

Lord Buddha and His Parables

- Swami Medhasananda

Let us start the article with a quotation from Lord Buddha's last teachings:

'My disciples the teachings I have given you are never to be forgotten or abandoned. These are always to be treasured. They are to be thought about, they are to be practiced. If you follow these teachings you will always be happy. The point of the teachings is to control your own mind. Keep your mind from greed and you will keep your behaviour right, your mind pure, and your words faithful. By always thinking about the transiency of your life you will be able to resist greed and anger, and will be able to avoid all evils. If you find your mind tempted and so entangled in greed, you must suppress and control the temptation.'

Be the master of your own mind. A man's mind may make him a Buddha or it may make him a beast. Misled by error one becomes a demon. Enlightened, one becomes a Buddha. Therefore, control your mind and do not let it deviate from the right path. You should respect each other, follow my teachings, and refrain from disputes. You should not, like water and oil, repel each other, but should, like milk and water, mingle together, study together, learn together, practice my teachings together. Do not waste your mind and time in idleness and quarrelling.

Enjoy the blossoms of enlightenment in their season and harvest the fruit of the right path. The teachings I have given you I gained by following the path myself. You should follow these teachings and conform to their spirit on every occasion. If you neglect them, it means you have never really met me. It means you are far from me, even if you are actually with me. But if you accept and practice my teachings, then you are very near to me, even though you are far away.'

Lord Buddha's Birth

According to the Indian Lunar Calendar, Lord Buddha's birthday was on May 6th this year. It was on the day of the full moon of Vaisakha (mid-April), the first lunar calendar month, and according to this same calendar, Lord Buddha (Buddha Deva) was born, got His enlightenment (Nirvana), and also passed away (Mahaparinirvana), all on the same full moon day (Purnima) of the first Indian month of Vaisakha. Hence, Buddha Purnima, is observed in India as a thrice blessed day. This is indeed very unusual, and I do not know of any other prophet anywhere to have been born, get enlightenment, and pass away on the same day of the year. Buddha Deva was born in 480 B.C., or about two thousand five hundred years ago, and He passed away at the age of eighty. He lived a rather long, fruitful and meaningful life. He was born into an aristocratic family of the Shakya clan, He was of a royal lineage, as His father and his father before him were all kings of a small kingdom. He later renounced this family and took up life as a mendicant monk, practiced spiritual austerities, and reached enlightenment.

As a monk He would beg for His food on some occasions, and once He visited His birthplace at Kapilavastu where He begged for food. His father, King Suddhodana, learned that his son was there and sent a message objecting to His begging,

explaining that it was not the custom of one born of royal lineage to beg for one's food. Buddha's answer to this was very significant. He told the messenger to inform the king that 'Buddha' was born in a different lineage, the lineage of Buddha, and according to this Buddha lineage, He was obliged to beg for His food.

Did Buddha Deva, born so long ago, really die? Did Jesus Christ die with His crucifixion? Did Sri Ramakrishna die of cancer? The answer to all these is, 'Actually, no!' Not only do they live through their teachings and followers, inspiring and guiding millions of people, they live on in a subtle plane guiding and inspiring aspirants. They still appear before those devotees who sincerely aspire and prepare to have their vision. In Bengali there is a couplet sang that says '*The divine play of Sri Chaitanya continues even now; only the fortunate can witness it.*' The same may be said of the play of Sri Krishna, Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Sri Ramakrishna as well. Once Swami Saradanandaji, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, was asked, "Maharaj, do you still have communion with Sri Ramakrishna?" Saradanandaji answered, "When I want to communicate with Sri Ramakrishna, I have to raise my mind to a higher level where I can have communion with Him, as they live in a very subtle and high plane."

Why did Buddha renounce family and worldly life? When He was born, an astrologer made a prophesy to His father, King Suddhodana, that if this new-born baby, Siddhartha, continues to live life as a prince, he will conquer the whole world as a great emperor. However, if he gives up the world, He will be a saviour of all humanity. Of course, the king did not want his son to renounce the world, but instead to become his successor to the throne. So the king made special arrangements for the prince to live in a garden of pleasure full of all types of merriment, music and dance. All opportunities to observe suffering of any kind were eliminated from the palace grounds. Even when the prince went out to enjoy charioting around the city, all aged, sick and otherwise distraught persons along the pathway of the chariot and His entourage, were to be removed from sight.

Siddhartha Learns of Old Age, Disease and Death

Prince Siddhartha, also known as Gautama, was married to a beautiful girl and passed his days in enjoyments and great affluence. Siddhartha's destiny, however, was to be the saviour of humanity, and all the king's careful arrangements and diversions could not redirect His destiny. One day while out riding in his chariot, Siddhartha happened upon a man who was quite clearly suffering, and not the figure of health and happiness. He asked his loyal charioteer, Chhandaka, about it, as it was his first encounter with such a scene. He asked, "Chhandaka, what happened to that man, why is he suffering like that?"

Chhandaka answered, "Because he is suffering from a serious disease."

"Is this suffering from disease something quite exceptional?" the prince then asked.

“No, my Prince! It is quite common,” Chhandaka answered.

“Can it happen to me?” he asked.

“Yes!”

“Can it happen to my wife, Yaśodharā?”

“Yes, sir.”

Siddhartha was shocked upon hearing this ...

On another ride into the city, Siddhartha spotted a man with thinning white hair apparently having trouble walking upright, as he needed the support of a stick and gasped for air. Again, Siddhartha asked Chhandaka, “What has happened to this man? Why is this man so thin and needs to support himself with a stick just to walk? Is this unusual?”

He asked this because all of the staff and servants and guests of the palace were young and beautiful. No elderly men or women were allowed on the palace grounds and Siddhartha had never witnessed an aged person. The charioteer then explained that such a condition is common to all, as all are born and grow old with time.

“Will I experience old age like this man?” he asked. “Will I suffer this as well? Will it happen to my wife, Yaśodharā?”

Chhandaka answered to all these, “Yes, my Prince, it is the natural state of human beings.”

On the third chariot ride the prince saw that someone was lying on a stretcher borne by four people, while several other people surrounding the stretcher were crying and lamenting. Again, Siddhartha asked his charioteer what had happened to the person on the stretcher, why was he being carried like that, and why were all the people around him crying. Chhandaka explained that the person lying on the stretcher had died and that they were carrying the corpse to the funeral pyre to be burnt. Again, Siddhartha asked the charioteer if this was something unusual, to which Chhandaka explained that people are born, they grow up, they grow old and then they die.

“Will I have to die?”

“Yes!”

“Will my dear wife, Yaśodharā, also die?”

“Yes, sir, everyone without exception dies.”

This shocked Siddhartha terribly.

The Prince Renounces the World

Seeing these three; the sick, the old, and the dead, made Siddhartha very pensive and thoughtful. Gradually a distaste for the atmosphere of enjoyment of life in the palace began to grow in him, but the new experiences he had in travelling

by chariot did not end there. On another occasion he saw a man dressed in an unusual colour of cloth with a shaved head, looking bright, joyful and peaceful. Yet, this man was obviously begging. Siddhartha asked his charioteer who this person dressed so unusually and appearing so peaceful might be, “I have never encountered such a person,” He said.

“My Prince, he is a mendicant monk” said the charioteer. “He has given up his family and a worldly life in search of eternal peace and joy.”

This answer sparked a glimmer of hope in Siddhartha's mind, while he constantly pondered the truths of life. His conclusion was as Chhandaka had already pointed out, that suffering is universal, and that old age, disease and death befall everyone. He wondered if there was any way to rid people of this suffering, since it was universal. How could one help humanity and stop this suffering? How, in spite of these sufferings, could one get peace and joy? He was constantly deliberating on this. Finally, he concluded that the remedy to this problem would be impossible to find living in the palace the life of a prince. A son had already been born to him, but he decided to give up his family, his wife and son, and his kingdom, to find a solution to suffering for all of humanity.

His renunciation was not a quest for personal freedom or even realization of God, but a devoted search for a way to remove the suffering of humanity as a whole, and to bring peace and joy to all. This shows the heart of Buddha, His tremendous compassion for all. It is for this reason He gave up a worldly life and embraced a life of a renunciate. Then began his long, hard term of spiritual practices; His practice of austerity and concentration in search of an answer to universal sufferings. Finally, after years of hard struggle He did find the way when He attained Enlightenment in a place called Buddhagaya, near the famous place of Hindu pilgrimage, Gaya.

Four Noble Truths

Buddha found the sources for our sufferings revealed in the ‘Four Noble Truths’ and how our sufferings can be remitted by following the ‘Noble Eightfold Path’ found in the Fourth Noble Truths. Realizing these truths through great effort and several years, He began His career as a teacher of others. I have observed in this country that many believe Buddhism is a completely independent religion absolutely separate from Hinduism, and Lord Buddha's teachings are all original ideas. Actually, this is not so. Buddha had a sharp intellect along with many other excellent qualities, and it is quite natural that He had studied Hindu scripture, including the Upanishads, deeply. In this sense it is not at all unusual that His many great teachings are influenced by Upanishadic teachings. As in the case of Jesus, who of course, was brought up with Jewish traditions, knew Hebrew scripture, though He had His own way of understanding God, and teaching this to His disciples. Buddha, too, though influenced by Hindu philosophical thought, had His own ideas and a unique way of presenting that philosophy, which was well organised, precise and practical.

Not only that, some of the Hindu practices of Buddha's day were abominable, such as the slaughter of animals in the name of pleasing the Lord. Such abhorrent practices in Hinduism were subject to criticism by the compassionate Buddha, who advocated for the elimination of such cruel practices altogether. If we look at the present state of Buddhism in many countries, we find lots of interpretations of Buddha's teachings, some diluted and some distorted as well. It is difficult

to know, by studying some popularized teachings of present-day Buddhism, what Lord Buddha actually taught; hence, we need to go to original sources of such teachings. There are books that contain Buddha's actual teachings, such as *The Teachings of the Buddha*, that we (Vedanta Society) use for our weekly Sunday reading. One of the benefits of using *The Teachings of the Buddha* is that it contains many stories and parables that He used to teach. This is the usual practice of many great spiritual teachers.

In the Upanishads as well, we find examples and stories. Jesus taught with lots of parables, too. Sri Ramakrishna, as well, used examples and parables. Why? Because the highest spiritual truths are so subtle, that unless they are explained in this way, the people cannot understand them. These words are so different from ordinary, secular teachings, because of their uncommon-ness and subtlety, teachers enlist the help of stories and parables so that truth can be more easily understood by aspirants. This will help them in their spiritual practice as well.

Simple Tales / Subtle Content.

Let us quote now some examples that the Buddha used followed by commentary:

- *"Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared."*

Our experience is that if we have money and share it with others our money supply is decreased, so we are afraid of sharing. If we share food with others, our supply of food is decreased. This is the reason we are afraid of sharing with others, because we will have less and less to enjoy for ourselves. There are certain things, however, that are increased in sharing. One is learning—the more you share learning, the more learning increases. Happiness, too, is never decreased by being shared. If you show a smiling face to others, there is little danger you will lose your smile to others. In fact, showing a smile to others increases your smile. A beautiful example of this is candlelight—from one candle thousands of candles can be lit and that same candle is not extinguished.

- *"Those who seek Enlightenment must be careful of each of their steps. No matter how high one's aspiration may be, it must be attained step by step. The steps of the path to Enlightenment must be taken in our everyday life."*

He then gives an example of a very foolish rich man. This man happens to see a three storey building and the 3rd storey was especially beautiful and magnificent. He thought, 'I, too, am a rich man, and I want such a beautiful 3rd storey for myself.' So, he asks a carpenter if he can build him a 3rd storey as fine as that one. The carpenter answered that indeed he could, and soon the foundation was in and work on the ground floor began. Seeing this the rich man became angry and asked why the carpenter was wasting time on a foundation and ground floor when all he wanted was the 3rd storey!

Is it possible to build a 3rd storey alone without a foundation, a ground floor and a 1st floor? Are our spiritual desires not like this foolish rich man's? We want the result without preparing and paying the price for it. With regard to secular matters, everyone understands that any great achievement is not possible overnight. If one wants to be rich,

just think how difficult it is to earn money—how much striving is necessary—or if one wants to excel in sports and games and win an Olympic medal, or to become an accomplished musician, or a great scholar. Everyone understands that by a mere wish we cannot achieve such goals, success requires long and hard striving.

It is truly a great irony that in spiritual matters everyone wants control of the mind and to enjoy peace of mind overnight! Such people do a little practice, and what they do is mostly in a casual way, and then approach the spiritual teacher saying they have done this and that practice, and ask why they have not yet realized God:

"Why doesn't Sri Ramakrishna appear before me?"

"Why can I still not control my passions and emotions?"

"Why can I still not control my mind?"

After doing only a little practice we expect great results, like the foolish man who wanted just the 3rd storey. Just the success without undergoing the preparation of hard practice. If we practice sincerely with faith on our part, some progress will surely come, but the grace of God is also necessary, and if we do not strive, we can be certain God's grace will not come. In fact, a desire to strive for the highest, is in itself by God's grace. More grace will not come unless we utilize the grace God has already given to us.

Parables and Fables

Here is an abbreviated parable:

- *On a mountain in the Himalayas lived a parrot with other animals. Then lightning ignited a great fire and the parrot thought, 'This forest and its trees have given me refuge, so I must do something to extinguish the fire to save these trees.' With this in mind the parrot dipped itself into a pond and flew to the flames shaking droplets of water onto the flames again and again. He repeated this act diligently with a heart of compassion and out of gratitude to the trees. A great god of the mountains witnessed the act of the parrot and was very impressed. The god then appeared before the parrot and asked, 'What are you doing? Your wings carry such a small quantity of water, how can you hope to extinguish the fire?'*

The parrot answered, 'Never you mind, I shall continue even unto my next life!'

The god was so impressed with this dedication, that he joined the parrot and used his great powers to help, and together they extinguished the flames.

We see in this parable how the striving and the show of compassion of the little bird so impressed a god, that he appeared before the bird and helped it extinguish the forest fire. This is an example of how God's grace helps the spiritual aspirant, provided we strive like that bird.

