retirement, their father had ample time to read and to try his hand at writing. "Being an amateur writer, he had enough time and liberty to write all this stuff, which does not appear to have any head or tail," spat out the second brother, which was immediately seconded by his elder sister-in-law or boro boudi. The eldest brother, in unison with them, declared "Then let our youngest brother have all the three letters and the responsibility to solve the riddle and savour it, as we have no time or interest for these nonsense." The others agreed readily, wanting to be rid of such annoying an ordeal. Babu's mother, however, was really upset with his two older sons and their sarcastic words. Her body language said it all. She took Babu aside and said sternly, "Listen Babu...your father was a very sensible person all along, with a clear and alert mind until the end. If he had left this letter to you all, he must have had something in his mind. This cannot be a whim. Anyway, do not worry at all, as you still have the roof right to build a house or sell it for a good amount in Kolkata, which is yours."

Time passed and the mother remained at their native place alone and Babu and his family were the only visitors arriving to take care of their mother. The other two brothers visited her once in a blue moon.

While in Kolkata, one evening Babu got a call that he should rush to their village, as his mother was unwell. Fearing the worst, he immediately informed his brothers and took a bus and rushed to their village along with his family. Unfortunately, their mother had already passed away. He waited till the morning for their brothers to come for the funeral but only the second one turned up alone. The last rites were completed. Babu spent a lion's share of money for the rituals, while one of the other brothers contributed the rest for the 'shraddha' ceremony. When the brothers checked the belongings of the deceased, they saw a letter in which the old lady has willed to give her 4 pairs of heavy gold bangles and 4 gold rings with Ceylonese blue Sapphires to her granddaughters and grandsons. However she had advised all of them not to wear these 'Neelams' without proper Vedic advice and not to be sold as well. She has also written that Babu could take one small iron chest lying in one corner under the bed but she did not know where its key was. The brothers and their family arrived on the 10th day ceremony. After all the rituals were completed, the others wanted to leave. Babu's eldest sister-in-law said, "Before we leave, let us see what ma has left for Babu in the

iron chest." They found a square iron box, 1'x1' in size, with a unique hole-less lock like an iron lump that looked rusted. This lock was completely different, without any keyhole. The make was by some 'B... Lock Company', which was not legible. The brothers tried to break the lock at home, but their efforts were in vain. Even a seasoned blacksmith could do nothing. They had heard that his father used to keep jewelry for Devi Durga, used for adorning the goddess each year. They found this square unique box and its unique lock invincible. The lock had already rusted. This lock was completely different from other usual locks. Unable to break the lock, the brothers and their family members looked disinterested. They had heard that it had some gold plated silver ornaments meant for the divine mother. Let Babu have it as he has to take care of the Durga Puja as willed by their father and later by their mother, they said. As mother had already stated the Babu will have the safe, the brothers and their wives readily agreed to it. They were anyway happy with the heavy gold bangles and blue sapphire studded rings that their children got, including Babu's daughters. They were least interested in the 'gold plated silver items' said to be in that iron chest. The eldest brother quipped, "This small safe was handed to ma by father and only he knew how to open it and he did not share this with ma even! I remember father had once mentioned that Devi Durga's jewelry is kept inside. So whoever handles the annual family Durga Puja will need to use them". "The family idol was around 200 years old, made of a solid black metal and three and a half feet tall weighing around 30 kgs," he reminisced, "We have been strictly advised to polish it black before every Durga puja. She has to be decorated with shola saaj, ornaments, and new clothes every year. People used to call it as Kalo Durga or Kali Durga of the Das parivar." Why the idol was to be coloured black, was anybody's guess.

After all had left, the four in Babu's family were left to ponder by themselves. The children were feeling pensive, lonely, as their grandma was not there to tell them stories or to cook those delicacies. Babu did not know what to do now as they had to lock their house and go back to Kolkata after a few days. Should Devi Durga be left alone near the thakurghar dalan, locked with a huge chain as the forefathers had planned? So people passing by could pray and have a glimpse through the grilled iron door: mused Babu.

