

Learning from Anecdotes & Stories

- Swami Medhasananda

I Can



There was an American chemistry teacher who also taught his students moral and ethical values for good living. One day he suddenly wrote "I CANNOT" on the blackboard and asked his students, "Is this right? Is this statement correct?" They soon understood what he meant and answered, "No, it's not correct, Sir. Please delete NOT". After erasing NOT, he said, "Students, always remember, I CAN". The teacher and his words were imprinted in the hearts of the students forever.

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The President of a company wanted to raise a donation of five million yen for natural disaster recovery efforts and told his employees of his idea. At first, they said, "It's impossible. One million might be possible; but five million, never." The President insisted, "I don't come to you in order to hear you say, No, we can't. I just want to hear your suggestions on how we can." They were so impressed with his commitment that they started to suggest many ways of making the impossible possible. As a result, they held a charity concert with well-known musicians and raised the sum they aimed for.

We can if we think we can.

Never Give Up

In the life of Swami Vivekananda, there's a story where Swamiji and his group were climbing the Himalayas on a pilgrimage. Their journey got more difficult as oxygen became thinner, and they had little food. When they came very close to the summit, an older pilgrim said, "I will stop here now. It's impossible for me. It's really a pity, but I cannot seem to reach the summit."

Swamiji encouraged him with a bunch of hopeful words. "Why will you stop now?" he said. "I know this is really tough, but just turn around and see who came all the way up here from the flat land. You did. You, yourself, climbed up here. Yes, this is tough, but please don't stop. Never give up. You can do it. You have only a few miles to go. Please don't stop." Cheered by Swamiji's inspiring words, the old pilgrim said, "Yes, you are right. I came up all the way, let me keep going up!"



Don't Grumble, Just Play

In an interview Dale Carnegie, the popular writer of inspiring books had with President Eisenhower of the USA, Carnegie asked, "Who affected and inspired you most?" Eisenhower answered, "It was not a famous person who inspired me most....It was My Mother who did." Then the President continued, "One day our family was playing cards. I grumbled when a joker came to me. Then she suddenly stopped the game and said this seriously. "Children, I have a valuable piece of advice to give you. In playing cards, as in life, sometimes you get good cards and sometimes bad ones. Do you grumble each time you're dealt a bad hand, saying God is unfair? Don't complain; accept it and face it. Even God's devotees can't control the cards they receive. Just accept whatever hand you're dealt and keep playing. With persistence, you will eventually win."



Serving as a military officer in wartime and later as president of the USA means facing extraordinary difficulties. However, Eisenhower remembered his mother's words all the time and practiced them which sustained him all through.

How a Single Noble Practice Saves

Hafez, the saintly Persian Sufi poet (1315-1390) was poor and a bit eccentric. He did not do much spiritual practice, but he would visit the tomb of an Islamic saint every evening, light candles and pray there without fail.

One day he realised he had fallen in love with a very beautiful woman, a courtesan, who was the favourite of wealthy clientele. So popular was she that she had become wealthy herself. Of course, her fees were much too high for the poor Hafez, so he could not approach her. Nevertheless, in order to curry her favour he would arrive very early in the morning and clean her yard before the servants woke. This continued for several days. When the servants mentioned the matter to their mistress, she instructed them to hide next time and capture the do-gooder.

The following morning the servants obeyed the command of their mistress, got hold of Hafez, and brought him to the lady. She asked Hafez the purpose of his secret and silent service to her. He answered that he liked her very much, but that he was too poor to approach her. Pleased, she ordered her servants to bathe and clothe him nicely, and she told him that she would meet him later that night. Throughout the morning and afternoon, Hafez was very excited. But as evening approached he suddenly remembered his unflinching practice of going to the tomb and lighting candles. This created a great inner struggle

within him, should he meet his favourite lady as he had long cherished and was now only a matter of waiting an hour or two, or go to the tomb as was his usual practice. Since he had not missed a single evening going to the tomb, he finally decided to run there first.

Upon his arrival, he found two men there drinking wine poured from an earthen jug and singing and dancing very happily. They offered the poet a drink, but he declined, saying he did not consume alcohol. Many times they entreated him, but he did not relent so they dashed the cup they had prepared for him to the ground. At this point, the poet relented and begged for a little sip, but he was told that this could not be done. He was, however, welcomed to taste whatever remained in the broken cup. The moment Hafez took a taste, he too began singing and dancing, because the drink he took was not ordinary alcohol, but the nectar of divine love.

In the meantime, the courtesan had been looking for Hafez and found him at the tomb. Seeing her, he motioned to her to do as he had done. The moment she tasted that nectar, she too became joyful and danced. As it happened, the two other men were, in fact, angels.

Dharma Finally Triumphs

A particular king once announced that he would host a bazaar near his palace. He invited everyone—artisans, shopkeepers, and the general public—to participate, promising that he would purchase any unsold items himself. The bazaar drew a large crowd, with vendors selling a variety of goods, from vegetables to sweets. Among them were artisans and craftsmen making all sorts of goods, including figurines of gods and goddesses. There were statuettes of Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, etc. Now, while Lakshmi is the goddess of fortune and wealth, there is also her opposite, Alakshmi, the goddess of misfortune and poverty. An artisan having crafted statues of both Lakshmi and Alakshmi, brought them to the bazaar for sale. The bazaar was a success, but upon closing it was found that only the statue of Alakshmi remained unsold. True to his word, the king purchased it and took the image to his palace.

Taking a walk very early one morning a few days later the king happened upon a most beautiful and radiant woman adorned in the finest materials and jewels leaving the palace. When the king asked who she was and where she was going, she introduced herself as 'Lakshmi' and said she had come to bid the king goodbye. The king, dismayed, asked her why she must leave the palace. She explained that she and Alakshmi cannot dwell in the same house, and so she departed. The king thought this couldn't be helped and took it in stride.

A couple of days later, again on his morning walk, the king was visited by the luminous form of Saraswati, the goddess of music, art, and learning, dressed in white, about to exit by the palace gate. As she was leaving the palace, the king asked who she was. Learning that she was Saraswati, she too told the king that she had to leave the palace because she and Lakshmi were twins and they lived together, and since Lakshmi had already left the palace, she must leave too. Without Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth in the palace, the king had already become poor. And now, with Saraswati's exit, the king foresaw his court of scholars departing soon. Yet, he took her departure in stride as well.

Some mornings later the king saw another radiant figure with an elephant's head. This was Ganesha, the god of wisdom, success and good luck, who informed the king he must leave the palace. When the king asked why he was leaving, he replied that if Lakshmi could not stay and Saraswati cannot stay, then he too must go. Ganesha is the god of success, and without Ganesha, the king was sure to face hardship. "So be it," thought the king.