Lord Buddha also taught from ancient fables, and I am sure each of you will enjoy this one. I am also inserting a quiz into this fable, and I don't think the answer will come very easily for most. There is a great teaching behind this story of a country where it was the peculiar and inhuman custom for their aged people to be abandoned in a remote and inaccessible mountainous area. Where, obviously, for lack of food and shelter, they would die in the most miserable condition. When the father of a minister of that kingdom became old, the time

drew near for the minister to abandon his father too. The minister, however, struggled with the idea of leaving his father to die in such a state. So instead, he secretly hid his father and cared for him.

- One day a powerful god appeared before the king of that country and posed a puzzling problem, saying that if the king could not solve the problem satisfactorily, the kingdom would be destroyed. "Here are two serpents (snakes)," the god continued, "tell me the sex of each." Knowing little about snakes, neither the king nor anyone in the palace could solve the problem, so the king offered a great reward to anyone in the kingdom who could answer the question. Hearing this, the minister went to visit his wise father he had hidden and asked him the answer to the problem. 'It is an easy solution,' the old man exclaimed. 'Place the two serpents on a soft carpet and the one that moves around is the male, and the other that keeps quiet is the female.' The minister then brought that answer to king and that problem was solved.

- With this answer the god asked another question: *Who is the one being asleep is called the Awakened One, and being awake is called the Sleeping One?* Again, the correct answer came from the minister's old father: *'It is the one who is under training for Enlightenment, for he is awake compared to those who are not at all interested in Enlightenment. Again, he is also asleep compared to those who have already attained Enlightenment.'*

What is the meaning of Buddha in English? - The Awakened One. He is Eternally Awakened, and we are the Eternally Sleeping! Sleeping in this instance is ignorance, and being awakened is knowledge! What is night to one (the ignorant) is day to another (the Enlightened) and what is day to one (the ignorant) is night to another (the Enlightened). Ordinary people have full interest in all manner of secular matters and little or no interest in spiritual matters at all. So, in secular matters most people are quite awake, but in spiritual matters they are fast asleep. Souls like Sri Ramakrishna are just the opposite! He is completely awakened in spiritual matters and asleep regarding secular matters.

In this context I quote one relevant verse from the Bhagavad Gita:

*yā niśhā sarva-bhūtānām tasyām jāgarti sanyamī
yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśhā paśhyato muneh*

*What is night to all ignorant beings,
to that Atman-Consciousness the self-
controlled sage is awake;
and the sensate life to which all ignorant beings are awake,
that is like night to this illumined sage.*

For instance, the best time for meditation is from about 4am to 6am, and is called Brahma-muhurtha (two hours before sunrise). Spiritual aspirants who take up spiritual life seriously meditate during these hours. In modern times many people find the hours of 4am to 6am most suitable for deep sleep, as they stay awake and go to bed quite late.

- The god then asked the king the meaning of another riddle: *"When is a cupful of water more than the water of an ocean"* The minister's father also answered this saying, *"A cupful of water given in a pure and compassionate spirit to one's parents or to a sick person has an eternal merit, but the water of an ocean will someday come to an end."*

This next story teaches how one side of the coin comes with the other.

- *"Once a beautiful and well-dressed woman visited a house. The master of the house asked her who she was; and she replied that she was the goddess of wealth (Lakshmi). The master of the house was delighted and so welcomed her into his house and treated her nicely.*

"Soon after another woman appeared who was ugly looking and poorly dressed. The master asked who she was and the woman replied that she was the goddess of poverty. The master was frightened and tried to drive her out of the house, but the woman refused to depart, saying, 'The goddess of wealth is my sister. There is an agreement between us that we are never to live separately; if you chase me out, she is to go with me.' Sure enough, as soon as the ugly woman went out, the other woman disappeared."

Is there anyone among us who desires suffering? Surely, none. OK, now is there anyone here who does not want pleasure and enjoyment? Surely, none. So, it is evident that we want to avoid suffering and only want pleasure. There is a Bengali couplet that translates as: 'Pleasure and pain are twins, if one falls in love with one of these, the other will surely follow.' You need not invite the other—it will come by itself! It is just like the other story of the goddess of wealth and the goddess of poverty.

Obviously, we are puzzled and wonder what our ideal course of action should be in such a situation. Our answer regarding the ideal course to be adopted by us involves two attitudes. One attitude is to see both happiness and suffering as nothing special. Meaning I want neither pleasure nor pain, but whatever comes, I will see it as a witness, both as it appears and as it disappears. Come what may, I will not be perturbed and will always remain in peace. In Chapter 13 of the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna says that both pleasure and pain are the consequence of the Three Gunas. So, it will come and it will go, appear and disappear, both will pass. Let me just be the witness and observe the play of the three gunas in me, and not be affected by either of them. This is the attitude of jnanis, which one can practice and thus transcend both pleasure and pain and experience an abiding peace.

The other attitude is that of the bhakta, that both pleasure and pain come from God. In that way they bear with them calmly, without being overwhelmed by them, and focus on God. Hence, the devotees should pray thus, 'God, I seek neither pleasure nor avoid pain, I only want You and You alone.'

We should choose either of the above mentioned two paths according to our ability and aptitude to gain everlasting peace and joy and highest wisdom which Lord Buddha had wanted the humanity to seek for and attain. ■

[This article is based on a talk given at Vedanta Society of Japan on 21st June, 2020]

Conversations with Swami Nityasuddhananda

Shloka 16, Chapter II, Bhagavad Gita

- Suneel Bakhshi

I lived in Tokyo during 2012 and 2013. It was a busy time for me at work and in my personal life but in June 2012, Swami Nityasuddhananda of the Ramakrishna Mission in Haridwar, India, accepted my request to start to teach me the Bhagavad Gita. Since then I have had the great good fortune of studying many texts with SwamiJi.

Having now reflected further on the essence of the Bhagavad Gita, I would like to describe Shloka 16 of the second chapter to the readers of Anjali. The Shlokas from 12 until 30 in this chapter describe the very essence of the Bhagavad Gita.

Within these, I found Shloka 16 to be one of the most pivotal, a source of the wisdom of the Upanishads and perhaps also of several other great Eastern and also Western philosophies. It has the deepest meaning, which I will do my best to explain in a few words. According to SwamiJi, Adi Shankaracharya is believed to have said that “for people who truly come to understand this Shloka 16, it is as though their very conscience has been animated”. SwamiJi also said that those who have fully understood this Shloka can be said to have attained *Viveka*, or true discernment, and those among us who go on to experience bliss or Ananda in contemplating on it, epitomise Vivek-Ananda.

Shloka 16, Chapter II, Bhagavad Gita

nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ

ubhayorapi drīṣṭo 'nta svanayos tattva-darśhibhiḥ

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः ।

उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥ 16॥

na—no; *asataḥ*—of the temporary; *vidyate*—there is; *bhāvaḥ*—is; *na*—no; *abhāvaḥ*—cessation; *vidyate*—is; *sataḥ*—of the eternal; *ubhayoḥ*—of the two; *api*—also; *drīṣṭaḥ*—observed; *antaḥ*—conclusion; *tu*—verily; *anayoḥ*—of these; *tattva*—of the truth; *darśhibhiḥ*—by the seers

The Unreal (*ASAT*) never is. The Real (*SAT*) never is not.

Seers, possessed of the knowledge of the Truth know the very essence of both these.

It is important to anchor our understanding of the words, *Asat* and *Sat*, which in a purely philosophical context mean the Unreal, and the Real. The Shloka above says that seers (*tatvadarśhibhiḥ*, or knowers of the Truth) understood the falsehood of the falsehood, and the truth of the Truth, and indeed the very ends (*antaḥ*) of both of these (*anyoḥ*, *ubhayoḥ*).

The Shloka directs our thinking to what the Real or Truth is, by making us first understand what it's opposite, UnTruth, or UnReal is. It reminds us that everything in the material world has a finite existence, and is part of an ongoing series of cause and effect, ALL of which on reflection are equally, fundamentally of a finite nature. This awareness allows us to learn, first by reflection and then by practice, that the greatest attractions cannot and will not give us constant happiness and peace. Equally, the worst of physical, emotional, and external stresses and shocks can also be better countered by the awareness that these too are necessarily finite. In this philosophical sense, such things which are not part of a fundamental unit of eternity can be at best only “partially true”, and therefore *Asat*, or UnReal.

By contrast with *Asat*, then is the Real or *Sat*. You may know of the word *SatChitAnanda*. This combination of words, *Sat*, *Chit*, *Ananda* or Truth, Consciousness, Bliss, is another expression of *Brahma*, the Ultimate Reality which in our Upanishads is the source of the Absolute Truth, the Real. In the Bhagavad Gita, the Real or *Sat* is described beautifully and in the most subtle of ways between Shloka 12 and Shloka 30 in Chapter II, all of which surround and provide deep context for Shloka 16.

Our very consciousness can be felt, during moments of quiet contemplation, to include our steady and quiet awareness of this world of senses, of the ceaseless change in this *Asat*, and is a component of That which is other than *Asat*. This spark of unchanging divinity within each of us is *SAT*, while the world of whirlwind change as perceived through our physical senses is simply a “partially true” manifestation. The realisation of this Absolute, of our true, eternal Self, by definition beyond the finite world of cause and effect, is our quest in life.

With this logic the Shloka guides us to a measured detachment from *Asat*, or the UnReal, and a turn, even a slight turn to start with, towards the Real, where we can rest our thoughts IF we can understand THAT to be the true destination and so, to be True.

SwamiJi notes that Lord Krishna, observing the grief of Arjuna, recited this Shloka so Arjuna could start to learn forbearance. Why is it necessary ? Because *Asat* will cause *Dukha*, as long as one doesn't recognise the Unreal for what it always is, and

place one's mind and concentration fully on the *Sat*, the Real while FULLY engaging in the effort and the work in the very *Asat* that is the material world we are in. So Lord Krishna said to Arjuna : understand this phenomenal world for what it is, and learn to bear it, else your mental equipoise WILL be destroyed by it.

How, then does one do so, I once asked Swami Ji. His answer : learn, while actively participating in the world to be a witness to the phenomenal world, as in the light of a *Diya* life is lived but the *Diya* itself is never tainted.

Why, even if we relate to this Truth, do we find it so difficult to embed it in our daily lives, I then asked. His answer : " we all suffer from three weaknesses (1) fickleness of mind (2) inertness of mind (3) an *Avaran* or a curtain over the mind which screens the Truth by *Maya*. Once at least two of these three weaknesses are removed for an aspirant, typically after sincere dialogue with a Teacher, the individual CAN advance through a lifetime of committed effort on this path. "

I have come to believe that for a person whose inertness of mind has been eliminated, and who has firm conviction, the Unreal begins to fade in its vice-like hold over the mind, and that the Real begins to manifest more and more. The famous analogy in the commentaries is that of a rope mistaken in the darkness for a snake, but as soon as the light of the *Diya* is switched on, the false snake disappears and the true rope appears.

By personal experience, and maybe paradoxically on a first reading, I have come to believe that this approach to life, far from being negative, adds instead to joy, even exhilaration, in this God given life.

I find this Shloka to have a vitality that makes it one of the most powerful of the Shlokas in the Bhagavad Gita. I said so to Swami Nityasuddhananda, and he then told me about Swami Turiyananda, who was a direct monastic disciple of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, a brother disciple of Swami Vivekananda, and a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Ji told me that Swami Turiyananda used to meditate on this Shloka alone, sometimes for three to four days at one time. I attach here a photograph of this Swami.



Swami Turiyananda

With best wishes to readers of Anjali to find the time to reflect on the infinite wisdom of this Shloka. ■



Vietnamese Lacquer Art

- Gunjan Verma

Being part of the Indian Foreign Service, establishing friendships with various culture across many lines has become integral to my life. Painting in many mediums and styles of different countries has been interesting and very therapeutic for me.

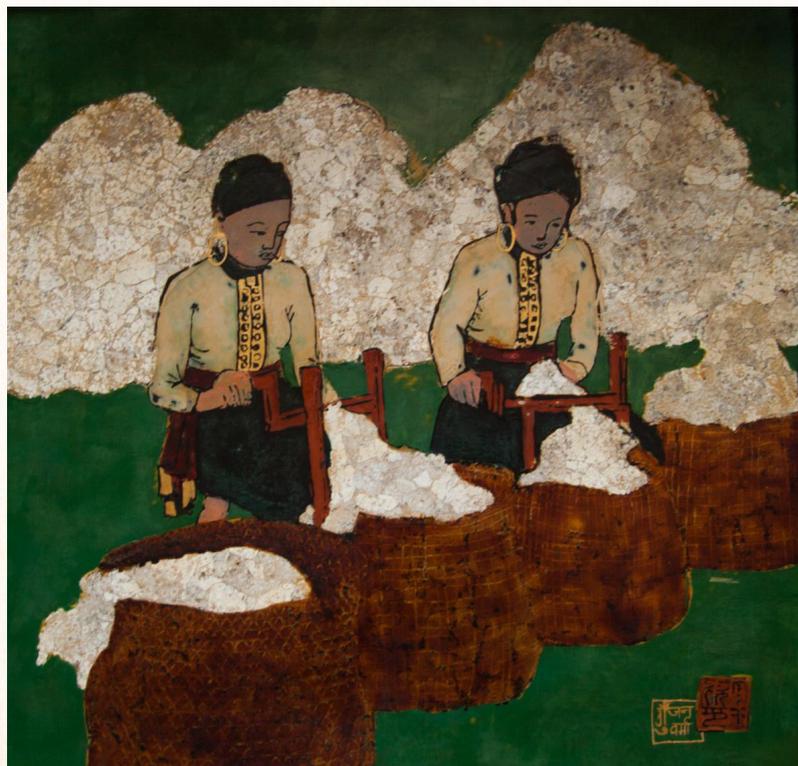


Cotton Picking-1 by Gunjan Verma

When I lived in Hanoi, Vietnam, agriculture formed the backbone of the culture demonstrated in paintings and famous Vietnamese water puppet shows. In my very first lacquer paintings, I chose to highlight Vietnamese cotton pickers, their attire and tools.

As lacquer paints come in only two colors (black and brown), the cotton was created by first chiseling layers of lacquer, applying lacquer paint, pressing 5 mm pieces of concave washed and dried eggshells, then sanding down with cement blocks and eventually applying more coats of lacquer to even out the painting as well ensure the mixed media art's longevity. To make the colors vibrant, I used silver leaf as the first layer, and the pigments mixed with liquid lacquer. The basket and fabric detail has been done with gold leaf.