If no one is around, the thieves will not leave it alone; they may steal and sell the idol merely as scrap, for a few bucks. "What to do now?" murmured Babu. Suddenly Pritha said, "Papa, the answer is simple...as your parents wanted you to take care of Maa Durga and worship Her every year, you have to respect this wish of theirs. Why can't we take the Devi idol with us and keep Her in our house and worship Her regularly in Kolkata?" "Correct," said Saachi. "If needed, we can bring Her back here for a week every Durga Puja. Let us take Ma with us to Kolkata." So they locked their house and asked neighbors to take care of the property and left for Kolkata with Durga Ma and the little chest. They hired a minivan, tied the idol to the van so that the ten arms of Durga are safe during this transportation and covered it with a large piece of cloth. The children all sat inside, while their father escorted the idol. While crossing the Ganges, they saw some people throwing coins towards their vehicle; probably they wanted to throw them at the holy river, but some of the coins fell on their open truck as well. They reached home safely in the evening and slowly, with utmost care, they took Ma Durga home and placed it in one of their smaller rooms, which they used as puja room. They also placed the mini iron chest in the other room, adjacent to the Puja room, wrapped up with an old saree of Babu's wife, under their bed. Surprisingly, at one or two occasions they felt that the iron chest had moved from its place. The children were puzzled, but dismissed it as unexplainable. Pritha discussed this with Saachi and she

reported that she seemed to have heard a faint sound at night under the bed, as if someone was dragging something heavy. "Hope there is no spirit inside Dadu's mystery box." This strange movement of Dadu's chest was kept a secret by the children as they eventually thought it to be a figment of their imagination.

Time passed and at times, their friends and relatives would drop in to see the idol and take snaps. It was as if a prized possession for the family. The sharp features of the divine mother mesmerized them. It was decided that every year they will celebrate Durga Puja at their village to keep the family tradition alive and transport the idol there for a week for everybody to take part in the celebration.

But Pritha and Saachi had other things in mind. What does Dadu's letter say? How does the lock open when there are no keyholes and what does it contain?

One evening when both the sisters were studying in the room, Saachi read something interesting in physics that disturbed her. She looked at the idol thoughtfully. Saachi saw a strange thing beneath one of the Devi's wrist: a one rupee coin stuck near the bangle that the Devi wore. She asked Pritha to look. Pritha also understood what her sister was hinting at. Pritha pulled out the coin and let it free from its magnetic field. Suddenly both jumped up saying, "Eureka! Papa!!Mama!! Where are you?" They almost screamed. "Just bring out Dadu's letter." Pritha slowly said, "I think we now know what Dadu wanted to say." We think we are very close to solving the mystery of the small chest and its mystery lock." Her words made them all very tense, jittery in anticipation. "First get the chest, ma," shouted Saachi. Her mother did so. Pritha held the chest and slowly moved towards one of the arms of the Devi. She touched the lock of the chest to one of the right arm of the Devi's bangle but nothing happened. She tried a few more times, but still nothing happened. "Wait," said Babu. He read the riddle aloud once more and asked the daughters to listen first. Your eldest uncle was given the three storied house which also has a scarecrow in the kitchen garden below, right? And your second uncle got the square plot at Garia, which may have been a dry pond earlier? Yes. And the third one gets something related to Devi's arm and this mystery chest? Isn't it?" "Yes" cried both his daughters in unison, their excitement hardly contained. Babu said, "Try the second top arm of Durga...or try the second left wrist...which held the 'Vajra' or the 'Thunderbolt', given to Devi by Lord Indra." When Pritha and Saachi followed their father's instruction and touched the lock to the Devi's bangle, they heard a strange sound and suddenly they saw the heavy lock falling down with a thud. There was a still silence. "It was the magnetic effect of the bangle which helped the lock to open and free itself," whispered Saachi, and this lock was made in England by Brahma and Sons." "Oh really!" all exclaimed. Pritha brought down the chest and tried to force it open. After some effort with external force the chest did open. A black thick cloth was recovered and they could see a pale bluish glow coming out of the chest. "Yes, yes," cried every one. It was a blue sparkling diamond, probably shaped as an eye, with a note on a parchment scroll. It read in Bangla that this was the third eye of the 'Trinayani' and the heavy gold chain, plated as silver, and was gifted to the family by the Royals of Travancore. Moreover, it also stated that the face of Durga was made of pure Gold, which was deliberately painted black along with the body to safeguard it from theft. "Did Dadu read books by Enid Blyton, James Hadley Chase or the 'Da Vinci code' to cook up all these?" Muttered Saachi, awestruck. There was an eerie silence for some time. Suddenly there was a nudge and Saachi woke up. Pritha was there at the bedside in her new saree asking her to get up as they have to offer pushpanjali at the Durga Puja Pandal. Was it a dream then?, "My God! Just a dream! And I thought I had solved a family mystery!" ■