Again after a few mornings, he witnessed a large, powerful, yet radiant man leaving the palace. "Who are you?" asked the king. The deity introduced himself as Kartika, the god of war and general of the army of gods, and the bestower of power and courage. He said that since Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Ganesha had departed he too must leave the palace because they all belonged to the same divine family. "This, too, cannot be helped," thought the king.

Long after this, the king noticed a bright, elderly figure quietly sneaking away from the palace. The king approached and asked who he was. "Dharma" said the figure. Dharma is the god of righteousness. The king again asked why he too was leaving and he replied since Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartika were gone, he too must leave. This time the king intervened and commanded. "No, You must not!"

"Why should I not?"

"Because I have sacrificed everything for your sake! I have lost wealth, learning, success, and the protection of the army, all just for keeping my promise!"

The god Dharma had to acquiesce to the king's just claim and, as a result, made his way back to the palace. Consequently, one by one, the other gods and goddesses who had departed also returned, as Dharma is revered as supreme among them all.

Worldly Love Versus Divine Love

One day an old man visited the house of his friend who was also old. As it often happens at the old age people suffer from the loss of memory and the host also had a similar problem. Now to entertain the visiting friend the host requested his wife addressing, "Darling, will you serve a cup of tea to my dear friend?"

The wife brought the tea. Then the host made a further request to his wife addressing, "Honey, will you kindly bring some cookies also?"

When the obliging wife had gone to bring cookies, the visiting old man exclaimed to his host friend "John! Amazing! I am so much impressed! Wonderful!

"What is amazing? What makes you so much excited, Chris?"

"John! I wonder how you can still cherish such a deep love for your wife after so many years of marriage!"

Then the host friend whispered in his friend's ear, "Chris, it is not really so. I often forget my wife's name. Hence, I managed by addressing her sometime 'Darling', sometimes 'Honey'.

Worldly love grows, reaches its peak and then mostly wanes. But the love for God grows and grows until it becomes infinite.

Parables of Gautam Buddha

- Swami Divyanathananda

The word 'Buddha' actually means one who is enlightened. The great prophet of Asia, whom the world knows as Gautam Buddha was born as Siddhartha to *Suddhodhana* and *Maya Devi*. *Suddhodhana* was the chief of the *Sakya* clan. The luxuries of the kingdom could not hold him long to its shackles. One day, when he ventured outside the palace, he saw a sick man, an old man, and a corpse. It was the first time in his life that he had witnessed such sights and it stirred his consciousness and made him think deeply about the purposes of life. He realised there were innumerable sufferings in human life, and these would surely come to him too. Then what is the purpose of life? Why do people suffer? Is it possible to remove suffering? This is one salient feature of great persons. They look at ordinary things and situations differently than we do. Their questions are always deep. When Sri Ramakrishna started worshipping the divine Mother *Bhavatarini* at *Dakshineswar*, he would ask to himself "Is this Mother real, or only an image of clay? Does she really partake of the food offerings? Does she listen to our prayers?" Such types of questions seldom cross our minds. Prince Siddhartha developed extreme disgust for the luxuries of his palace and he became eager to find out answers to the questions he was seeking. So, he renounced the world and became a hermit. He underwent extreme hardships to know the truth. His body was falling into pieces, finally, he realised extreme physical hardship won't land him anywhere, and he had to follow the middle path. Finally, at Bodhi Gaya he attained Nirvana. The truth which Buddha got was the "Truth underlying life as a whole, namely, Life is full of Suffering, Desire is the cause of Suffering, Suffering ends at the destruction of Desire and Desire is destroyed by Right Living." These are known as the four great truths and his teachings are based on these four truths.

He then set himself up to share the truths that he received from the depths of his consciousness to the entire humanity. He gave his first sermon at Sarnath, near Varanasi and slowly went to other parts of India. Many kings, learned men and women, as well as persons of ill repute and common men, became his disciples. His wife and son too renounced and became *bhikkhus*. Buddha's fame spread in other parts of the world too. He lived till he was 80 years old.

Buddha did not give much emphasis to rites and rituals, instead, He laid stress on morality and ethics. His teachings were simple and practical.

Gautam Buddha often used interesting anecdotes and parables during his talk, and today I am going to narrate a few of those parables.

There was a wealthy, but foolish man. Once when his neighbour built a three storied building, he became jealous, he also decided to construct a similar one. So, he called a carpenter and explained him what he wanted. The carpenter made the foundation of the building first, followed by the first floor, then the second and so on, at this point, the wealthy man became impatient and said, why do you have to do all these? I want the third floor built directly, that's all!!

This story teaches us that if we have a goal, we must do the groundwork first. Without doing the first things first, the result won't come on its own. We cannot reach the goal if we work haphazardly, ignoring the initial steps.

For those who seek enlightenment, Gautam Buddha laid down three ways of practice. The disciplines of practical behaviour, second- right concentration and third- wisdom. To illustrate, a farmer desiring a crop, first ploughs the ground, after the ground is ready, does irrigation, and finally sows the seeds. He removes the weeds carefully which grows from time to time, and he patiently follows these steps for several days. Instead of doing that, if today he ploughs the land, tomorrow he can't sow the seeds and day after tomorrow he can't get the crop. Just as the farmer patiently does all the hard work for getting a good crop, similarly, the person who travels along the path of enlightenment must plough the mind with cultivating good virtues, he must remove the evil desires with the help of discrimination, then sow the seeds of concentration and wisdom. In this process, if he travels along the path, he will attain enlightenment in the course of time.

When one seeks enlightenment, one should focus on the goals and align the practices which will take him towards his cherished goal. One should be careful that he does not move away from the goal. To illustrate this fact, he used this analogy:

If a log of wood which is being carried through the running stream of water does not get grounded or is not taken away by any man or does not decay, then sooner or later will reach the sea. Similarly, the seeker of enlightenment should be careful from the snares of maya and should not be deluded by the outer beauty of unreal things. Sometimes spiritual aspirants give too much emphasis on hard austerities, torment their body but fail to make considerable progress in spiritual life. On the other hand, some aspirants are puffed up in vain glory about their renunciation. So, one has to be careful that one is not caught up in these. Keeping these in mind, if he carries out his spiritual practices diligently, ultimately, he will attain nirvana. Only one who is not careful and not discriminative and is more intent on the method rather than the goal, gets caught up.

When a seeker after enlightenment travels in this life-journey he comes across many unpleasant things, which might create momentary disturbance in his mind. How should he deal with them? Gautam Buddha, to explain this point said:

There are three kinds of persons, the first one is like letters carved in rock. If they become angry, their anger and grudge are permanently imprinted on their mind. The second are like letters written on sand, they can be quickly erased. They might become angry sometimes, but their anger quickly passes away. The third one is like letter carved in water; their mark doesn't remain even for a moment. In other words, abuse and criticism does not even touch them. They are the least affected.