This painting shows the weave of the basket which was done by applying thin lines of lacquer, sanded down and then silver and gold leaf paper was applied. The baskets were then covered in a thin layer of lacquer to tone down the brightness of gold. ■



Cotton Picking-2 by Gunjan Verma

Sach Khand: The Great Mystery

- Harjas Sahni

Sach Khand also known as the realm of truth is the ultimate spiritual destination for Sikhs. In contrast to Abrahamic religions that believe in heaven, Sach Khand is not a heaven. It is not a geographic location somewhere in this universe, but it is where an individual soul unites with God, the formless one. In short, it is the highest level in the evolution of human consciousness. It is important to remember that in Sikhism God is formless, genderless and omnipresent. The realm of truth consists of formlessness, and this formlessness surrounds and penetrates the entire creation of God. This is almost impossible to imagine and conceptualize as we live in a world of forms.

Sach Khand is where God resides and looks upon its creation with great attention. The formless one, watches over numerous continents, galaxies and universes simultaneously and rejoices. Guru Nanak Devji has written a great detail about it and says that "to describe this is as hard as steel." It may be futile to describe it, as formlessness cannot be described in forms. However, the entire concept is fascinating and quite different from the ultimate destination mentioned in other religions.

To put this entire concept in picture, Sikhism often uses this metaphor of an ocean. Imagine God and Sach Khand as the ocean, and we as the little droplets that have been separated from this ocean. Our ultimate goal in life is to go back to this ocean and be in one with God. Nevertheless, like Abrahamic religions there are many restrictions to entering Sach Khand. First, we must annihilate the five thieves in Sikhism: ego, lust, anger, attachment and greed. Secondly, we must remember and praise God through prayers, and do selfless service. Lastly, we must be in the company of enlightened beings and learn from their wisdom. Only a truly pure soul can be liberated from this interminable cycle of life and death, and enter Sach Khand.

Humanity has made great advancements in science and technology. We have even found proof for reincarnation, and can to a certain extent grasp what happens after death through the extensive research on near-death experiences (people who escaped death). However, no matter how advanced science gets, we will never be able to fully comprehend Sach Khand. Such is its greatness. It will always remain a great mystery. ■

Economic Opportunities for Indian Community in Japan

- Mona Khandhar

The history of modern Indian settlement in Japan goes back more than a century. In 1873, a few Indian businessmen and their families, primarily Parsis and Sindhis, had settled in Yokohama as well as Okinawa. In 1891, Tata, then a small trading firm, established a branch in Kobe. Local statistics of the Hyōgo Prefecture Government showed 59 Indians living in the prefecture in 1905. After the destruction wreaked on Yokohama in the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake, the Indian traders there also migrated to Kobe; from then on, Kobe became the centre of gravity of Japan's Indian community.

By 1939, on the eve of World War II, the number of Indians in Hyōgo Prefecture had reached 632. However, due to British sanctions against Japan and the 1941 halt of shipping between Japan and their homeland, many closed their shops and left; by 1942, there were only 114 remaining. Prior to 1990, the Indian community in Japan remained centred on the Kobe area. However, after 1990, the numbers in Tokyo began to increase. Migrants who arrived in the 1990s included industrial trainees brought by Japanese car manufacturers which had set up factories in India. IT professionals and their families also came to Tokyo, settling primarily in Setagaya and Minato wards.

As of 2000, there were also around 800 Indians working in the IT industry in Japan, up from 120 in 1993. Kenichi Yoshida, a director of the Softbridge Solutions Japan Co., stated in late 2009 that the Indian engineers are becoming the backbone of Japan's IT industry and that "it is important for Japanese industry to work together with the India." In recent years "IT," like "curry," has become synonymous with India. Another 870 Indians were employed as cooks. Others are engaged in trading, importing the Indian handicrafts, garments, precious stones, and marine products, and exporting Japanese electronic goods, textiles, automotive parts, and jewelry. There are Indians also in teaching profession and involved in scientific research. Unlike in past years, Indians today migrate not just as laborers but also as professionals.

However, many Indian women in Japan immigrate to Japan because they are married to an Indian man who has been given the opportunity to work here, or one already residing in Japan. Either way, they are registered by Japanese immigration as a dependent of their husbands. Many of them are well educated and with work experience. Despite of these, they struggle to get the job in their preferred career.

According to official statistics, the number of Indians in Japan has risen from 7,478 in 1997 to 24,524 in December 2014. The Indian population in Japan is skewed significantly toward men, with

females comprising only 30 percent of the total community of around 32,000 recently.

While this increase might appear substantial, it is small compared to the influx seen in nations such as the U.K., U.S., Singapore and Malaysia, to name a few. Generally, Indians aspire to further migrate to the US and the UK. However, it is pertinent to note that economic opportunities and acceptability of Indian migrants are getting limited in the US. On the other hand, the economic opportunities, living conditions and acceptability for Indian migrants are improving in Japan.

Japan continues to be a global leader in quality manufacturing and precision equipment. On account of aging society, Japan has become more open towards migrants, including Indians. Japan also has a huge MSMEs base. Japanese MSMEs are quite efficient and well supported by Government of Japan. They face a major challenge of succession. A good opportunity is getting created here as well to help them expand market in India and transfer their technology as well.

Over past several years, the ties between India and Japan are growing and India has been following "Look East" policy as integral to her International Economic Policies. However, roots of Indian community are still not as deep in Japan as in the above countries. Japan offers several professional opportunities. Our bilateral cooperation is likely to enhance especially in sectors like Infrastructure, Electronics, Automobiles, Medical Devices on account of incentives offered by Government of India and Japan's inherent strength in these sectors. Innovation, professional services and Research and Development in general also offer a good opportunity. Nonetheless, the Indian community in Japan does not seem to be availing of these opportunities enough.

The language is a major challenge for many Indian migrants in Japan. Good professional career options in Japan presupposes good knowledge of their native language. The Indian migrants though pick up speaking and understanding of Japanese language, it's difficult for them to pick up reading and writing skills in Japanese. Many a times they are themselves not inclined much to pick up reading and writing skills in Japanese. As a result, education of children poses another challenge for Indian parents. Good international schools are not easily affordable, while Indian schools are limited in terms of their location and other factors. Indian parents rarely send their children to standard Japanese schools. Therefore, their children also do not pick up reading & writing proficiency in Japanese and mostly aspire to further migrate to the US and the UK.

Unlike Indian migrants in countries like the

US, where Indian migrants got well integrated into the economic systems of the country, holding good positions in American multinationals, leading positions in educational and research institutions, businesses, thereby becoming good links between the two countries, Indian community in Japan need to explore these options fully in Japan.

Despite these challenges, Indians in general like Japan, particularly the Japanese values of punctuality, patience, hard work, discipline civic and social responsibility. These are qualities most Indians wish to inculcate. Japanese women also have a special liking for Indian grooms.

In this regard, the approach of Japanese business community is a good indication. Japan has several home-grown multinationals that have subsidiaries and business establishment in many other countries despite of their unique culture and language barrier. Even in India, the Southern region and cities like Ahmedabad have seen substantial rise in Japanese expatriates. They are also building Japanese Industrial Townships.

Of late, Japan is encouraging educational and professional tie ups and training program for Indian students and professionals under TITP. In India, the number of Language Centers teaching Japanese is

increasing. Therefore, the Indian professionals and students coming to Japan with fair knowledge of Japanese language is less likely to face the language barrier. Crossing language and cultural barrier is very important for Indian migrants to avail of the economic opportunities in Japan.

Some are under the impression that India, unlike Japan, is loud and lively. Festivals and parties add a further flavor to Indian life — a life suffused with color, music, prayer, food and, most of all, fun. Celebrating an Indian festival in Japan with the same gusto is a challenge. However, a peep in Japanese lifestyle will change this perception. The way Japanese have developed tourism, adopted life style, getting more options of fruits & vegetables available and becoming open in past several years, it seems getting more comfortable for Indian migrants.

The past decade has seen a steady increase in migrants from China, Nepal and India who prefer to live around Tokyo. The megalopolis makes it easier for them to find jobs, meet fellow countrymen and maintain their ways of life. The share for Indian residents living in greater Tokyo was 64%. With these positive trends, we hope to support and see economic opportunities more forthcoming for Indian migrant community in Japan. ■

Reference:

For data and some facts used in this write up, some articles and media reports have been referred to.

[Mona Khandhar IAS is Minister Economic & Commerce, Embassy of India, Tokyo]

Modernization drive on Indian Railways

- Ravindra Verma

Indian Railways (IR) is among the world's largest rail network. IR route length network is spread over 1,23,542kms, with 13,523 passenger trains and 9,146 freight trains plying 23 million passengers and 3 million tonnes (MT) of freight daily from 7,349 stations. India's railway network is recognized as one of the largest railway systems in the world under single management. The railway network is also ideal for long-distance travel and movement of bulk commodities, apart from being an energy efficient and economic mode of conveyance and transport. Government of India has focused on investing in railway infrastructure and has enabled FDI to improve infrastructure for freight, passenger and high-speed trains. Some of the recent steps regarding modernization of IR are highlighted below:

1. Indian Railways to become Green Railways by 2030

IR has committed to become a 'net zero' carbon emission organization by 2030 and is taking a multi-pronged approach towards this goal. IR has undertaken several initiatives towards decarbonization such as the complete electrification of the traction network (by 2023), improvement in energy efficiency and meeting of the power demand through Renewable Energy. This is in line with the International Paris Agreement on Climate change, 2015, where India has pledged a reduction of 33-35% in emission intensity by 2030 from 2005 level.



Ministry of Railways (MoR) has decided to provide solar power plants on vacant unused Railway land on mega scale. A pilot project of 1.7 MW capacity with direct connectivity to 25 KV traction system has been successfully operationalized in Bina. Solar plant of 3 MW capacity has also been commissioned at Modern Coach Factory (MCF), Raebareli for non-traction application. Further, 2 more projects at Diwana (2 MW) and at Bhilai (50 MW) are in progress. IR has developed a plan for installing solar plants of 20 GW capacity by utilizing its vacant land (~51000Ha) by 2030. IR has solarized more than 960 stations till date and 198 MW solar rooftop capacity is under creation for 550 stations.

2. Railway Station Redevelopment

MoR is engaged in development and modernization of Railway Stations across India through Public-Private Partnership. Indian Railway Stations Development Corporation Limited (IRSDC) is a special purpose company approved as main project development agency by the Union Cabinet. As a part of this endeavor, it has decided to undertake redevelopment and operation/maintenance of Railway Stations. IRSDC is carrying out the bidding process for the Project, including provision of development plans – master plan, architectural drawings, consult with urban local bodies/other statutory authorities while approving the plans, so that the development is harmonious with surrounding development, generally following National Transit Oriented Development Policy. Details of ongoing bidding (RFQ and EO) can be seen at <https://irsdcl.in/>

Recently, Rail Land Development Authority (RLDA) has invited online bids from private players to redevelop New Delhi Railway Station and IRSDC for CSMT Mumbai into an integrated commercial, retail and hospitality hub. The objective of this ambitious project is to position the Railway Stations as a multi-modal hub through upgradation of the infrastructure and provision of state-of-the-art amenities such as multi-level car parking, an elevated concourse with segregation of arriving and departing passengers, refurbished platforms with easy access from the concourse level, mezzanine level exclusively for passenger facilities such as lounges, food courts and restrooms, an elevated road network with multiple entry and exit points with optimum use of natural ventilation and lighting. The project would also include a significant commercial component entailing a mix of retail, office, and hospitality developments such as 5-star hotels, budget hotels and serviced apartments. RLDA is currently working on 62 railway stations in a phased manner while its subsidiary, IRSDC has taken up another 61 stations.



3. Dedicated Freight Corridor

Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFC) is one of the largest rail infrastructure projects a (total length of 3360 route km) undertaken by the Government of India. DFCCIL has been set up as a special purpose vehicle to undertake planning, development, mobilization of financial resources, construction, maintenance and operation. JICA funded 1504 km long Western DFC from Jawaharlal Nehru Port Terminal (JNPT) to Dadri connects major cities in the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana. 500Km section has already been commissioned on DFC. The tunnel caving work has been completed for the one km long tunnel through the Aravallis in the state of Haryana. This will be the first electrified railway tunnel in the world, which would be able to run double stack containers.

4. High Speed Rail (HSR) Development

To revolutionize the transport sector in India through speed, safety and service, the first HSR corridor is being implemented from Mumbai to Ahmedabad, with technical and financial assistance from Government of Japan. The project comprises 'Make in India' as well as training component to enable Indian workforce to acquire skill relevant for HSR Technology. It is creating large scale employment and economic development. National High-Speed Rail Corporation Ltd (NHSRCL), a specially created SPV, is implementing the project. A state-of-the-art High-Speed Rail Training Institute is being set up in the campus of National Academy of Indian Railways (NAIR) at Vadodara. NHSRCL has been entrusted to prepare Detailed Project Reports (DPR) for new HSR corridors namely Delhi-Varanasi, Mumbai-Nagpur, Delhi-Ahmedabad, Chennai-Mysore, Delhi-Amritsar and Mumbai-Hyderabad.



5. Maintenance Projects of critical importance

The back-end warriors of IR have fully availed the opportunity provided by suspension of passenger services due to pandemic of COVID19 to successfully execute more than 200 long pending maintenance works including yard remodeling, repair and regirdering of old bridges, doubling and electrification of rail lines and renewal of scissor crossovers. Pending for several years, these unfinished projects often confronted as bottlenecks. Apart from ensuring supply chains all essential commodities running through parcel trains and freight trains, IR executed these long pending maintenance works during this period which otherwise require traffic blocks of long duration. These works taken up for removal of bottlenecks and enhance safety include 82 rebuilding/rehabilitation of bridge, 48 limited height subway/road under bridge in lieu of level crossing gate, 16 construction/strengthening of foot over bridge, 14 dismantling of old foot over bridge, 7 launching of road over bridge, 5 yard remodeling, 1 commissioning of doubling & electrification and 26 other projects.

6. Covid Isolation Coaches

In order to augment the capability against COVID19, Indian Railways has converted 5231 non air-conditioned coaches into isolation coaches, at the level of COVID Care Center as per the 'Guidance Document on Appropriate Management of Suspect/Confirmed cases of COVID19' circulated by Ministry of Health & Family Welfare. These facilities are part of the integrated plan developed by MoHFW and NITI Ayog and are normally used when state facilities are overwhelmed. IR production unit Rail Coach Factory at Kapurthala, has developed a Post-COVID Coach. This coach has design improvements in it like hands-free amenities, copper-coated handrails and latches, plasma air purification and titanium dioxide coating.