# Of Travelogue Writing

- Suparna Bose

I have always been a passable travelogue writer. Always. Almost always. And especially when I'm immersed in a new place, taking in its sights, smells and sounds. I am traveling now. With my family. In a pristine countryside where the horizon can be traced by waving my arms, the wind is unpolluted, the sunshine brilliant. Ideal for me, the seasoned travelogue writer. Why is it then that with the atmosphere so conducive for writing, with the Grand Teton range in front of me in all its youthful majesty, that I can't find words?

The snow is falling on the dark chocolate brown rock, on top of the fresh snow that fell during the night. The rows of golden yellow alpine sunflowers are there. There are bursts of purple hyacinths. The Snake River is sometimes playfully gurgling over the rocks, sometimes boisterously and aggressively tumbling down, and sometimes meandering tamely beside a green valley. The alpine forests of Yellowstone National Park, the steep woods down the craggy mountains, with the denuded silent sentinels, it is beautiful all over, all around me.

And yet things are missing. I do have voices around me, traveling companions who are indeed very dear to me. Yet, I am missing my previous travel companions. My parents. I have lost one to dementia and the other one to eternity.

I remember the trips that we took before. I remember the mighty Alakananda winding its way down the mighty Garhwal mountains, the smaller but equally querulous Mandakini, the small town of Rudraprayag sitting on their confluence in its bejeweled evening glory, the green waters of Devaprayag, the steep climb of the bus to the temple of Badrinath cutting across the rugged, bare terrain of Mana pass, the incessant raucous babble of the Hindi songs belted out of the bus radio, the nameless handsome Garhwali guide, the driver, and the giggly young cleaner, who got into trouble with the local youths in Chamoli. The walk along the gorges. The trek to Kedarnath on horseback with the horse frequently teetering on the brink of the gorge. The epiphanic flash of the moment of Deo-Dekhni. The evening *aarti* at Kedarnath, the walks back to the Birla guest



house after dinner consisting of rice, fluffy *chapati*, ghee-laden *dal* and potato curry. The roadside *dhaba* serving *ma ki dal* and *tandoori roti* on our way to Kulu and Manali, the apple orchards of Kulu, the boulders on the side of River Beas in Manali.

I also remember the trip down the Deccan plateau, the green coconut palm-shaded coasts of Kerala, the smell of freshly fried banana chips, smoking hot *idlis* sitting on green banana leaves, with some gunpowder scooped into a small newspaper triangle hurriedly packed by a roadside shopkeeper, of hurried packed evening dinners consisting of bread, butter and boiled eggs and elaborate *thali* lunches in roadside eateries with green beans or cabbage sautéed with mustard seeds and shredded coconut, dry curry with red beets, fragrant yellow *toor dal* with dollops of *ghee*, smoking hot *ponni* rice on banana leaves. Beautiful awe inspiring temples with picturesque statues, weavers on looms weaving magic on silk and creating *Kanjeevaram* sarees fit to clothe a mythical queen, evening peddlers with loads of fragrant *mogra*, jasmine and marigold flower garlands ready to adorn the raven tresses of a bashful young woman or the statue of a supreme deity in the local temple, the smell of *agarbattis* cloying the senses. I remember my mother huffing and puffing her way up the thousand odd stairs to the monolithic statue of Bahubali at Shravanabelgola, and berating my father and me for not disclosing the actual number of stairs! I remember my fish-loving father heaving a sigh of relief reaching Kanyakumari and finding a "Bengali" hotel where he could get a mean fish curry! I remember hours of waiting at tidy railway stations, bus stations, waiting for the next form of transportation that would take us to Chikmagalur or Coimbatore or Ooty. The withering shore temples of Mahabalipuram, staring transfixed at the Penance of Arjuna, the five golden spires of the Chidamvaram temple, the sprawling Madurai temple complex with the intricately carved huge *gopurams*, the delicately carved Brihadeeshwara temple at Thanjavur, the mind blowing sculptures at Belur and Halebid, all swarm into my view like a slideshow and then flicker out.