In our life and in the world around us, we see the working of opposite forces: Heat and cold; pleasure and pain; happiness and sorrow; rich and poor; etc. So, we always have to adjust with them. Life is not always sweet and honey. Disturbing situations, if they arise, we have to face them patiently and bear with them. Buddha gave an illustration:

Once, there was a tussle between the head and tail of a

snake. The tail argued, "It is not proper that always you should go first." The head said, "it is absurd on your part to say so, the tail naturally remains always behind. Stay where you are." Thus, one day there was a tug-of-war between the two. Finally, the snake broke into two parts and was finished.

Buddha himself, after undergoing hard austerities felt that too hard austerities lead one nowhere. Then he decided to take the middle path, i.e., neither too much austerities nor indulging in too much comfort. This analogy explains.

Once, there was a spiritual aspirant by the name of *Shrona*. He was zealous of achieving enlightenment, so underwent hard physical austerities. Finally, the body started bleeding. When his teacher saw this, he said to *Shrona*, "Have you seen a harp? If it is fastened too tightly, it doesn't produce the right sound, on the other hand, if it is fastened too loosely, then also it won't produce the proper sound. In other words, the tuning has to be optimum, which will produce the desired note. In the same way, while performing physical austerities, we have to bear in mind that we have to follow the middle path. Too much hard austerities weaken the body and mind, whereas indulging in luxuries will make our life easy-going, mind will become shallow and our zeal for enlightenment will decrease.

The following illustration highlights the fact that an iron will and determination can make the impossible, possible.

Once in the Himalayan mountains, in a bamboo grove, there lived a parrot. There also lived many other birds and animals and they lived peacefully. One day, a fire broke out by the rubbing of bamboos and the fire started spreading fast. The birds and other animals started going out hither and thither to save their lives. However, the parrot was looking for ways to do something for extinguishing the fire. Nearby there was a large pond, and immediately the parrot hit upon a plan. It flew to that pond and dipped itself in that water, came back to the place of the fire and started dripping water there. It went there again and again and repeated the same exercise. A heavenly God appeared and said, "You have a large heart, but do you think you can do much with this effort?" The parrot said, there is nothing in this world that I can't do so long as I have a pure and mighty will. If necessary, I shall continue this through my next life also. God was pleased and by his divine power extinguished fire in that jungle.

In the same way, karmas of million births can be wiped away in one birth, when we are determined to put our heart and soul for achieving the task and take refuge in the Lord. In the path of spiritual enlightenment self-effort and divine grace, both are necessary.

In a certain kingdom, there was a custom of abandoning aged people in an inaccessible mountain. There was a minister in that kingdom, who had a father, who was also ageing. That minister found it difficult to take him to that mountain, so dug an underground cave and hid his father.

One day, a God appeared before the king and asked a question. "If two serpents are kept nearby each other, can you tell the gender of them? How can you find out the answer?" The King was perplexed and could not answer. So he announced that anybody who could give an answer to this question will be rewarded. The minister knew his father to be very wise, so went to him and asked the question. His father said, "that which moves is female and that, which lies still is male."

Then another question: "If you keep two horses, one the mother and another its offspring, but grown up and of the same height as of the mother, how can you know which is the mother and which is its offspring?" The king unable to find the answer, sought the help of his minister, who again went to his father

and came back with the reply: "Give some hay. The Mother will pass on to its offspring." Then another question. "Who is the one when being asleep is called the awakened one, and on being awake is called the sleeping one?" "It is the one who is under training for enlightenment. He is awake when compared to those who have not started on the path of enlightenment; He is asleep and when compared to those who have reached enlightenment." - came the reply.

The king was very much impressed with the answers. When he discovered that the father of the minister had given the answers to those questions, he realised the mistake of locking up aged persons and abolished the law.

Once in a certain village, there was a young boy who was raised by his parents. In the course of time, the father died, after which he lived with his mother. After some time the young boy got married. In the beginning, they lived happily, but soon, misunderstandings started to show up between the mother and his wife and it aggravated so much that the mother-in-law had to leave the household and started living separately.

Now after some time, a child was born to this couple. Soon, rumour reached the mother-in-law that her daughter-in-law was saying to everybody that until her mother-in-law was there in the house, nothing worthwhile had happened in the family and only after she left the house the child was born. Hearing this, the mother-in-law was greatly disturbed. It roused so much anger in her that she said, it seems that righteousness has disappeared from this earth. She wanted to hold funeral service and burn righteousness. Then a God appeared there and wanted to stop her in various ways, but in vain. Then he said, in that case, let us burn the child and her mother.

Then the mother-in-law realised her mistake and begged God for forgiveness and asked him to protect the mother and child. At that time her daughter-in-law also realised her mistake and went to the cemetery and brought the mother-in-law back to the house.

Sujata was the wife of a rich merchant called *Anathapinda*. But she was arrogant and nagging and often quarrelled with the family members over small matters. Once Gautam Buddha happened to visit their house and in course of time, learnt about the arrogant behaviour of *Sujata*. Addressing *Sujata*, he said, "*Sujata*, do you know, there are seven types of wives. There is one, who is like a murderer. She has an impure mind, doesn't honour her husband and consequently turns her mind to another man.

Then, there is a wife who is like a thief. She consumes the hard-earned money of her husband and spends them on luxury and other physical comforts and if necessary, steals money also.

There is a wife who is like a master. She rules the household and has even upper hand over her husband. Often she scolds the husband with harsh words.

There is also a wife, who is like a Mother. She takes care of her husband and treats her as her own child.

Then there is a wife who is like a sister and there is also a wife who is like a friend. Both these types are modest in their behaviour and take proper care of the husband and at times of crisis, give the right support.

Lastly, there is a wife who is like a maidservant. She serves her husband and other family members faithfully. She has no expectations, no resentments, but silently serves the family."

Then the blessed one said, "*Sujata*, to which category do you belong?" *Sujata* at once realised her mistake and said, "I would like to be like the last one".

Sujata then slowly changed her behaviour, served her husband well and together they sought enlightenment.

Life and it's Meaning: The Vedanta View

- Suneel Bakhshi

I have contributed to Anjali several times over the last decade. Each time I benefited from a review of my early drafts by Swami Nityasuddhananda of Ramakrishna Math at Kankhal in India. I had the blessings of Swami Ji's teachings for ten long years, until he passed away very suddenly last year, and I use this opportunity of writing for Anjali to pay my respects once more to Swami Ji.

My intention in the 2023 edition of Anjali is to summarise key tenets of a wonderful book I that I came across only this past year. It is full of profound teachings, each beautifully and concisely summarised, many of which I had slowly uncovered over the years in my conversations with Swami Nityasuddhananda. This book, published in 2004 and written by Swami Adiswarananda, Minister and Spiritual Leader of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre of New York, is titled "The Vedanta Way to Peace and Happiness".