7. Double stack container operation

IR creates a new world benchmark by commissioning 1st high rise Over Head Equipment, which has contact wire height of 7.57m and successfully run double stack containers in electrified territory on Western Railway. With this remarkable development, IR has become the first Railway to run Double Stack Container train with high reach pantograph, the Operations of which successfully commenced in June, 2020.



8. Satellite Tracking of Trains: Around 6500 locos (electric & diesel) are already equipped with GPS, about 6000 locos to be equipped by Dec 2021. The Centre for Railway Information System (CRIS), the information technology arm of the Ministry of Railways had collaborated with ISRO to implement Real-time Train Information System (RTIS) project in trains. IR has installed a GPS aided geo-augmented navigation system (GAGAN) based devices on locomotives to acquire train movement data in real-time and to have improved efficiency in train operations. Container movement can also be tracked with information available on mobile apps.

9. Digital India, Digital Rail Initiatives: All Key processes of IR including freight operations, passenger operation & ticketing service, fixed asset management, human resource management, E-Office, E-Training have been digitized & fast tracked. Rolling Stock Asset Management and wayside infrastructure is being digitized. Locos/Freight Wagons/Coaches/Coaching maintenance/Yards are being managed with the use of IT based apps. Digital maintenance technologies are also being adopted viz. Condition monitoring along with the use of AI & IoT.

10. IR has operationalized its first **12000 HP electric locomotive**, with this, India has become the sixth country to have manufactured an electric locomotive with such horsepower locally. The IGBT based locomotive, manufactured by Madhepura Electric Loco Factory is a joint venture between Alstom and IR. The factory will manufacture 800 such locomotives in the next 11 years. The locomotive can be tracked through GPS, it has air-conditioned driver cabs on either side and is equipped with regenerative braking system which provides substantial energy savings during operations. It is capable of hauling loads up to 6,000 tonnes at a top speed of 120kmph. ■



Save Twilight

- Utso Bose

“This road
nobody’s travelling it
save twilight.”

~ Basho

The places we leave behind come back to us. Maybe suddenly, often without remorse, they catch us in moments of stillness, off guard, and we are flung back, ceaselessly, into the past. I left Japan in 2009. I've been ambivalent about the experience ever since, and, every year, when the prospect of writing for Anjali arrives, I promise myself I will write something different. But it is in moments like these that my other homeland comes back to me, all too quickly and much, much too strong; a flash of almost blinding light. And I find myself there, in Yokohama, a boy of nine, learning to unlearn, making sense of a universe written in invisible ink.

We used to live in a place called Kamadai. Towards its earnest nape, a small road ran uphill. The walk uphill was tiring, but houses lined every rung, and our building was right at the top. Like every person living in a flat, it was existed for me only for as long as I lived in it. Once I left, it never occurred to me what could have happened to it. Back home in Calcutta, we soon moved into our old flat like shifting into an old sweater. But as it often happens with old sweaters, it didn't fit like it used to. Nevertheless, I remained there, in Calcutta, quietly choosing to forget about the life I left behind, up, until one day, when I was told that we would be travelling back to Japan for a week or so, in 2016.

Are returns harder than departures?

There was once a crack on the edge of the pavement outside our building. Puddles would often collect there, blessings from the Kanto monsoon, and, during winters, specks of snow covered it, so it would look like a secret. As we neared Kamadai, passing the wispy streets of Sakuragicho, I felt a strange distance. A reckoning perhaps, or even a recognition, that the places you come back to are never the places you

left behind. The bus stopped at the crossing, and we got off.

Kamadai is a locality of whispers. A few kilometres away is the heart of the beating city, but here, everything is slower. The sunlight slants, quivers, rests. The first thing I noticed was the difference and the sameness. Most of the old shops were there, but were now manned by different personnel. The book shop had closed down. "It's all Amazon's fault!", One of my friends said to me later. The old Ramen-ya was there too, and, on recognising me, shared a rare moment of sober excitement, so rare indeed, among people here. We turned to walk that same walk uphill, now, seven years later. It was the same walk, the same houses were still there, each standing as milestones, announcing the sight of that one building right at the top. I expected a kind of alienation to arrive, imagining that the sight I would be greeted by would be of a house I wouldn't recognise. But when we did reach the top, the building was there. It was still there, that same building, flecked with green, it didn't even look old. Older. I walked up to the entrance and was about to ring the doorbell of our old flat when I saw a group of people sitting inside. A family of three, in that same room, where, seven years ago, I had received news of my homecoming.

And I felt a strange distance for the second time; not a sad, dejected distance, but a distance of realisation, that change is often a small thing. And in its minuteness, in its almost-invisibility, it assumes a subtlety that often goes overlooked. I looked around and noticed that the crack was no longer there. It had been filled.

I suppose that's how life is lived; in absentia, in silence, in overlooked changes, in moments of stillness, cracks waiting to be filled. ■

Asuras in Hindu Mythology

(Proto-Materialist metaphysics of Ancient India)

- Viswa Ghosh

Human kind has had to instinctively understand the world, the reality in which it had to survive. At some point in human kind's history we started to address the question: How to understand reality and nature?

Sometime during our ancient past, this question became a major source of controversy and debates. In philosophy, this emerged as the famous debate between **Materialism** vs **Idealism**.

Philosophical **Idealism** regards mind and consciousness to be first-order realities to which matter is subject and material interactions are secondary. In other words, matter or reality is what our mind makes it out to be.

Philosophical **Materialism**, in contrast, holds matter to be the fundamental substance in nature, and that all things, including mental states and consciousness, are results of our interaction with matter or reality. In other words, matter and reality exist irrespective of whether our mind perceives them or not.

In this essay, I am not going to argue in favour of or against either **Materialism** or **Idealism**. Instead, my focus in this essay is to bring out the how this debate has been played out in Hindu philosophy.

In Hindu mythology it is commonly understood that Asura represents EVIL, as juxtaposed against the Devas (or Devatas) who have been regarded as forces of GOOD. Says Rajagopalachari, historian, statesman and India's last Governor General, "On the whole, Asuras and Rakshasas were those who rejoiced in doing wicked deeds." He further conjectures, "The Devas were generally upholders of dharma and took on themselves the task of putting down the Rakshasas... some of whom had attained great power through tapas."¹

Victory of GOOD over EVIL has been the most common theme in Hindu mythology, notably in the two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Hindu mythology has always represented Asura as fierce, prone to committing violence and crimes, engaged in eating, drinking, merry making and bacchanalia.

Perhaps, hidden behind these entertaining and easily palatable tales of victory of Devas victory over Asuras, there lurks a much more serious debate. Critical study of the epics and Hindu scriptures show that the vilification of Asuras is linked to the victory of **Idealism** over **Materialism** in Hindu philosophy.

I. Charvaka and Lokayata Metaphysics

While I started this essay with Asuras, out of necessity, I have introduced two more terms, Lokayata and Charvaka. Over the next few paragraphs, I will connect all three – Asura, Lokayata and Charvaka – to show that all three philosophical traditions were steadfastly rooted in **Materialism**, or rather, proto-**Materialism**² and were once thriving metaphysical systems in ancient India.

Many ancient writings hint at the existence of Lokayata Sastra, but no such ancient text has yet been found. Candrakirti's Prajna Sastra quotes Lokayata Sastra. Aryadeva's Satasastra contained an actual quotation that is attributed to Sage Brihaspati, as this **Materialist** metaphysics or Barhaspatya, was considered to have been originated by Brihaspati.³

As happens all too often in history, victors⁴ – in this case, **Idealism** and its proponents, the **Idealists** – not only nearly wiped out the original versions of proto-**Materialism** but also distorted the proto-**Materialist** worldview. Therefore, we have no recourse other than to seek out the kernel of proto-**Materialism** from the words of its opponents. Opponents, who often misunderstood, misrepresented and offered caricatures of **Materialist** metaphysics.

Madhavacharya, a well-known 14th century proponent of **Idealism** says about fundamental assertion of Charvaka metaphysics, also referred to as Lokayata:⁵

1 *Ramayana retold by C. Rajagopalachari* edited by Jay Mazo of American Gita Society, p. 19.

2 In his *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya refers to it as proto-**Materialism**. It was as yet in its original and crude beginnings when it was pushed out of the mainstream into oblivion. Rise of city-states further hastened this process.

3 *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

4 It must be noted that the clash of ideas is rarely a free and fair contest. Specific historical conditions have laid waste to the best of philosophical traditions while the same powerful social and political forces championed the worst of thoughts. We must also recognize that these were times when humankind lacked sophisticated scientific theories and tools to explain natural phenomena.

5 In *Sarva-Darsana-Samgraha* by Madhavacharya mentions, "Hence, another name for that school is Lokayata." p. 12.

In 1331 AD, Madhavacharya was the Head at the monastery of Sringeri, which had been founded by the 8th century Vedantist teacher Sankaracharya.

“While life is yours, live joyously;
None can escape Death’s searching eye:
When once this frame of ours they burn,
How shall it ever again return?”

If Madhavacharya is correct, clearly these lines point to a denial of life after death by Charvaka / Lokayata metaphysics.

As proto-materialist metaphysics, Charvaka / Lokayata held that the inebriating power of intelligence emerges from the coming together of four elements – earth, water, fire and air.

“Springing forth from these elements, itself solid knowledge, it [intelligence] is destroyed when they are destroyed, – after death no intelligence remains.”⁶

In passing, we may note that the epic, Mahabharata (Santiparva), records that a Charvaka was killed by the assembled Brahmins who had gathered to bless the Pandavas when they returned victorious from the Kurukshetra war. This Charvaka was the lone dissenting voice, who addressed Yudhishtira, saying:

Thou art a wicked king! Thou art a slayer of kinsmen! What shalt thou gain, O son of Kunti, by having thus exterminated thy race? Having slain also thy superiors and preceptor, it is proper for thee to cast away thy life!⁷

The assembled Brahmanas, having overcome the shock of hearing a dissenting voice, united to slay the Charvaka after disparaging him as “...Rakshasa Charvaka, the friend of Duryodhana!”⁸

We realize that contempt for both Lokayata & Charvaka is clearly expressed by those who defended the **Idealist** worldview. This contempt becomes glaring when we turn our gaze to understand the presence of Asura in Hinduism. Referring to the epic Mahabharata, Radhakrishnan (philosopher, academic, and the 2nd President of India) acknowledges that, “The Epic often stigmatizes heretical opinion as demoniacal (asura).” Being a staunch Vedanta philosopher himself, he further explains, “...the views can be called Lokayata or a heterodox philosophy of the mundane, and are opposed to the orthodox adhyatma-vada or philosophy of the spirit... they certainly deny immortality of the self and, as a corollary, the law of karman and rebirth.”⁹

From these brief accounts, we are sanguine that Charvaka / Lokayata were proto-**Materialist** metaphysical doctrines. Also, etymologically and Lokayata (lokesu, among people + ayatah, prevalent) meant it was prevalent among people, which is also admitted by Madhavacharya in Sarva-Darsana-Samgraha.

II. Asura Metaphysics

In brief, “Self” for Asuras is identified with the body. That there is no “Self” over and beyond the body. That there is no life after death. This is clearly a **Materialist** interpretation.

Devas, on the other hand, pursue the **Idealist** view of the “Self”, which believes that the true “Self” is the atman and should not be confused with the body, which is merely a container. Hence, for **Idealism** “identification of the body with the pure Atman is the root cause for human sufferings and miseries and for births and deaths.”¹⁰

What further evidence(s) do we have to demonstrate that the Asura world view stood for **Materialist** metaphysics?

We find such evidence in Chandogya Upanishad, which explains that one of the key questions on which Asuras and Devas deviated was on the philosophy of ‘Self’. Chandogya Upanishad relates a story regarding the search for “self” by both Asuras and Devas. Let us follow this story in some detail.¹¹

To seek answers on what is “self”, both Indra from the Devas and Virocana from the Asuras approached Sage Prajapati. Both spent time as students under Prajapati and after 32 years Prajapati asked them:

Prajapati: “Desiring what have you dwelt here?”

Virocana & Indra: “They report a saying of yours, Sir, to the effect that – that Self which is free from evil, free from decrepitude, free from death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst, with true desires and true volitions, should be sought after, should be sought to be understood, and he attains all regions and all desires who has sought to know the Self and understands it – it is desiring this that we have dwelt here.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁷ *Mahabharata* of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, Vol. VIII, *Santi Parva* (Part I), translation by Pratap Chandra Roy (between 1883 and 1896), p. 86.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 87.

⁹ *History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, Vol. 1, S. Radhakrishnan, p. 88.

¹⁰ *Brahma Sutras* (translated by Sri Swami Sivananda of Divine Life Society), p. 4.

¹¹ The Chandogyopanishad with Bhasya by Shankara (translated by Dr. Sir. Ganganath Jha). Chandogya Upanishad addresses many philosophical questions – such as, Philosophy of Being, Philosophy of Inner Akasha, etc., including the “Philosophy of Self.” pp. 449-456.

Prajapati: "The person that is seen in the eye – that is the Self that I spoke of; this is the immortal, the fearless, Brahman."

Virocana & Indra: "Sir, he that is perceived in water, and he that is perceived in the mirror, – which of these is that?"

Prajapati: "It is he himself – is perceived in all insides... Look at yourselves in a cup of water, and then what you do not understand of the Self, – tell me?"

They looked at themselves in a cup of water.

Prajapati: "What do you see?"

Virocana & Indra: "Sir, we see ourselves entirely as we are, even to the hairs and nails, – a perfect replica."

Prajapati: "Having become well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed, look into the water cup."

Becoming well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed, they looked into the water cup.

Prajapati: "What do you see?"

Virocana & Indra: "Just as we are ourselves – well-adorned, well-dressed, and well-groomed, – so are these also well-adorned, well-dressed, and well-groomed.

Prajapati: "That is the Self, – the Immortal, the Fearless, that is Brahman."

They both went away with their hearts satisfied.

And Prajapati, looking after them, – said, "without having perceived and without having understood this Self, they are going away; now, whoever of the two, Devas or Asuras, will accept this doctrine will be landed in trouble."