I come back to the back seats of the Chevrolet Suburban, the backpack full of sundry snacks like roasted garlic flavored Triscuits, Newton's fig flavored cookies, lime chili corn chips, the picture on the water bottles of Arrowhead strangely resembling the range of the Grand Tetons flying by my window. The bison herds roaming around freely in the Yellowstone park countryside, the elusive elks grazing in the fading lights of the dusk, the lone bison posing for a photo near the post office beside the Yellowstone Lake hotel, the harsh cawing of the ravens near the Canyon village, the curious, even comical beaver at the Hidden Falls near Jenny Lake, the cascading waterfalls of the Grand Teton and Yellowstone, the Niagara and the overwhelming Horseshoe falls all into the roar of the Narmada in Dhuaandhaar and the winding tourist-eluding maze of Bhulbhulaiya in Veda Ghaat. I am a toddler, a five-year-old, a teenager, a young woman, and a mother of one. All at once. Past and present collide, submerge and become one. To me writing a travelogue has never seemed more difficult. Ever. ■

# Love and Peace

- Soumitra Talukder

*The mellifluous passage of life of the puerile,  
The amaranth of frippery in display of muse,  
I grew among the bereft in life, the dystopia of a ghetto,  
The cabal in brew, the ennui of time!  
Yet the effusive passion of your smile,  
All I needed was a touch of love from you!  
The maddening strife to succeed, the sermons of morality,  
The masters with their cortege lured the peers on the goals of life,  
A desperate tuning in mechanical for the affable aplomb!*

*The world cared nothing, the obfuscate image, the tryst with the destiny,*

*I remained chained, with my thoughts, wishes and dreams stashed away!*

*My spirits were in a reverie of the inevitable, lost in the shadows of the myth!*

*Yet the vision of your being in soigné, the aura of delight,*

*Between good and bad, the evils, the wrong and the right,*

*All I needed was a touch of love from you.....!*



# The Return

- Paramita Sen

*She beckoned again, the mystery lady of the East.  
A flash of fan, a rustle of silk  
Then she was gone.  
Was it a dream?*

*But what of the scent of sakura  
that lingered?  
The blush of pink and white that colored our sleep.*

*Overworked minds, the therapist said.  
A week by the sea.  
Arose a mighty mountain on the shore  
An eternal pyramid, snow capped,  
majestic and cratered.*

*Above the crashing waves we heard the chants  
Mellow and deep.  
As the stately monks circled their way to the shrine.*

*She came back that night not as a dream  
But desire. A longing to return to those ancient shores  
To walk and breathe, to listen again.  
To hear the sound of raindrops above the din.*

## Feelings

- Tamal Basak

*Every moment I miss you,  
every moment I feel you close,  
like the vase and the rose,  
like a breathe and my nose.*

*Over the sea and the sky,  
my imaginations fly,  
my heart is the wave  
and I am in the shore,  
counting the drops -  
I think of you - I pore.*

*Though you aren't here  
and never will be,  
the last line of your poem  
will stay ever with me -  
"Love is a faith,  
a never ending rhyme,  
- will glitter with its glow  
till the last end of time".*

# Cherry Blossoms Live On...

- Srujani Mohanty Kapoor

*Loftily they swing in the breeze,  
their colors, spinning off dreams,  
rosy tufts of neat petals.....*

*As they float down onto mossy green waters,  
Adrift on people's imaginations, the laden bunches inspire nameless emotions....  
which churn , lift, and pacify the millions,  
partaking of the nectar of their sweet spectacle!*

*Blossoms of cherry, riding on the magic wand of sprightly  
spring, profuse magically on every borough!  
The buds bare themselves into pantheon of whorls spouting their attractive spell!*

*My craving fuelled by their blinding beauty,  
asks for more, the yearning undiminished for this never  
ending enchantment woven by the Almighty!*

*Once a year, an elusive week, they weave their iridescent  
crescendo of pink and white cacophony*

*Life bends over and catches their symphony, with the song of Sakura  
on every mortal's lips.... which will pass on generations.....*

*The children, youth and elderly espouse snatches of deep veneration, for Thou, O Sakura!  
Live On, as a reverent prayer in each bosom!*