I cannot recommend this book highly enough to lay people curious to understand the framework of the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. The Swami writes that "the principles of the Vedanta are scientific because they are verifiable and repeatable, democratic because they foster individual freedom, universal because they apply to all people at all time, pragmatic because they focus on human problems and development, and psychological because they relate to human experience."

Many readers of Anjali would know that the Vedanta is the teaching of the major Hindu scriptures, deriving its authority from the four Vedas : the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, and the Atharva Veda. The Upanishads are the concluding portions of the Vedas (known as Vedanta), which describe profound spiritual truths.

The Swami writes that "the spiritual crisis of our age has highlighted the importance of the message of Vedanta, the crown jewel of Hinduism, which is based on a set of universal principles. Vedanta is reflected in the traditions of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other Eastern spiritual paths. Vedanta is the message of the Upanishads, the voice of the Bhagavad Gita, and the song of the prophets and Godmen, past and present."

In this brief essay for Anjali I will attempt to show the Swami's piercing insights as well as his clarity of thought, all based on empirical observations of life which I believe are effectively the first principles underlying the framework of the Upanishads. The extracts I have selected and collated below are in my view the key building blocks of the book and reflect the eloquence of the Swami, as well as his deep knowledge and wisdom.

I have rearranged the sequence only slightly in light of my own experience in reading, re-reading and then reflecting on the messages embedded in the book. I hope this collation inspires at least some readers of Anjali to want to learn more about the life and teachings Swami Adiswarananda, and as a result to enjoy as I have, our own rich heritage that much better.

LIST OF EXTRACTS

- Harmonising Faith and Reason.
- Grasping the Essentials of the spiritual quest - Direct Experience.
- The Ultimate Reality, which Vedanta describes as Brahma.
- The Universe, as an apparent manifestation of Brahma.
- The Human Individual, essentially a soul using its mind and body as instruments to gain experience.
- The Three Bodies of a human individual : al, subtle and causal.
- The Five Sheaths : psychophysical layers which constitute a human personality.
- The Three States of Consciousness which describe the full spectrum of human experience.
- The Fourth State, which allows discrimination between the Real and the unreal.
- The Problem of Good and Evil.
- The Values of Life - Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha.
- The Paths to the Goal - Bhakti-yoga, Karma-yoga, Raja-yoga, Jnana-yoga.
- The Steps toward the Goal of Direct Experience - scripture, teacher, practice and time factor.
- Liberation of the Soul.

All the selected passages below being directly from the book, please read these in the spirit of listening to the Swami in his own words.

HARMONISING FAITH AND REASON

In any walk of life, reason follows faith. We perceive a thing and then reason about it. This is also the process in the realm of religion. That which is envisioned by faith is systematised by reason for the understanding of the average mind. We reason about a thing as long as we have not developed faith in the existence of that thing or we are doubtful about its existence. Faith is, therefore, the mature form of reason. The contentions of Vedanta are marked by several points of emphasis, the first of which is that in fact the validity of Truth depends neither on faith nor on reason but on the realisation of Truth in life. The Upanishadic exhortation is "Do not seek God but see him." It is seeing through the eye of integral vision, in which our entire self participates. Realisation of Truth proceeds from an inner maturity or evolution that begins with the dawning of faith. Faith matures into conviction through reasoning and discrimination; intellectual conviction about Truth inspires the mind toward uninterrupted concentration; and this concentration eventually culminates in the final revelation of Truth. Vedanta accepts both reason and faith as instruments for the realisation of the ultimate spiritual goal.

GRASPING THE ESSENTIALS

Vedantic reasoning is an attempt to plumb the depths of human personality to discover the Ultimate Reality that remains embedded within.

Swami Vivekananda described this essential concisely and powerfully more than 100 years ago as follows :

"Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity by controlling nature: external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy - by one, or more, or all of these - and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details."

THE ULTIMATE REALITY

Brahma is non dual Pure Consciousness, indivisible, incorporeal, infinite, and all-pervading, like the sky. Brahma is of the nature of Sat Chit Anand, or Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, the ground of all existence, basis of all awareness, and source of all bliss. Through its inscrutable power, called maya, the transcendent Brahman appears to be conditioned by time and space and to manifest itself as a personal God, the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe. Again, various seekers of God, depending on their advancement, perceive God differently. For example, to the beginner, God appears as an extra cosmic creator; to the more advanced seeker as inner controller; and to the perfect knower of God as being everywhere and in everything. Thus according to Vedanta, the supreme Godhead Brahma is both formless and endowed with many forms. Vedanta asserts that "truth is one : sages call it by various names" (Rig Veda 10.11.114.5).

THE UNIVERSE

Through its inscrutable power of maya, Brahma appears as the world of matter and souls and as endowed with the activities of creation, preservation, and dissolution. Maya is change and relativity. The question that naturally arises when considering the arguments of Vedanta is : if everything is all pervading Consciousness, why do we see multiplicity ? The answer is that it is due to ignorance (avidya). Avidya is darkness or the absence of the light of the Self. Avidya makes us believe that we are many, even though in reality that which exists is only one - one indivisible Consciousness appearing in multitudes of separate centres of limited consciousness. We take our beliefs very seriously, but in fact there are numberless instances demonstrating that our beliefs are not based on so-called reality : they are merely subjective perceptions. As just two examples, (1) for us the earth has weight, but the universe itself has no weight, and (2) we experience the sky as blue and curved like a vault, but we know this experience to be an optical illusion.

Avidya is essentially that which obstructs the vision of truth. In the language of religion, avidya is sin; from the perspective of ethics, it is immorality; from the point of view of aesthetics, it is ugliness; and in the realm of logic, it is fallacy. Vedanta describes Avidya as nether real nor unreal, and the concept of Avidya and its illusory character presupposes the existence of something that is real. As error implies truth, so illusion implies reality. Another name of Avidya is maya. Analysed further, maya is the very mind that attempts to divide the indivisible, to think the unthinkable, to limit the illimitable. Accord to Vedanta, the sufferings of life are due to the superimposition of maya on Brahman. Maya is the very fabric of life and cannot be fought or escaped; it can be overcome only by the knowledge of Brahman. So long as Truth is not known, maya is delusive; when it is known, maya is Brahman. Knowledge of Brahman is attained only when all superimpositions of maya are seen as illusory notions of the mind.

THE HUMAN INDIVIDUAL

According to the Vedanta, the human individual is essentially a soul that uses its body and mind as instruments to gain experience. Vedanta maintains that the macrocosm and the microcosm are built on the same plan, and that Brahman is the soul of both. As the soul of every being, Brahman is known as Paramatman. The Upanishads speak of the two souls dwelling, as it

were, side by side within each person; the real soul (Paramatman) and the apparent soul (Jivatman). The real soul is the witness consciousness, serene and detached. The apparent soul is the embodied soul, the experienter of birth and death, ever in quest of freedom and eternal life. The apparent soul is the ego self- the reflection of the real soul. The real soul has been described as Self and the apparent soul as non-Self.