Now, Virochana, with a satisfied heart, went out to the Asuras and preached to them this doctrine – viz.: "The Self alone is to be worshipped, the Self alone is to be attended upon; and it is only by worshipping the Self and attending upon the Self that one secures both regions, – this as well as that other."¹²

Chandogya Upanishad concludes: For this reason, even to this day – if one does not give, has no faith, and does not perform sacrifices, – they say of him, 'oh! he is Asura (demoniacal)'; as such is the doctrine of the Asuras."

A couple of clarifications need to be made on what Chandogya Upanishad cites regarding the Asura doctrine of the "Self":

1. One, this is a view of *Asura* doctrine of the "Self" as viewed from the eyes of its opponents. Hence, there are distortions – some obvious and some not so obvious. For instance, if life after death is denied by the *Asuras*, surely "secures both regions" cannot be consistent with the doctrine. (Further discussions on such distortions are beyond the scope of this essay and will be a major digression from the main theme.)

2. Two, *Asura* doctrine of the "Self" is not to be understood as a doctrine of narcissism. Rather, it must be understood as a microcosm of nature. In other words, understanding the "Self" will also address other mysteries of nature. And, one can imagine the mysteries of nature that our ancestors confronted in our remote past!

III. Conclusion

"Asura View" needs to be part and parcel of any serious study of Indian philosophy. As we stand in the 21st century and prepare to face the challenges of global integration, racial and religious mixing and tolerance, we should not avoid unearthing the vast wealth of **Materialist** metaphysics (the *Asura* / Charvaka / Lokayata), that were once associated with the very origin of our South Asian civilization. Especially, in this age of scientific and technological advancement, **Materialist** metaphysics is capable of providing us valuable insights for rationality, logic, ethics and theology.

During the next and all future Durga Mahotsav, let us recall the real Asuras in Indian civilization and not the fictional ones that have been foisted upon us. At the same time, do not ignore the real Durga that lies embedded in the clay

¹² To be sure, we need to be clear about what "region" means. Life on earth is as one such "region" and life after death as another "region".



Asuras in Hindu Mythology

pot (purna ghot) with the picture of a human baby in vermillion, and that holds water inside, covered with leaves, rice grains, and with a green coconut placed on top. The clay pot is placed on a lump of clay which is sprinkled with five varieties of seeds (panchya sasya). For this real Durga may well be part of our Lokayata metaphysics and tradition that always dreamt of bountiful harvests for its people.

It is all the more important to recognize the real Asuras in our ancient past because serious attempts are being made today to distort history of Indian civilization disregarding evidence and material basis.

Our critical understanding of our own past is vital to how much distortion we will allow. ■

Sri Sathya Sai Baba - His Life – A Summary

- Write up coordinated by Saideepa Yuri Hira

Sri Sathya Sai Baba was born in Puttaparthi on Nov 23, 1926 - an auspicious Monday in the lunar month of Kartika, when Lord Shiva is especially adored. He was given the name Sathyanarayana Raju. What intrigued His mother Easwaramma, most was the unbounded compassion her little Sathya had particularly for the poor and downtrodden. Even as a toddler, He insisted that the beggar at the door be served well in spite of their own limited means and would often give His own share to the needy. When He began school, His playmates were inspired by His ability to lead them to be socially responsible, spiritually aware, endowed with individual and national character. His friends were often fascinated by His extraordinary powers of creating things out of thin air, knowing the future, deep understanding of scriptural wisdom and so on.

The inexplicability of His actions greatly disturbed His father Sri Ratnakaram Pedda Venkama Raju, and on May 23, 1940, he angrily accosted Sathya to reveal His true identity. Sathya just took a few flowers and flung them down which arranged themselves to read "I am Sai Baba." Later that year, on the morning of Oct 20, halfway through the school day, Baba suddenly returned home, cast aside His books and dramatically declared, "I am no longer your Sathya... I am Sai. I have my work, I cannot wait any longer." Thus, that day forward Sathyanarayana Raju became Sathya Sai Baba.

From that epochal moment on, kings to commoners started thronging to His presence seeking solace and succour as Baba cancelled an incurable disease of one, sorted out familial problems of another, and likewise. His growing fame, accompanied by rising ridicule from envious quarters, rattled His elder brother Seshama Raju, who wrote a letter cautioning Him of His activities. In His reply, dated May 25, 1947, Baba emphatically stated that He has a 'Task' to 'foster all mankind with bliss', a 'Vow' to 'lead all onto the path of righteousness', and a 'Work' of 'removing the suffering of the distressed', also assuring that He would never give up on those who attach themselves to Him.

Towards this end, in the 1960s Baba germinated the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisations in India, through which people across religions, class and caste, could collectively engage in selfless service and foster the eternal values of Truth, Righteousness, Peace, Love and Non-violence, for their own spiritual uplift. In no time the movement grew global to more than 126 countries with Prasanthi Nilayam being its epicentre.

While millions of inspired individuals took to practising selfless love, to create working models for them to emulate, Baba founded the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust in 1972. Since then this umbrella institution is engaged in the implementation of trailblazing projects like free primary to tertiary-care hospitals, free education from primary schooling to doctoral research, free drinking water to remote villages, free housing rehabilitation initiatives, etc., demonstrating to the world new paradigms to raise society's quality of life inspired by love, service and universal brotherhood. Baba, Himself exemplified this higher life incessantly for 86 years where the power of pure love was in glorious action.

On His 83rd and 85th Birthdays in Nov 2008 and 2010, on His devotees' request, Baba rode on a golden chariot. Only later did everyone realise, those were indeed symbolic of the golden culminating moments of Baba's earthly sojourn. Baba discarded His bodily vesture on April 24, 2011. The devotees miss His physical form, nevertheless, they continue to experience His guidance and grace, as enigmatically as ever. The Universal Consciousness that is Sri Sathya Sai eternally lives on.

Dooars – A Distant Dream

- Joyita Basu Dutta

My earliest memories of the Dooars region of North Bengal are of driving through the lush green countryside on our way to Jalpaiguri, my parent's hometown. The drive was scenic - virgin green country-scapes, long stretches of neatly pruned, undulating tea shrubs as far as one could see into the horizon. Serene tea estates alternated with patches of thick impenetrable forests, that would rhythmically screech with the now familiar distinct shrill of the cicadas crying out in unison. The dense greenery would eventually relent into comforting fragmented rice fields and pineapple farms that would bask in the golden hue of the setting sun, as we approached Jalpaiguri. In the back seat of our glistening black Ambassador, which my father would meticulously polish himself before any trip, my heart would pound as we would approach the forest stretches. I would imagine tigers and elephants leaping out of the thicket. But there was an even greater fear, which paled in comparison, the fear of notorious dacoits ambushing us. I could sense a similar tension in the air as my father would accelerate harder to get through the forest stretches and veer us to safety as fast as he could. North Bengal then was pristine and untampered. And Dooars was an exclusive world existing by itself, nurturing the then thriving tea industry of Bengal.

Baba started his journey as a tea planter in the gardens of Assam, where Ma joined him as a bride. My sister spent her formative years in the tea estates there. After a satisfying and productive stint in Assam, Baba moved on to Dooars and was posted in Radharani, a garden at the very edge of the Indo-Bhutan border, where I spent my first decade. I remember as a child, during the dry winter months, instead of taking the highway, we would take a shorter but extremely bumpy ride in our Willys Jeep over the river bed for a quick trip to Phuentsholing, a small border town in Bhutan. Small towns close by such as Kalchini or Hamiltongunj did not quite measure up to Phuentsholing. Siliguri was a good 3.5 hours away and yet to catch up. In the early '80s, Phuentsholing had a shopping arcade that housed a bookstore, where I bought my first Enid Blyton, shaping the bookworm in me. It really was more than a luxury as one rarely had access to books in the hinterlands. The town also had a quiet Buddhist monastery tucked behind a hill overlooking the valley, very similar to the Buddhist temples of Japan. It was a favorite place to visit and to take family members and guests who were visiting us. There was also a movie theatre showing the latest Hindi movies. The best treat in Phuentsholing was the Druk hotel. We looked forward to our annual lunch at Druk with tremendous excitement. My sister and I even wore Bakhus, the traditional Bhutanese dress, and it was my favorite outfit, such was the influence of our neighboring country on us young girls.

I grew up in the lap of nature, leading a life intrinsically woven around it. As a tea planter, Baba's mood always seemed to be tied with the weather pattern. Elated and chirpy during the rains, restless during the dry spells, and despondent when a freak hailstorm would destroy the crop and all the hard work that went behind it. Glorious sunrises and spectacular sunsets, sky spangled with countless stars, uncertainty of confronting wild animals, such as tigers or elephants, solitude and calm of the countryside were all part and parcel of life. One would imagine an element of untamed wildness ascribed to nature, but on a tea plantation everything was immaculate. The tea bushes that rolled along acres and acres of undulating land were trimmed and pruned to the same level in an orderly

fashion, weeds were meticulously plucked out and shade trees whitewashed up to the same height as far as the eyes could see in the distant horizon, creating a uniform geometric pattern. Neatly fenced with barbed wires twisted around painted white poles, the sea of green tea bushes within, soothed my eyes and the aroma of the fermenting leaves from the factory still wafts around me to this day as I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Within our bungalow compound fenced off with vibrant bougainvillea, was a lush green front lawn that was tended to with care and attention by experienced and knowledgeable "malis" under the supervision of my mother, as well as a kitchen garden. The grass lawns were well mowed, the driveway lined by lilies and hydrangeas, the tough and hardy gerberas brought happy cheer when all the other flowers had disappeared, the roses in their different shades had bees buzzing and hovering over them. The garden phlox were my favorite. The gulmohar tree spread out its umbrella-like canopy flamboyantly at the entrance to the driveway and painted a welcoming picture to our home. The burra bungalow we stayed in was built during the British Raj, complete with chimneys and fireplaces, a creaky wooden staircase, well ventilated yet cozy rooms, each fitted with incredulous bells connecting with the kitchen. Huge 'jali kamra's (wire meshed spacious front verandahs) were my favorite space to occupy. Life seemed like a permanent staycation.

The nights were serene yet pulsating with the rhythms of the Adivasi folk songs accompanied by percussions, the screeching of the insects, the alternating croaking of the toads and frogs. This was just the façade though. Lurking in the jungles at the edges of the plantation were wild animals. Oftentimes, in the dead of night we were woken up by the screams from the labor quarters, the siren from the factory and the bursting of firecrackers used to frighten away the animals that had ventured in. Finally, when the cacophony would die down, we were reassured that the animal was done for the night and had retreated. But not always were we so lucky. If it happened to be a herd of elephants, the poor elephants would run amok confused with all the racket raised. This led to damage of property and the management having their hands full. Sometimes the Burra Bungalow would have visitors too. I remember a particular night, when momentarily, all the usual sounds prevalent during the nighttime had receded and there was an uncomfortable silence. It seemed something in nature was amiss. The cicadas were cautious and had quietened down and everything seemed unusually still. Unsuspectingly, I left by bed to peep out my window. Confronted within the darkness of the night was an even darker shadow reaching right up to me on my second-floor bedroom window. A huge unnerving gentle curve marked out the two-separate darkness's. Perplexed, I peered harder only to be confronted with the gentle sway of a trunk and the unmistakable flapping of a huge pair of ears. Reckoning that I was face to face with an elephant, I somehow managed to maintain my calm as I withdrew from the window and with even more composure went over to my parents' room to alert them. Baba, after weighing his options, activated the factory siren that wailed loudly. Immediately the factory chowkidaars and garden laborers arrived at the bungalow. The usual ruckus was raised by the laborers, excited cacophony and many firecrackers later the mighty elephant left our compound and eventually the estate, without much loss to

life and property. Such sightings were routine and luckily, they couldn't cause much damage to the colonial bungalows with their sturdy thick column like pillars.

Dooars was after all the Buxa region of north Bengal, famous for its tiger reserves. Dacoits took advantage of the thick foliage. So, trips to towns were only occasional. Though availability of eggs, milk and poultry were plentiful on the plantation, we depended on the garden postman for other daily needs. The 'Dakwalas' job was to visit the closest post office to the tea garden, to send out the official mails and reports to the head office, which was located in Kolkata. And also collect all official mail for the estate, including personal letters addressed to the staff. We would make use of the opportunity of the Dakwala stepping out of the garden, and Ma would make a list of essentials she required for the Dakwala to fetch, the previous evening itself. With the advent of the VCR in the mid-eighties those lists went on to include names of the latest Hindi movies. The confusion on the 'Dakwala's' face as he tried to pronounce the names, which my sister made him practice before he set out, made us giggle like giddy girls. Evening refreshments were still a problem though. The Dakwala couldn't really get us what we fancied and we had to be self-dependent, so Ma, after a short siesta in the afternoon, would with us by her side to help, prepare ice-cream for hot summer evenings, varieties of cakes and cookies fresh out of the oven, which we savored and relished. Without access to the internet it is still a mystery how my mother taught herself the art of making swiss rolls and souffles. She clung on to her recipe books and taught herself everything there was to baking without access to internet or cookery shows. She still collects recipes and sends them to me here in Tokyo, while I wallow in 4G/5G, watching my favorite food vlog on YouTube.

Life on the estate could get extremely quiet and dull, had it not been for the club that catered to a cluster of gardens in a region. The club was indeed the center of social life for the tea planter's families. Saturday evenings were designated for activities at the club. Planters from various estates across the region met and discussed matters about their gardens over drinks. Families would get a much-desired opportunity to interact and socialize. Ladies got to showcase their skills at the annual flower shows that vied to outdo the other clubs at interclub competitions. Sporting events in badminton, tennis, soccer and golf nurtured talent and fulfilled the aspirations of many. The Christmas party still holds a place in the hearts of all

the "chai ka baby and baba logs". Santa would come on a red tractor, not a sleigh, clanging his bell and we'd run after him in excitement. We would patiently wait for Santa to give us our presents, that were wrapped neatly and placed by our parents under the Christmas tree the previous evening. The ladies would decorate the club with bright hollies, candy canes, poinsettias and a pine tree would be adorned for the year end. Special treats of Christmas cake, tarts and jellies placed in baskets made skillfully from orange peels are etched in my memory and showcased the skills of the bungalow cooks who held on to their secret tricks and recipes, passed down from their British predecessors. It was indeed a different era, when our own religion was still very personal and practiced privately. Colonial hangover still ruled the lives of a predominantly cosmopolitan crowd. The thriving club was a reflection of the thriving tea industry back in the day. It was bolstered with the contributions from member estates. So, in later years the dilapidated clubs were only acting as tell-tale signs of what was actually a malaise set to befall the entire industry.

Growing up in the tea gardens, I endured a sense of rootlessness, which I was relieved to discover was a common feeling among many of the tea children I grew up with - nobody could identify the far flung place I came from. They were unfamiliar with the names and places I uttered; a very different lifestyle made it even more complex. We would often quote the nearest relatively well-known town as our hometown though we had no association with the town and made no mention about the lives that we led for fear of coming across as unrelatable. Decades later when we were confronted with the 'hometown' field on Facebook, we mostly left it blank! We belong to the far flung, inaccessible estates, unknown to the rest, a way of life unfamiliar to most. Always the Chai Ka Babies and Babalog as we were referred to by the indulgent and endearing caretakers of the tea estates. A dream so distant yet precious. A way of life has eroded over the passing years, faded with the lure of city life, the manipulation of greedy businessmen more interested in wrenching out every last rupee for the annual report and no vision for the future, and government policies that ignored the industry. Alas, the tea industry in Bengal is fighting for survival today and I'm left with nothing but evergreen memories of my childhood and these words that my child may be familiar with my roots. My unshakeable roots in the Dooars, which may not be grasped by all, but roots that I've grown to be comfortable in and embrace with my whole being. ■



India – A Perennial Idea

- Varun Tomar

In January earlier this year, Saif Ali Khan in an interview claimed that there was no concept of India until the British came. There was a huge furor regarding this statement of his, and the ever outspoken Tarek Fateh countered “Yeah right. French East India Company was about China & Vasco d’Gama went to Fiji.” This incident led me to question the very idea of India. What is India? When was the idea of India born? When did it come into existence? Is the concept of India perennial or modern?

It should be noted that when we talk about the idea or concept of India, one must separate it from the Indian state. Khan, it seems was clearly confused between the two. Many scholars, like Ashish Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Sunil Khilnani support Anderson’s argument made in *Imagined Communities* that the construct of India is a product of modernity, and India was born in the wake of British invasion of India. However, it must be noted that while the modernist argument might be true in case of the modern Indian state, it cannot be applied to the concept of *Aryavarta* or *Bharatvarsha*. The idea of India, or Indica, predates modernity. From Megasthenes in the early third century BC, via Alberuni, the Portuguese missionaries, Schlegel and the Romantics, Schopenhauer, and on to the theosophists, Kipling, E. M. Forster, Paul Scott, the Beatles, and Goa Trance, other cultures have recurrently used India as a foil to define their own historical moments.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who was educated in West and saw things as a Westerner would do, also claimed that his understanding of India was flawed, and the concept of India is not a product of modernity. Nehru claimed, “India was in my blood ... And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw. To some extent I came to her via the West and looked at her as a friendly westerner might have done. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts rose within me.”

Long before the concept of modernity came by, another Westerner, John Strachey, in 1888 claimed that “the first and most important thing to learn about India is that there is not and never has been India.” Yet, India had a centralized empire under the Mauryas, covering a major part of the subcontinent, expanding from Iran to Bengal, at least a century before the Qin united only part of Han China. Alexander Cunningham, the British archaeologist who served in colonial India said that learned men described India to Alexander of Macedon as a ‘single land.’ These men attested that the land known as India is a rhomboid or roughly quadrilateral in shape, with the Indus to the West, the Himalayas and Hindu Kush to the North and oceans skirting the East and the South.

Cunningham goes on to write:

The close agreement of these dimensions, given by Alexander’s informants, with the actual size of the country is very remarkable and shows that the Indians, even at that early date in their history, had a very accurate knowledge of the form and extent of their native land.

Many millennia before the Greeks described the geographical construct of India, Sanjaya, the narrator in the ancient epic *Mahabharata*, described the vision of entire cosmos for King Dhritarashtra. He referred to the cosmos as

a massive circle of seven concentric oceans that separated six *varshas* or regions, each possessing its own mountains and river systems. In the middle of this cosmos lies *Jambudvipa*, which is described as a four-petalled lotus floating in the ocean, with *Bharatvarsha* or India, defined by the southern petal. It has the Himalayas and the mighty rivers and seas surrounding its triangular shape.

It must be noted that seed of idea of India was sown in the ancient Indian texts like the Vedas, Puranas, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Puranas describe the features of *Jambudvipa* while discussing the geographical features of the earth. We find that *Brahmapurana* depicts the boundaries of this vast stretch of land, which is bounded on the southern side by the ocean and on the northern side by the Himalayas. *Brahmapurana* goes on to claim that the people, who are born on this soil and therefore, who are indeed the children of soil, are called Bharati.

उत्तरेण समुद्रस्य हिमाद्रौ श्रैव दक्षिणे।
वर्षं तद्भारतं नाम भारती यत्र सन्ततिः॥

It claims that the vast land is out-stretched to nine thousand yojanas. The rivers like Ganga, Brahmaputra, Sarasvati, Sindhu, Yamuna, Gomati, Chardabhaga, Narmada, Tapi, Kaveri, Godavri etc. adorn this land. These rivers are treated as sacred and most beneficial by the people of India because of these descriptions afforded by the seer author of the *puranas*. Thus, the narrow barriers of language, region, caste or creed submerge into a Pan-Indian nationalism because of the firm belief imprinted on the minds of Indians about the holiness of all the rivers of India. The *Vishnupurana* also presents the accounts of geographical features of India as well as the sociological conditions of *Bharatvarsha*. It says that the vast land situated on the northern side of the ocean and on the southern side of great Himalayas is called *Bharata*, and the sons of this soil are known as *Bharati*. Similarly, *Makarandeyapurana* and *Agnipurana* also narrate the glory of *Bharatvarsha*, with precise descriptions of mountains, rivers, geographical configurations, races and inhabitants who dwelled the land. Here also, *Bharatvarsha* is described as the land situated on the north of ocean and south of Himalayas. It further adds that the land is encircled by seas.

The two great epics by Valmiki and Vyasa reflect the cultural unity and indivisibility of the vast country known as *Bharatvarsha*. In *Ramayana*, Lord Rama fought for establishing the rule of law in the land of *Bharatvarsha*, not only Ayodhya. He fought to reassert the right of Indian people to live in peace and tranquility, and for defending the motherland from the onslaughts of barbaric forces coming from abroad. Coming from the northern kingdom of Ayodhya, Rama spent a major part of his fourteen years of exile in the forest of Chitrakoota, in Madhya Pradesh. From there, he travelled south through Kishkindha (Karnataka) and Rameshwaram (Tamil Nadu) to put an end to the atrocities of Ravana, the tyrannical king. The plot of Ramayana reveals a pan-Indian outlook amongst the political elite of India, and Rama undertakes an arduous journey to the south to ameliorate the millions of people who are suffering, highlighting the concept of ‘one country, one people.’

Similarly in Mahabharata, Lord Krishna formulated a plan for establishing the rule of law, or Dharmarajya, in the extensive land called Bharatvarsha. This was aimed at emancipating the

people of the entire country from the clutches of despotic and arrogant rulers, who took delight in discarding ethical values and principles of good governance as enunciated in the Dharmashastra. Mahabharata mentions the participation of the Shakas (Scythians), Paradas (Parthians), Balhikas (Balkhs), Kambojas (Central Asians) and other clans from all over India, elucidating the expanse of Bharatvarsha and the concept of 'one country, one people.' The sage-poet Vedavyasa is said to have incorporated into the compass of this mega epic all details and theoretical speculations of India, so it is also called 'Bharata Samhita.' In the Adiparva of Mahabharata, sage Vaishampayana says that what is there in the Mahabharata, may be found in some other books, but what is not in it cannot be found in any other book in India.

धर्मो चार्थे च कामे च मोक्षे च भारतर्षभा
यदिहास्ति नदन्यत्र न तत् क्वचित्।।

The battle of Kurukshetra is described as the most destructive war of ancient India and in order to avoid it, Krishna tried his level best to restore human values peacefully. This momentous war was fought between all the kings of then India, who participated on either side. Even though the erstwhile India was divided into numerous states, the people of India were mentally and culturally united with common bond in form of eternal values of life. In order to strengthen this bond, Arjuna travelled throughout the north-east India during his exile. Though the people of India were living in different states from administrative point of view, nevertheless, human and cultural values united them socially, economically, religiously, philosophically and culturally. The thought of India as 'one land, one people' dominated the thoughts of intellectual elite right from the Vedic period, and this pan-Indian outlook became stronger during the later ages, when people began to consider entire *Bharatvarsha* as one country and adore the land as a mother deity.

It is not only the ancient texts which confirm the existence of perennality of the idea of India, but several other sources confirm the same. Since times immemorial, India has been a center of learning, philosophy, wealth and resources. Fascinated by the land, numerous traders, conquerors, nomads, adventurers and hermits travelled thousands of miles to reach India and were welcomed by it. Ptolemy, a Roman citizen of Egypt, in his book Geography of India, says that the true shape of India is the acute angle formed by the meeting of the two coasts of the peninsula in a single coastline running almost straight from the mouth of the Indus to the mouth of the Ganga River. Faxian, a fourth century Chinese traveller wrote

in his diary that "India is very productive and the people are flourishing and happy beyond compare. When men of other nations come, care is taken of all of them and they are provided with what they require". Xuanzang (Hsuan-tsang), a famous Chinese Buddhist monk and traveller, describes the shape of India to a half moon with the diameter or broad side to the north and the narrow end to the south. Mark Twain, the American humorist, in 1896, wrote in his diary that:

"India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most astringent materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only!"

When travellers like I-tsing, Al Beruni, Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta and Thomas Roe travelled to India, they described the land in their memoirs as 'India' and not the princely state they landed in. When Alexander, Turks, Arabs, Mongols, Mughals and Europeans attacked India, they came with the intention of plundering the wealth of vast fertile lands that lay beyond banks of river Indus, and not a single princely state. India sat in the middle of silk-route right up till the middle of 17th century, when Europeans invaded and overthrew the Mughals. The spice trade between India and Europe was one of the main reasons behind Europe's colonization of India. The land route to India was dominated by Arabs who were hostile and the European traders were frequently looted or murdered. Thus, in order to by-pass the Arabs and to find a less time consuming route to India, the Europeans set out to discover the sea-route to India. The search for Indian wealth and prosperity led to the accidental discovery of America in 1492 by Columbus. A few years later, in 1498, Vasco da Gama became the first European to reach India by ship, by circumnavigating the Cape of Good Hope in Africa.

Even after thousand years of slavery and subjugation, the customs, culture and value system of people inhabiting the land north of the ocean and south of Himalayas has not changed, indicating that the idea of India is primordial and not modern. However, over the past few generations the presumption that a single shared sense of India – a unifying idea and concept – has lost its credibility. This has been due partly to the direct challenges made to the Indian nation state by those who find reasons to dispute its authority, and partly it has arisen through the efforts of a new generation of historians who have introduced a host of novel subjects and concerns that attribute nation as a modern phenomenon. But, it must be noted that even though the Indian state might be a product of modernity, India as a concept is not. ■

A Tale of Two Cities

- Amit Roy

'Ladies & Gentlemen, we are about to land and the local time is half past four in the afternoon'- the heavily accented announcement disrupted my slumber and I managed to peep outside to be welcomed by dark clouds and a light drizzle. Exhausted and weary eyed from the long journey, I stepped out of the aircraft to be greeted by an eerie silence all around, a sense of discipline and calmness and an enticing clinical cleanliness. I could feel the fresh air of invitation in the Arrival Hall with those stoic faces trying to be cordial and helpful in muffled voices. For a fleeting moment, I realized that this is not the airport I am used to with its characteristic cacophony and chaos, booming voices and loud laughter and the non-functional air conditioning. My reverie broke when I found myself outside the airport, ready to leave, in less than half an hour - unusual by my expectation where I used to consider myself lucky if this could have been done within a couple of hours. As I came out, the cold breeze on my face brought me back to my senses and I realized that I had reached a new destination, my new home and workplace - far away from the dusty, sultry weather I was used to.

Sitting inside the almost sound proof limousine bus on my way to the Hotel, I was transported to a different world with all the glittering lights, the bright neon signs enough to make Las Vegas hang its head in defeat, the disciplined traffic and the incredible sights of the Sakura trees along the highway-a stark contrast to what was still fresh in my mind- the honking, the adrenalin rush to beat the traffic light, continuous lane changing, sudden emergence of the Okada (motor bike) from nowhere and the constant fear of being stopped and harassed by the lurking traffic official around the corner.

It took me a couple of days to overcome the jolt to my system and orientation as I had to get down to the business end of things. The first task was obviously the house hunting- the most critical element in settling down in a foreign land. I had done some initial homework and thus the task was less arduous- nevertheless what amazed me was the efficiency and clockwork precision- the agent waiting at the right time at the right place, quick tour of the available options, completing innumerable forms and formalities in a week- very unlike the month long house hunting I was used to, checking all the basics including back up power supply, security provisions, water treatment plant, amenities and the rent negotiation.

However, there was disappointment in store- the house I moved into seemed to end where it started- not the spacious apartment I had just moved out from with the high ceilings, multiple baths- big enough to complete your daily quota of morning walk, painful enough to attend to someone at the door.

And then my first trip to my new place of work- stranded amidst a sea of 'Men and Women in Black', all with a serious look, queued up for the next train, patiently letting people disembark and then the gentle shoving to get inside the packed compartment - I was overwhelmed and confused and stepped aside, mesmerized by the discipline in the madness. I was missing the comfort of my 4 Wheel Drive with enough space to stretch out at the end of a busy day, catching a nap in the traffic, knowing that my chauffeur would gently remind me that we have reached home. The next day, I decided to catch

an earlier train to work only to find that I had missed it by a couple of seconds- it is then that I realized that the definition of punctuality can be so diverse- I was used to people telling me 'I am almost there' which actually could also mean that I 'have just left home.'

I distinctly remember the first trip to the neighbourhood supermarket in my new city- it was a Herculean task to locate what I was looking for and figure out the names of the product. There were desperate attempts from both sides- the store attendant and yours truly- to understand and empathize with one another- it is then that I complimented myself on my Dumb Charades skills to get hold of some basic toiletries. I was sorely missing my Man Friday chauffeur, my house help- my lifelines who took care of all necessities so long as the shopping list was legible and there was a handsome weekend tip in the offing.

This is a tale of 2 megacities- Tokyo and Lagos- sitting on the two ends of a continuum- distinctively different, contrasting infrastructure, facilities and urbanization- the list is endless, but each has its own charm and personality.