THE THREE BODIES

According to Vedanta, a human individual has three bodies : physical, subtle and causal. The physical body is made up of the five basic elements - earth, air, water, fire and space (akasha) - and is subject to a sixfold change : birth, subsistence, growth, maturity, decay, and death. At death the physical body perishes and its five constituent elements are dissolved. The subtle body is made up of the subtle forms of the five basic elements that produced the physical body. It is the receptacle of thoughts and memories and continues to exist after death, serving as the vehicle of transmission. A human individual enters this world with a bundle of thoughts in the form of the mind, and also exits with a bundle of thoughts, some old and some new. The causal body, characterised by ego sense only, is finer than the subtle body. All three bodies are for the fulfilment of desires, gross and subtle. The soul is different from these three bodies.

THE FIVE KOSHAS (SHEATHS)

Vedanta scriptures describe the body-mind complex of a person as consisting of five psychophysical layers which constitute the personality.

The outermost layer is known as “annamaya-kosha”. This layer is the physical sheath, consisting of flesh, bone, blood and so forth. It has weight, colour, form and endures as long as it can assimilate food.

The second layer is called “pranamaya-kosha” or the sheath of vital force. It is considered a channel for the manifestation of cosmic energy. This vital force, the modification of cosmic energy, enters the body after its conception and leaves it at the time of its dissolution. This sheath too cannot be the real Self, since it too is subject to change and has a beginning and an end. It is merely a vehicle for the inner Self, the Reality dwelling within the sheaths.

The third layer is called the “manomaya kosha” or the sheath of mind, and it too is made of subtle matter. This third sheath permeates the two outer ones, for through this sheath an individual thinks and reacts, believes and doubts, and feels desires and attachments. The mind is the cause of all bondage, and again, the same mind is the cause of liberation. It cannot, however, be the real Self, because it is unsteady, and ever changing.

The fourth layer, the “vigyananaya-kosha”, is the sheath of intellect, or the discriminating faculty of a human being. It is finer than the mind and also more inward than it. The sheath also serves as a storehouse for the memories of past experiences, technically known as “samskaras” and is the seedbed of all thoughts and desires. Taken together, the sheaths of intellect, mind, and vital force make up the subtle body of an individual. It is really the subtle body made of thoughts that acts through the instrumentality of our physical body. Our thoughts are our actions in rehearsal.

The fifth layer is the sheath of bliss, “anandamaya-kosha”, through which the human individual experiences varying degrees of happiness. The sheath of bliss, being most proximate to the Self, reflects its light. Like the other sheaths, it too is a product of matter and is subject to change, and therefore this sheath also cannot be the real Self, which is self-existent, changeless, and free from all pairs of opposites.

All five sheaths, according to Vedanta, are modifications of matter, gross or subtle, and thus have no permanent reality. They appear to be endowed with consciousness because they reflect the consciousness of the Atman, or Self, their ground. All relative phenomena of the universe are, therefore, reflections of the Ultimate Reality, but these reflections often become distorted because of the imperfections in the medium of reflection. The so-called personality of a human individual is thus a shadow self, his or her real Self being the Atman (Pure Consciousness), which is the common Self of all beings. Thus the direct experience of the Atman is possible only when one is able to completely dissociate oneself from all five sheaths.

THE THREE STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

According to Vedanta, an individual normally experiences three states - waking, dream, and dreamless sleep - which represent three different aspects of our becoming. Vedanta considers that reality is not exhausted by the external waking

universe, whose conclusions are not seen as incorrect, but instead as incomplete. The dream state - where the waking world is replaced by a dream world with a dream subject, object, and instruments of knowledge - provides data for the conclusions of the subjective idealist, and these are also incomplete. Dreamless sleep is a unique experience, different from that of dreaming or waking. Vedantic reasoning analyses the respective experiences of the three states and concludes that Reality transcends all three.

TURIYA, THE FOURTH STATE

According to Vedanta, the Self of an individual is distinct from all three states of existence “waking, dream, dreamless sleep.” This Self is indwelling and is the experimenter of all three states, yet it remains unaffected by them. To the Vedantist, the body, mind and sense organs belong to the category of non-Self; they appear conscious only because they reflect the light of Consciousness or the Self. Turiya is the Absolute state, while the other three states of existence are relative. A relative phenomenon becomes meaningful only in the context of the Absolute. Conversely, when the Absolute is overlooked, a relative phenomenon becomes easily mistaken for the Real. When not illumined by the knowledge of Turiya, life is bound by the experiences of waking, dream, and dreamless sleep, creating continual crises. The goal of Vedanta is to resolve these crises by spiritually integrating the three states in the light of Turiya, or Self, which is their ground. The Self is the very essence of our being, while the three states comprise our existence. Knowledge of the Self alone can bridge the gulf that exists between essence and existence.

THE PROBLEM OF GOOD AND EVIL

Questions often asked include : Why do we suffer ? Why is there evil ? What is the source of evil ? If the creator God is all-loving, why does God allow this evil to take its toll ? According to Vedanta, reality is neither good nor evil. Good and evil are value judgments made by the individual mind in keeping with its inner disposition caused by past karma. Good is that which takes us near to our real Self, and evil is that which creates a distance between us and our real Self. The law of karma is the law of automatic justice. As one sows, so shall one reap. This is the inexorable law of karma, which says that though our will is free, we are conditioned to act in certain set ways. We suffer or enjoy because of the conditioning of our mind, and conditioning of the mind, accumulated through self-indulgence, cannot be overcome vicariously. The effect of karma can only be annulled by other karma. Vedantists are called upon to act in the living present, to change their fate by changing their way of life, their thoughts, and their actions. Our past determines our present, and our present will determine our future. To the contention that the law of karma does not leave any scope for the operation of divine grace, Vedanta's answer is that the grace of God is ever flowing equally towards all. The joy and suffering of a human individual are of his or her own making. Good and evil are mind made and not God created.

The law of karma exhorts a Vedantist to right actions, giving the assurance that just as a saint had a past, so a sinner has a future. Through the doctrine of rebirth and the law of karma, Vedanta seeks an ethical interpretation of life. The theory of the evolution of species describes the process of how life evolves. But the purpose of this evolution can be explained only by the doctrine of rebirth and the law of karma. The destiny of the soul is immortality through Self-realisation. Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute being its real nature, nothing limited can give it abiding satisfaction. Through its repeated births and deaths, it is seeking that supreme fulfilment of life.