Tokyo, the epitome of etiquette and discipline, holds a tremendous amount of fascination with the latest technological advancements, a reputation of uniqueness, modern boldness merged with tradition and where everything has a buzz to it though in measured proportions. It is one of the safest cities where you can leave your mobile phone while you go to the counter to collect your coffee, can get lost and move around even past midnight without the fear of being harmed.

Lagos, the largest city in Africa, famous for its frantic and fast-paced life, vibrant and colourful despite all the negatives around snatch and grab, extortion, fraud, traffic congestion, lawlessness, security. It is a pot pourri of different cultures, tribes, languages; a city of bizarre contradictions- where 5 star International Hotel chains co-exist with the neighbouring shanties, a city with one of the highest consumption of Champagne in the world and where poverty stares into your face along the roadside.

However, there is one thing in common- despite the contrasting physique, cultural and societal norms, people are helpful to the 'Gaijin' and 'Oyinbo'- terms used to describe foreigners; though the balance between Honne and Tatemaie are very different - for a Lagosian, there is no distinction between the inner feeling and the façade. Last but not the least, there is a vibrant Indian community in both the cities- the huge Indian diaspora in Lagos, engaged across occupations cutting across all strata, fun loving, outgoing though a shade different from their Tokyo counterparts who are culturally more enriched and a bit more sedate.

The two cities have an indomitable spirit and I consider myself lucky to have lived in both- it teaches you how to be adaptable, resilient, street smart and embrace challenges. I have come a full circle- starting with the first stint in Lagos for more than a decade, followed by a 3 year sojourn in Tokyo and now back in my second home since the beginning of this year- allured by the suya and pepe sauce, carrying all the warmth and affection of friends and well-wishers- Sayonara Tokyo. ■

One never forgets their first time...

- Jyotsna Bhatti (nee Chandrani)

I could scarcely believe my ears when my father said “ok” in a relatively calm voice. Did I hear right?

Every year, Maa would visit Kolkata (hopefully her favourite destination) for 10 days - it was the most anticipated annual visit. We would spring clean, get new clothes, build marquees, organise the “Para” pandals, practice our performances run up to her arrival.

Beautiful and majestic, Maa was ageless - always so bold and beautiful. Each time an innovative avatar, each Para claiming their reincarnation to be the best.

The universe had conspired and the planets had aligned, my boarding school holidays fell during Pujo! Wow...Maa had her mysterious ways to ensure when your time comes, you will see her. My paternal grandparents resided in a lovely building society in Ballygunge and each year, the society had its own Devi and Pujo. This year, I was going to be there too!

On the day of Shasthi, all of us, the children, the middle aged, the elderly and the in-betweens, gave an ecstatic welcome to Maa and adoringly adorned her to take the place of pride for the remaining days of the Pujo. Every para or building Pujo has a Dada - the universal leader, the masterful logistics expert & problem solver, the culture zeitgeist. Our building was blessed with one too. He recruited his army of enthusiastic young residents of the building and gave us our tasks. I found myself doing Bhog duties - serving delicious Pujo treats and it is not Pujo Bhog, unless you serve from aluminum buckets. Our Dada was particular about authenticity!

Mothers gave up looking for their children or yelling them to come back home - the pull of Maa and the festivities were no match for domestic routine and expectations. Saptami, Ashtami, Navami were a blur of music, aarti, dances, eating, golpo, playing dress up. And of course, the food (and the clear up post that). The haze from the Dhunuchi nach to the beat of the Dhaak was intoxicating and we entered into a trance-like state, as the intensity of the beat and the footwork built to a crescendo.

Vijaya Dashami saw our mothers and other married ladies dress in their finery and partake in sindoor khela to their hearts' content, fervent in their silent prayers for a blissful marital life, blessed by Maa.

This was not new to me. It was familiar and comforting. What followed next was the new and unexpected experience. The climatic Visarjan!

The building Pujo committee would organise for a truck to allow us to accompany Maa to the Hoogly for the royal send off every year. And yes! This was the year my sister and I were allowed to travel as her entourage! Oh! the excitement to climb into a packed open-air truck bed, all singing, with the Dhak playing, the chants wafting from the horizons - I was giddy. The bumpy roads of Kolkata, with its inimitable traffic jams, all making it so atmospheric and memorable. Volley of friendly conversations flew across parallel trucks, as they slowed down at the lights or caused traffic jams in their enthusiasm. Somewhere in the melee of familiar neighbours were my parents, but for the duration of the ride, we were free agents, enjoying the wind in our hair, shrieking at the lurches, giggling inappropriately. Our hearts soared as our truck made its way to the river bank, thanking Maa for casting her magic for those ten days, when neighbours came together, generation gaps melted, families reunited, friends found time and giving your time to the community became a matter of pride.

When we bade Maa farewell, our little hearts felt a little sad at the promise of the return of normalcy. As the waves gently lapped and took Maa in their embrace, we plodded back to the truck, rather quietly. And someone very wise from our building society, years ago had created a wonderful custom to overcome this sense of loss - one household would sponsor ice creams for everyone on the truck for the return journey home. And to mark our maiden Visarjan, my parents generously offered the balm of ice creams to soothe our achy hearts.

That was the year 1999. Twenty-one years later, I remember the smells, sounds and the sensation of that day with electrifying clarity. Like I said, one never forgets their first time. ■

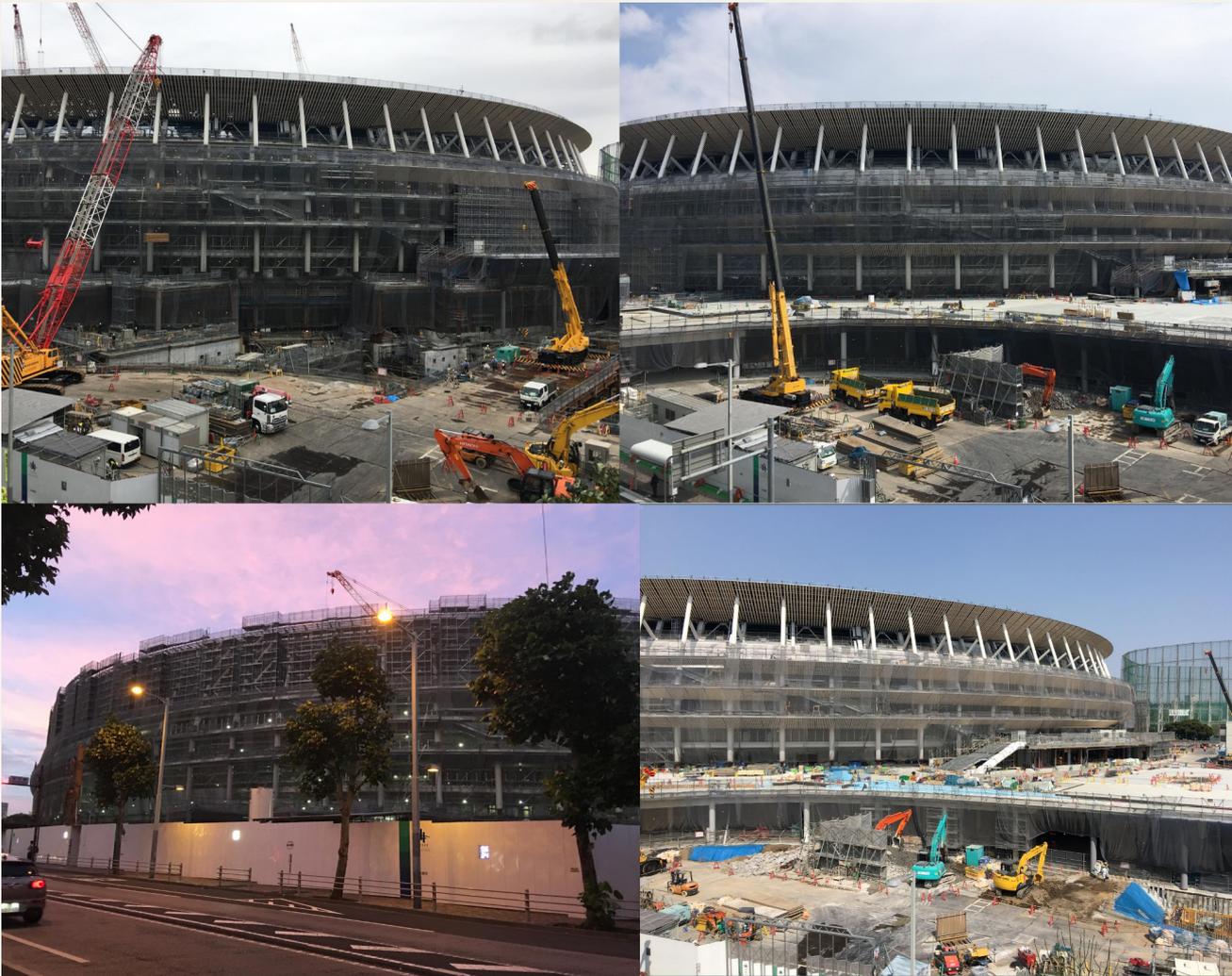
Tokyo Olympics

Our Ability to Deal with Uncertainty

- Arnab Gupta

Last year, I had the unique privilege of watching over the construction of the brand-new stadium for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

We were using a rental space, on the 4th floor of a building right across the street, to conduct workshops. With this superb view, we saw the structure transform into its final form.



Then, earlier this year, the world changed.

Had the coronavirus pandemic not occurred, we would have just finished celebrating a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Today, many are questioning whether the Tokyo Olympics should take place within the next year.

Or, for that matter, ever.

We, in the Agile world, tend to talk about uncertainty in a matter-of-fact way. But the truth is that many unforeseen events are hard to swallow. Especially when they hit close to home.

Japan was in a state of hopelessness in the aftermath of the massive earthquake and tsunami that struck its northern Tohoku region in March 2011. The economy had already been stagnant for nearly two decades when the disaster struck. Many felt that the resulting nuclear fallout in Fukushima prefecture made the bid to host the Olympics far-fetched.

Then, in September 2013, to everyone's surprise, it was declared that Tokyo would host the 2020 Games. The collective joy that welled up was like much-awaited rain after a long drought. I remember fighting tears when I heard the news. The party had started. It was Japan's turn to shine once again.

It was so transformative, there was a visible rise in people's optimism in the following years. The Japanese government had been facing backlash in its reconstruction and restructuring efforts after the disasters. The Olympics provided a healthy outlet for the pent-up energy amongst the people.

The remainder of the 2010s saw new infrastructure pop up across the city and surrounding areas. The main rail artery of Tokyo, JR's Yamanote line, opened its first new station in 49 years. As a result of trends like this, the nation's economy enjoyed a 71-month growth streak until the beginning of this year.

Today we are in the middle of a pandemic that has been shaking global economies and livelihoods.

In Japan, the figure for new COVID cases per day continues to rise, even after so many months have passed since the first cases were recorded. With the exceptions of stalwart countries, like Taiwan, the pandemic is far from being controlled globally. As government emergency funds dry out, the economic fallout, which is the topmost concern for most, continues to snowball.

So it is fair to say that most people in Japan cannot give a damn about the start date of the Olympics.

Of late, many are breaking taboos by speaking up and expressing the growing sentiment that the Tokyo Olympics should be canceled.



You don't need to stretch your imagination far to understand why.

First of all, as of this date there is no end in sight for the pandemic, nor the hope that a vaccine or other remedy could emerge in time. Meanwhile, countries are already late in the process of selecting athletes to send to the Games, while athletes themselves remain unable to practice and keep themselves in top shape.

A full-scale Olympics would entail opening up the country's borders to the rest of the world, in a massive way. Even if COVID-19 were largely stamped out by then, an event at the scale of the Olympics would carry a risk most locals could find unacceptable.

The Japanese organizing committee's chairman announced that he did not desire to have the games held in a shortened or simplified manner. This has added further fuel to the sentiment that the government cares only to satisfy large business interests. Of course, looming atop these arguments is the reality that companies uninsured against calamities like these stands to lose the huge business they were expecting.

Finally, the International Olympic Committee has made it clear that there will be no extension beyond next summer.

The more you face the facts, the more you realize the sheer difficulty of holding the Olympics one year from now according to the original plan. You notice just how big of a pipe dream it is.

Admitting this is hard, as it feels like turning against the cultural icon that is the Olympics, along with the individual hopes and dreams that come attached to it. After all, the Olympics was the source of a great deal of excitement and energy for Japan, for the past many years.

At times like these, we tend to take the cold stance of a rational observer. We leave behind the people who are still excited, while nonchalantly preparing for the realistic scenario.

By doing this, however, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity for imagining the best way to conduct the Olympics, in the new disruptive era we have entered.

We continue to pretend that things can be scheduled far into the future, that traditional norms must remain untouched, and that all voices and interests can be satisfied. We continue to pretend that the world is a static place, despite the last many months being the starkest testimony of how that no longer is the case.

Now is the time to learn how to be comfortable with uncertainty.

Only by being comfortable with uncertainty, can an intractable situation like the 2020 Olympic's future be tackled.

What happens in the next few months will depend a lot on how well the key stakeholders display this trait. To better understand what this entails, consider the following questions:

Can they focus on direction, instead of the destination? Can they distill the real meaning and value of the Olympics, one that spans individual interests? Can they build a shared vision of how this can be upheld in a way that is most appropriate for the current situation?

Can they test ideas and learn quickly from them? Can they test various types of solutions for viability? Can they do so without stirring up a public frenzy?

Are they comfortable with the solution being an emergent one? Can they let go of accumulated "baggage" if and when a great solution shows up in front of them? Can they make decisions in speeds that are unthinkable?

These are just a handful of considerations that will determine the outcome of the next few months. It will test how agile the stakeholders can be at times in which uncertainty is the "new normal".

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The world-famous Japanese animation film "Akira" chillingly prophesied the current situation: a Tokyo Olympics near cancellation.