THE VALUES OF LIFE

Vedas speaks of four values of life, of which Moksha, or liberation through Self-knowledge, is the fourth. The other three are Dharma, or practice of righteousness; Artha, or attainment of worldly prosperity; and Kama, or enjoyment of legitimate pleasures. Dharma calls for an individual to perform the duties of life in accordance with the laws of morality, ethics, and righteousness. Artha implies acquisition of wealth, necessary for the preservation of life and the promotion of the welfare of others. Kama is the enjoyment of legitimate pleasures, without which life becomes joyless and dry. These three values must find their fulfilment in the fourth, Self-knowledge. Moral perfection when not for the sake of Self-knowledge becomes nothing but enlightened egoism. Wealth and prosperity when not used for the sake of Self-knowledge breed delusion and attachment. Art and aesthetics that do not reflect the light of the Self degenerate into promiscuity. Science and technology when not directed to the attainment of Self-knowledge prove to be dangerous weapons of self-destruction. Therefore, the acquisition of wealth and the enjoyment of pleasures must be guided by Dharma, or righteousness, and governed by the goal of Moksha, or Self-knowledge.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE : FREEDOM OF THE SOUL

The supreme goal of life, according to Vedanta, is Moksha, or liberation, the realisation of the soul's identity with Brahman, the absolute Reality. It is not merely the cessation of suffering; it is the positive experience of intense bliss. Vedanta scriptures

designate this realisation as Self-knowledge. The main Upanishads repeatedly emphasise that Self-knowledge and immortality are synonymous.

The Katha Upanishad says : "Having realised Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying, and likewise tasteless, eternal, and odourless; having realised That which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great, and unchanging - one is freed from the jaws of death."

Immortality is not the result of any spiritual discipline. It is a revelation. Spiritual disciplines purify the heart, and in the mirror of the pure heart the immortal Self is reflected. Self-knowledge is a burning realisation that totally transforms the person. The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman. Self-knowledge, the Upanishads point out, must be attained in this very life. One who dies in bondage will remain bound after death. Immortality, in order to be real, must be experienced before death. The Katha Upanishad says : "If a man is able to realise Brahman here, before the falling asunder of his body, then he is liberated; if not, he is embodied again in the created worlds."

Self-knowledge is the consummation of all desires, According to the Vedanta scriptures, one should give up individual self-interest for the sake of the family, the family for the sake of the country, the country for the sake of the world, and everything for the sake of Self-knowledge. The liberated soul is the free soul, whose life and actions demonstrate the reality of God. Though living in the world of diversity, the free soul is never deluded by it, never makes a false step or sets a bad example. Virtues such as humility, unselfishness, purity, and kindness become natural for a free soul. A free soul bears no outward mark of holiness. As a fish swimming in water leaves no mark behind, as a bird flying in the sky leaves no footprint, so a free soul moves about in this world and departs it leaving no outward mark. While living in the body, the free soul may experience disease, old age and decay, but having recognised them as belonging to the body, remains undisturbed and even-minded.

THE PATHS TO THE GOAL

Vedanta advocates freedom in the practice of religion. It maintains that the path to God-realization cannot be the same for all. Spiritual disciples can never be standardised, because not all persons have the same inborn tendencies and temperament, and each must follow his or her own path.

According to Vedanta, there are four basic types of mind : emotional, active, mystical, and philosophical. And in keeping with the four types of mind, Vedanta prescribes the practice of four different paths known as "yogas" : bhakti-yoga, karma-yoga, raja-yoga, and jnana-yoga.

"Bhakti-yoga" is the path for the emotional type of person, where seekers worship a specific aspect of a personal God or a divine incarnation. The watchword of Bhati-yoga is : "Thy will be done", which denotes absolute self-surrender to God. Through self-surrender and ecstatic love, the seeker ultimately attains to God-vision.

The path prescribed for the active type of person is "karma-yoga", or the yoga of selfless activity. The watchword for this path is : "Work is worship." Karma-yoga is nonattachment in action. The practice of non attachment purifies the heart, and purity of heart leads directly to God-vision or self-knowledge.

For those who are mystical by nature, Vedanta prescribes "Raja-yoga", the yoga of concentration and meditation. The watchword for this path is "Know thyself". Through uninterrupted concentration and meditation, the seeker ultimately realises the true nature of the Self - pure, perfect, and immortal.

The path of "Jnana-yoga" is for those who are philosophical and rational in temperament. It is the path of relentless self-analysis, discrimination and renunciation. The watchword of this path is "The Self is Brahman". Through ceaseless meditation on the Self, the seeker attains union with It.

FOUR STEPS TOWARD THE GOAL

Direct experience of the Ultimate Reality is the goal of the spiritual quest. The reality of God can be neither proved nor disproved by reason. Emotional experiences too, do not constitute knowing. Direct experience is intuitive and immediate. It is corroborated by scripture, verified by reason, and felt within as deep and transforming knowledge. Such experience alone can silence all our doubts and give certainty to our conviction. Direct experience carries its own irrefutable testimony. It transforms us permanently.

But direct experience is not a sudden revelation or a spiritual windfall. It cannot be attained miraculously or vicariously, and there is no shortcut to it. According to Vedanta, there are four vital steps that a seeker takes to attain this direct experience. These steps are scripture, teacher, practice and time factor.

THE FIRST STEP : SCRIPTURE

The first step towards direct experience is the study of the scriptures. This provides the seeker with a spiritual hypothesis, or road map, for the journey. Yet, just as reading about a country, no matter how well described, cannot take the place of seeing it with one's own eyes, so study of scripture alone cannot be a substitute for direct experience. The path must be right, in keeping with the seeker's inner disposition and physical and mental fitness. How should he or she make the right choice ? Hence arises the necessity for a competent teacher.

THE SECOND STEP : TEACHER

The role of the teacher is indispensable in any spiritual path. The sacred texts of Vedanta maintain that no direct experience of the Real is possible without a teacher. Precepts are not enough to inspire us spiritually - we need examples. It is true that God alone is the ultimate guide and teacher, and those who can approach God directly with utmost sincerity, deep longing, and absolute self-surrender may not always need a human teacher. But earnestness, longing and surrender are very rare. Hence, there is the need of a teacher.

Divine incarnations and prophets set examples in this regard. Even though they were born with knowledge of their oneness with God, they accepted teachers. Sri Krishna, Shankaracharya, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda - all had spiritual teachers to guide them. The name may differ from one tradition to another. For example, in Yoga and Vedanta the teacher is called guru, or dispeller of ignorance; in some traditions of Christianity the teacher is called spiritual director; in Judaism, tzaddik; in Sufism, murshid. The task each performs is the same, leading the seekers in his or her care to spiritual enlightenment, or illumination. It is said that the seed and the field attract each other. When the field is ready, the seed comes. When we become ready, the true teacher appears. Perhaps the best way to find the true teacher is to make ourselves ready for his or her coming.

THE THIRD STEP : PRACTICE

After the seeker has been initiated into the sacred mysteries of the spiritual path, the latter begins the third step - spiritual practice, both foundational and structural :

Foundational practice is for control of the mind and structural practice for its regulation. Foundational practice calls for mastery of moral and ethical virtues via self control - that is, gaining control over body, mind and senses, which are accustomed to submitting to the demands of every impulse and passion. These are the distractions of desires, storms of passions, upheavals of emotions, and agitations of the subconscious. Only a seeker with a purified mind and moral stamina can overcome them and persevere in the path. Morality is the steel frame foundation of spiritual life.

Structural practice consists of prayer, ceremonial worship, meditation and self-enquiry, meant for directing the mind towards concentration, culminating in meditation, and meditation in absorption, ultimately with Truth revealing itself.

The two practices, foundational and structural, are interdependent and are meant to be carried out simultaneously. Spiritual practice ceases to be effective when not followed in both aspects - foundational and structural.

THE FOURTH STEP : TIME FACTOR

Direct experience of Ultimate reality cannot be programmed or scheduled. Human nature cannot be hurried. Spiritual urgency and hunger cannot be generated by artificial means. Our mind takes time to assimilate spiritual instruction and attain the desired spiritual growth. Our ingrained habits and deep-rooted tendencies cannot be overcome all at once, and counter habits are to be developed with intense effort. Again, direct experience of Reality is a gift of the Divine and not the result of mere effort. Grace descends only when we keep ourselves ready and wait patiently for it. Revelation comes in a flash, but it takes a lifetime of preparation to make us ready for that light.

LIBERATION OF THE SOUL

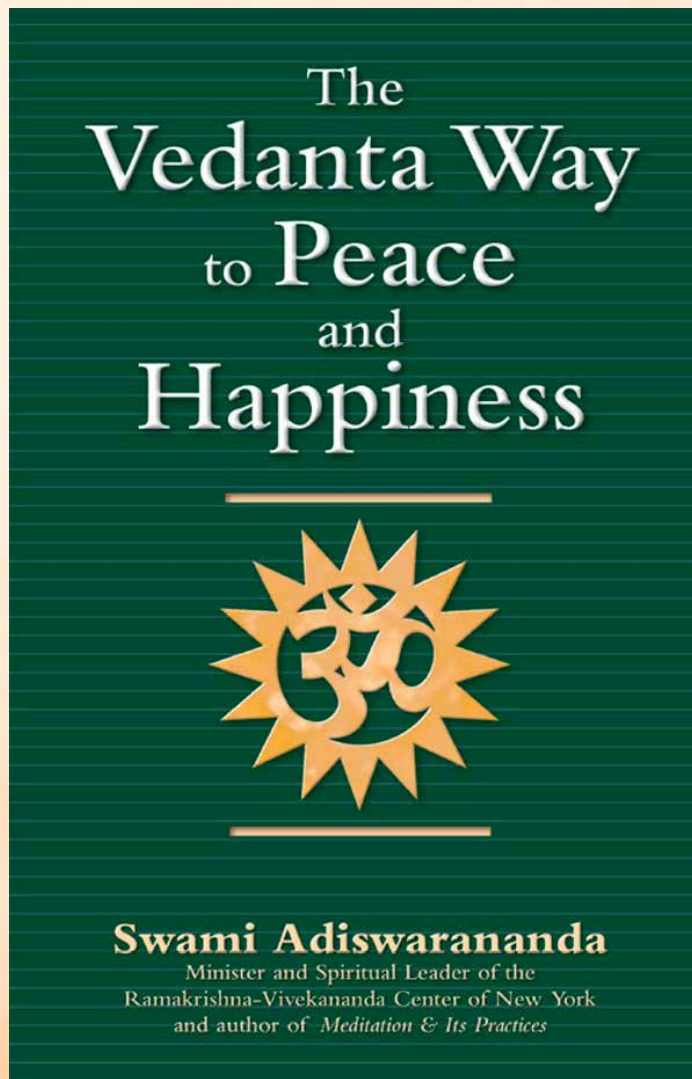
Liberation is the goal of all goals of life. It is the motive force behind all morality and unselfishness, prayer and meditation,

charity and austerity, performance of sacraments and doing good to others, all culminating in liberation - the infinite expansion of the soul - the promise and central teaching of every religion.

It is this promise that distinguishes the religious quest from all other quests of life. In the Vedanta view, liberation is "jivanmukti" or freedom while living in the body. Around the world and in many cultures and faiths at different points in human history, free souls have demonstrated the reality of God, the validity of sacred texts, the divinity of the human soul, and the oneness of existence. They are known as the awakened ones or illumined ones. Ever aware of their identity with all beings, they feel through all hearts, walk with all feet, eat through all mouths and think with all minds. They regard the pain and pleasure of others as their own pain and pleasure and their hearts overflow with compassion for all. In modern times, Sri Ramakrishna's life is said to have been a perfect example in this context.

The above extracts, while not meant to be complete, offer a framework that are consistent with frequent comments to me over the years by Swami Nityasuddhananda, often noting Swami Vivekananda's view that "the teachings of Vedanta are worth nothing if they are not problem solving". In my own life experience I am convinced that while the Vedanta is set in the most exhilarating and inspiring language, it is at the same time, strongly grounded in practical reality.

Swami Adiswarananda writes "...the teachings of Vedanta are useless unless they enrich our lives and lead us to peace and happiness. Vedanta reminds us that the course of life is mysterious. It is plagued by ceaseless changes and uncertainties. Pain, suffering, illness, old age and death are harsh realities that cannot be ignored or avoided. Vedanta maintains that our happiness depends upon peace of mind, peace of mind on self-control, and self-control on awareness of our true Self, which in turn counter the merciless and inexorable laws of life. The book presents both the facts and fiction of human life and assures us that regardless of background, culture, training or religious belief, all can follow the Vedanta way to resolve the problems of life and reach the supreme goal."



The Novel Coronavirus: Uncovering the Societal Challenges and Collective Responses - Ashoke Karmokar

The novel coronavirus disease, termed as COVID-19, first surfaced in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. This highly contagious disease, with pneumonia-like symptoms, could be transmitted through droplets or person-to-person contact. The transmission of the virus by people migrating from Wuhan/China caused the COVID-19 cases in Japan and South Korea at the beginning, which then escalated to all corners of the globe. Its rapid spread and continuous evolution in the human population brought severity to the world community beyond imagination. Consequently, the world governing body, the World Health Organization (WHO), was forced to declare the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Since the outbreak, COVID-19 has infected millions of individuals worldwide. The disease jeopardized people of all layers, including the front-line healthcare workers, as stringent infection control measures were not readily available. Although doctors administered existing drugs to patients on an emergency basis, there were no clinically approved antiviral drugs or vaccines against COVID-19. However, the urgency led medical organizations and research labs to immediately start working on vaccine developments to prevent the spread of the disease. Under these circumstances, the medical industry's fast reaction to the crisis focused solely on protecting the people; the strategies began with the implementation of identifying patients promptly and caring for them in total isolation so that further outbreaks could be avoided.