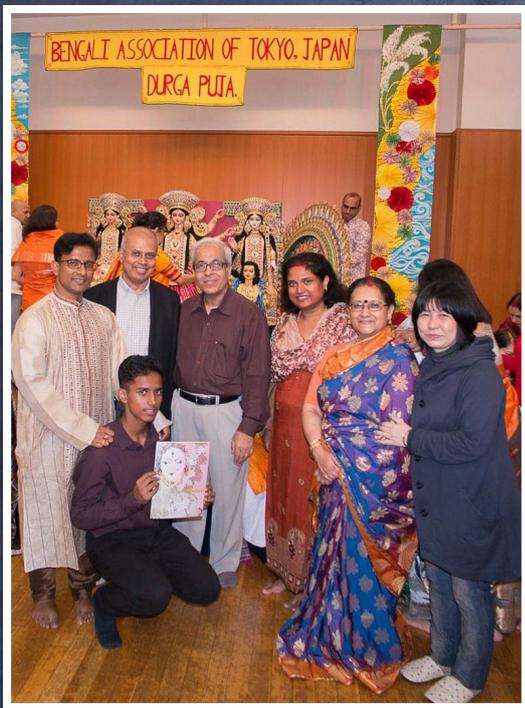
[\[VIDEO\] The Impact of Akira: The Film that Changed Everything](#)

This was in 1988. The film shocked audiences around the world through its visual realism and complex plot lines. It was a reimagining of a medium that traditionally targeted a less mature audience. It kicked off a new genre of sophisticated Japanese anime, which lasts to this day.

"Akira" takes place in a futuristic "Neo Tokyo". Since then, the city has held an image that is dark, elusive, yet astonishingly functional and modern - a "city from the future", if you may.

Much in the way that "Neo Tokyo" did, it's time for the real Tokyo to inspire the rest of the world.

This time, by reimagining the 2020 Olympics. ■



Impermanence

- Twisha Dasgupta

When I was twelve years old, I was sitting at a desk in my geography class after I had finished a test, distractedly staring outside the window until my teacher handed me a book on Japan to keep me occupied. I started idly skimming through the pages until I landed on one about cherry blossoms, otherwise known as sakura. As a young girl, I proudly claimed that pink was my favorite color, so seeing the copious amounts of delicate pink flowers on these cherry blossom trees standing



out against the blue sky had me aching to go see them in person. If Japan was a country where I could see these beautiful flowers, I wanted to be there! Just a few years later, I was standing in the international terminal in Frankfurt Airport with my family with several suitcases stuffed to the brim. Moving to Japan was something new and exciting for me, but also bittersweet, as I was leaving some friends behind. However, I still longed to see those cherry blossoms in the springtime and to live the fantasy I had as a daydreaming middle schooler.

In just a few months' time, the cherry blossom season had arrived. It was better than the pictures, than my daydreams, than anything I could have imagined. The cherry blossom trees were in full bloom, and I could see rows of them every time I went outside. Soon enough, my phone's camera roll was filled with pictures of sakura, I was visiting all the parks I could find to view the flowers and having picnics under the trees became an almost daily occurrence for me. However, just in a meager two weeks' time, more and more of the sakura were falling to the ground. Of course, I knew that the cherry blossoms wouldn't stay forever, but this felt tragically short. What I didn't expect was how beautiful this change would be. I could probably say that the last few days of the cherry blossom season were surprisingly my favorite. Fallen light pink flowers lined the streets and I could occasionally catch glimpses of the flowers on certain trees. Sometimes a gust of strong wind

would blow the petals around the streets and through the sky. Eventually, the cherry blossoms were gone and replaced with bright green leaves, starting the cyclical process once again.

The feeling I had at the end of the cherry blossom season was much like the one I felt standing in the airport with my family. It was dichotomous; I was excited to create new experiences but sad to leave what I knew behind. I've considered myself to be an adaptable person, but it's human nature to want to hang on to the things we know. To crave a sense of security and stability. What the cherry blossoms taught me was that change can be beautiful. We can appreciate the wonderful things we've seen, but if we refuse to embrace change, we can't fully appreciate what's to come.

While studying a piece of Japanese literature at school, I came across the phrase 'mono no aware', which can be loosely translated to 'an empathy of things'. This phrase embraces the idea of impermanence. Nothing lasts forever and everything is transient, but this is something we can both be saddened by and appreciative of. It explains that bittersweet feeling that we get when we move on to a new phase in our lives. While the cherry blossom season seemed entirely too short, it taught me to embrace the idea of impermanence. I might not see cherry blossoms again for a while, but I can scroll through the multitude of pictures I have in my phone or simply reflect on the elation I felt sitting on a crinkly plastic mat under the trees with my family and eating convenience store food.

Our time in Tokyo was perhaps entirely too short, but that's precisely what made it so magical. I'll never forget the feelings I got when I first came here; bumping into things because I was too busy craning my head up to see the large skyscrapers, looking with wonder at the beautiful shrines I came across on the streets and eating the most incredible food. Most importantly, I'll never forget the friends we've made here. When one moves around a lot, it can be difficult to find communities to fit into. However, in the BATJ community, we have met some of the most welcoming, kind and friendly people and have felt such warmth and love. We've had so many conversations with like-minded people and made some lifelong friends. I would say the phrase 'mono no aware' does a good job of expressing how we are feeling. It's bittersweet to leave behind the community and the people we've met here, but we will always treasure the memories that we've made and the experiences that we've had. While we knew our time in Tokyo was not going to last forever, in some ways, it does feel like it's ended too soon. But Japan has taught us to embrace the beauty of impermanence, and we will forever remember the incredible times that we've had here. ■

The Trunks

- Piali Bose

There trunks lay side by side under the four-poster bed in the ancestral home. One belonged to the mother in law, one belonged to my hostel days and one gifted by my mother during my marriage—their colour fading in increasing order of age. Their contents almost forgotten, the urge to look into them once in a while was short lived thinking of the dust and mites that might follow suit. So, they lay there as testimony to decades of nostalgia filled memories. The visits to the home became far and infrequent but the lingering urge to open the trunks kept niggling somewhere in the back of the mind. It was as if something beckoned, something unfinished or some deep longing to look back onto the past without really wanting to.

So, one day the task was taken upon and the journey back to the old home was solely made to bring back at least one of them to our new house. The intention was more with the aim of *mottainai*, upcycling old things into my new home and bring in a corner of nostalgia in the décor.

The oldest of the three, belonging to my mother in law had rusted all over it and strangely was devoid of any contents (when did we empty it all or was it emptied by her long back?). Without wanting to delve onto the reasons and the rest, I wanted to get over with the entire cleaning and salvaging ritual-fast, real fast when suddenly something in the blackness of the box touched my hand. A tattered diary with its yellowing pages lay there, sad and forgotten inside its emptiness. Curiosity won over my initial hesitation of reading someone's diary whom I had never known in her physical self and her existence in my life was through photographs and reminiscence. She had passed away when she was still young. She was mentioned as a wife, mother and a widow who did her best with three children in a joint family until death snatched her away too soon.

The diary was hers. It had no name to claim her ownership but for the handwriting. The ink had faded but the words were legible. Initial pages were filled with Tagore songs (she was a gifted singer, I had heard) and then there were grocery lists, lists of valuables, reminders to herself, a feeble attempt at penning a daily diary and finally some post cards and inland letters folded in between the pages. Letters to her husband, living in a faraway town. The inland letter had its space divided between her and the children. In most of them, she updates about all the children and elders in the joint household, the neighbourhood news, the political situation of the 70s, and her daily unsung ritualistic life. In that one single blue page, I saw her universe unfolding in crisp short sentences. The other two pages were reserved for the children to update their father about their activities, almost an extension of what she had already written and somewhere it was understood to be a directive for a discipline. Amidst all this, that one sentence seemed to float in her writings *tumi kobe ashbe? Ekhane pujor akash*.

When are you coming home? The autumn sky is ready to welcome the Pujas!

That one sentence of longing was intimate enough to convey her eagerness, her longing, her emptiness and her love for her husband. The economy of words, the economy of emotions ability to have her own despite restrictions, the perseverance -all reflected *Gaman* (enduring the unbearable with patience and dignity) in that one blue page. They were seemingly ordinary and mundane but they spoke volumes about

the time and the people, who had the ability to take the family, the neighbourhood and the society with them.

I redefined the idea of *Ma* in my life in the Japanese context- she is the emptiness that fills spaces whereas she is also the embodiment of omnipresence.

The second oldest trunk had its lock broken (a talismanic reminder to my university hostel days) when I had lost my keys and had it broken to access the contents. The trunk filled with my study notes (frayed but neatly organized) letters from home (father in his imitable tongue and cheek humour whilst from mother, epistles of her empty nest akin to the loss of a friend and letters of ambition from the elder brother. More letters from the new love, heart breaks, promises poetry and songs and of greeting cards, new friendships and so on. It was like a box of personalities unfolding before me. It was rediscovering those persons including myself lost in those pages of handwritten notes. The reflected self seemed to be whispering, *jake rakho, sei rakhe* (what you house, houses you).

Locked inside the trunk, but you carry the essence of *Nemawashi* within. The knowledge gathered, the relationship forged, the lesson learnt, the love retained and the experience gathered, life goes on.

The third and the youngest trunk, a memento of my marriage when ma had filled with brass utensils and other knick knacks she thought would come handy. Out popped a fan shaped handmade *Totwo-suchi* (a list of the gift articles given during a Bengali wedding) reflecting a day 23 years back and when the wedding entourage visited with each a tray in hand full of gifts and savouries. The trunk still shiny and proud of its youth seemed to be humming that same shehnai tunes or the baul songs that filled the air with the frenzied activity during a wedding. The loud laughter, the tingling sounds of bangles, the whish wash of the sarees overpowering the sniffles of the bride to be and the mother at times. How the anticipation of a new joy sounds like *oubaitori* (the idea that people like flowers bloom in their own time), that which is more than balances the doubts of a new life. It brought about a smile and the grey hair that fell onto my countenance, startled me back from my reverie.

A decision was made; the youngest of the lot would be filled with the nostalgia from the other two and carried back to the new home, coated and polished to give a makeover and stand in the corner as testimony of time. I thought I had established the perfect *wabi sabi* statement piece, it looked perfect, but soon it started resembling the fate of the ones we left behind.

This time, right before my eyes, decorated to be forgotten in a corner until THE PANDEMIC hit us.

Mono no aware, means the beauty that comes from sensitivity, awareness and impermanence of things.

Ichio ichi e means taking each moment as it comes, relish them, slow down.

Shibui means, the muted coolness of simplicity of minimalism

Post script: Any upheaval in the rhythm of life has multifarious consequences. The pandemic that hit the world has led to

unprecedented lifestyle changes not to mention reigniting the spiritual questions in mankind—the transience of life, the importance of the present, the fragility of the future, the futility of materialism and embracing the truth of fear and death. In these questions, deprived of material comforts, there has been a shift towards internalizing things. Taking it slow, creating joy with minimalistic ideas, gratitude for food, having the family together

and most importantly appreciation of what we have.

I saw this as nature's way of bringing us together and joining the fragmented world that we had become.

The trunk had finally reached *home*. ■

Still Alive

- Udita Ghosh

**If I lose my anger
Declare me dead to the world.**

**Know that I am no more,
If I can walk through this jagged world,
Full of mounds of pain piled high
Confronting ravines of cold entitlement,
Sharp thrilling flights of joy,
And rain-drenched regret and shame,**

**Without feeling each story
Like blood on my tongue
Holding each tale in my chest
Like grainy smoke I inhaled;
Sparing a sensation in my mind
In wonder at this disparate world,**

**And remembering tearfully
With agonizing awareness
That we can be better—
That we need not live
So inextricably entwined
In vicious collective butchery.**

Tribute to Sushant Singh Rajput

- Arjyama Choudhury

Unable to get you out of my mind
You are not the first one to go this way
But this time the pain did not subside

Neither were I your fan
Nor were you my inspiration
Why am I then feeling this now
Isn't this a strange connection?

Probably because your going away like this
Has revealed the YOU I was ignorant of
I now realized that a soul of your calibre
Only HE could take care of!

I have never thought of you
But now you are always on my mind
The mind has been stabbed so deep
Very rare of its kind!

The innocence in your eyes
The soul so witty and wise
I am wondering day and night
Why did you make that choice?

For my friends out here
Nothing is bigger than life
The pain and miseries are short lived
As long as you survive!

Never ever give up on living
Its too precious to lose
It doesn't let you walk again
Even if they find back your shoes!

Reminiscence – The awakening of spirits

- Soumitra Talukder

There comes a time,
When the horizons are the fathoms of being free!
The deliverance of soul in what you want to be,
While you try to nurture the whimsies of your spirits,
The sweat of success in the measure of triumph,
The zest of grit in thee.

There comes a time,
When you can smile on the recall of a rustic era,
And be proud of the heritage you bear to nurture life,
When a few faces look to you in benevolence,
For the pursue of the esse in virtue.

You look back to your roots in memoirs of a reverie,
And realize if at all there were ever any extent,
For the motives of your smile...
It may not be hard to believe,
That the Camelot you cherish and deserve,
Lies in the realm of your wishes.

Fall autumn as the aroma of fallen jasmine,
Creates the onset of festive in the stupor of a time,
The crimson sky gleams again in the seasons of reminiscence.
A light in message rise from the land of melange in unity,
And flies beyond the seas to the Avalon of the rising sun,
As the celebration of peace warms the hearts in abundance,
The unison of hearts far & near glows in marvels of deference.

The Broken Clock

- Somik Ghosh

When the CLOCK lost all its hand to TIME, it stopped!
It lost its pride after years of running a marathon
Now it's his time to hang his boots.....
And now Time shall go un-noticed!
They say the wrecker-in-chief is a tiny virus
What a havoc has it created, Oh! Jesus!

When days reduced to mere numbers
Seasonal changes were noticed
Just on your window pane
While holding the online shopping cart
You not brave enough to go to real mart
No Cherry blossoms, no summer BBQ, no fall colors
Since going out of home is an act of valor.
You stay cocooned in your own world
Amongst your closest family perhaps,
Devoid of other worldly disturbances.

When you lead your life online,
And you keep consoling your mind
Thinking "One day everything will be fine"
When going out of your home becomes an adventure
Proving the old proverb wrong
That "Humans are social creatures"
TIME my friend you have lost your luster
Putting all our plans on HOLD.
"TIME and Tide waits for none"
But I see you have stopped
With the broken CLOCK
Waiting endlessly for the world to recover
Wondering if this place will be the same ever!?

We are now living a timeless age
Not quite sure about coming days
Festivals, socializing, traveling
Have become virtual and lost its craze
Sure my TIME has stopped for ever it seems
And my mind can travel only backwards in my dreams
Now please spare me from your "TIME" shock
Rest in peace my BROKEN CLOCK.