The common guidelines for containing the outbreak were requesting citizens to take precautionary safety measures, viz., maintain social distancing, wear masks, and promote hand sanitization. Many countries were forced to implement nationwide lockdowns in which people were restricted from accomplishing day-to-day necessities to enhance social distancing. During the lockdown, markets were instructed to open during designated time slots with a limited scale of customer gatherings. Companies instructed their employees to work remotely from home or join the workplace with staggered timings. Several countries even went as far as temporarily closing educational institutions. Almost all governments introduced a shutdown of national and international borders to flatten the pandemic curve, resulting in domestic and international travel to come to a halt. Even if few people were allowed to travel in emergencies, the strict screening of body temperature, showing negative COVID-19 PCR diagnostic test alongside the common guideline measures. Furnishing health-related information were also essential for allowing the authorities to contact trace in case of a chain infection or a cluster. Thus, this outbreak harmed not only the people's health but also affected the socio-economic activities worldwide.

The coronavirus cases in India began to escalate in the first half of March 2020, and with no exceptions, the Government of India announced a strict three-week lockdown from March 25, 2020. This sudden and unusual measure taken by the government further affected the economy, which was already running in poor shape since previous financial years. A colossal disruption occurred in the supply chain, and transportation impacted probably the most on the country's economic prosperity. Millions of migrant workers across the country were left without jobs or income, and many, even in the private sector, were left without work, spiking the unemployment rate to alarming levels. It questioned livelihood that vastly affected the deprived and susceptible parts of the

population. Most citizens were facing acute uncertainty and severe hunger. For example, many children relied on meals provided by their schools for nutritional necessities. However, due to the school closures, the children were unable to receive their meals, leaving them starving, weaker, and less immune to fight the disease. The lockdown, even though it assisted in limiting the spread of the disease, caused a devastating impact on the country, and its people who felt helpless and powerless in the face of COVID-19.

Based on administrative directives, governments, and other authorities began taking necessary steps toward emergency relief strategies and broader socio-economic developments. During this emergency crisis, community members did not remain idle but actively worked towards alleviating the suffering of those in need by affordable means. Without any regard to identity or circumstances, people reached out to their neighbors, friends, co-workers, and family members to make a change amid this pandemic. As one of these individuals, I chose to align and involve myself by making an affordable monetary donation to the West Bengal State Emergency Relief Fund, which may bring some value to people in desperate need. I was very concerned, wondering if my minimal contribution would bring adequate value compared to the enormity of the societal crisis as a whole. However, I was surprised when the Joint Secretary of the Finance Department of the Government of West Bengal sent me a receipt acknowledging the donation. The authority even offered to assist in processing the income tax exemption amount. Their kind gesture significantly extended my satisfaction many folds, making me feel like a part of society's collective response to the crisis.

- Closing words -

More than three years have passed since the first coronavirus case surfaced. Although newer and more transmissible and contagious COVID-19 variants have emerged, vital approvals and rollout distributions of vaccines worldwide have significantly reduced the severity. Nearly all countries have lifted their restrictions and opened borders to foreign nationals. Business and commercial enterprises are rapidly adjusting their core activities although the economy may take some time to recover fully. However, many watchdogs and experts in the field claim that the fight against COVID-19 is not over yet. Their advisory emphasizes the need to take necessary steps to protect the elderly and vulnerable while maintaining social interactions and activities. Recently, the World Health Organization has highlighted that even though there were heightened levels of immunity and reduced cases of hospitalization/death, there are still unknowns about the virus's future evolution. Thus, government authorities should continue to prepare for upcoming challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis.



In Search of God

- Manikchandra Ghosh

What is God? It's a common question that everyone, perhaps, has asked oneself or others or debated within oneself in some phase of life, regardless of whether anyone leads a life as a theist, atheist, or agnostic. I am not an exception. However, I could not find any perfect definition of God within the known realm of our human knowledge, even though the existence of a supreme authority has been perceived in various forms since the beginning of human civilization. Perhaps it is because of our limitations in conceiving Him as well as visualizing all dimensions of Him. As a result, the question remains unanswered to me, and it ripples often in my mind from time to time.

In my culture, during the auspicious moment of autumn, we assemble to worship the supreme authority in the form of the deity "Maa Durga" as the universal 'Shakti'. But what is Shakti? If I translate this word through the language of science, it means power. Power is an expression of energy per unit time. The manifestation of the supreme as Shakti resonates with the term - "energy. This shakes my fundamental concept of what defines God. It encourages me to believe that the concept of God in theology has some relationship with our understanding of energy in science literature or these two may be synonymous or equivalent. In this article, an attempt has been made to compare the various forms of the manifestations of the supreme authority with the diverse features of energy known to us and visualize how well they are connected.

When we look at ancient history or go through various religious literature and philosophies, we notice that the supreme authority is defined in various forms, and it is continuously evolving. Even today, the definition of God is not unified. Some worship the supreme as a formless entity or worship in various forms of idols. Interestingly, a similar trend is observed in the definition of energy. In the Newtonian era, energy and mass were separately defined. The energy term was conceived as a mechanical energy comprising potential and kinetic energy. Even energy in the form of heat was not recognized at the beginning. It was defined as calories. It was believed that the body became hot or cold depending upon whether the body processed or lost calories. The mass is recognized as energy much later due to Albert Einstein who related mass to energy, in his famous equation $E=mc^2$, where E, m, and c are energy, mass, and velocity of light respectively. In other words, like God, energy has a long history, and it exists in various states, from distinct form to formless.

In theology, God is eternal and omnipresent, as per Hindu religious literature. The ancient Indian literature as well as modern religious literature and philosophies accept the existence of God even before the creation of the universe. A similar concept holds good for energy. Science accepts that everything in the universe is energy that exists in various forms. Energy cannot be created or destroyed but it can be transformed from one state to another. Thermodynamics' first law confirms the conservation of energy in the universe.

The concept of incarnation is explained in the Geeta and other Hindu scriptures. This may not be vague when we compare it with energy. As the energy transforms from one state

to another and it is never lost but is reappeared or recycled, we can comprehend the possible transformation of God from one form to another, from a formless or metaphysical state to an orderly state that can be perceived by our five senses. If accepted, this concept supports the Hindu theological claim that Lord Vishnu incarnated in different forms to preserve the universe and restore "peace and dharma" in the four yugas (era or cycle).

“यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।

अज्ञानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् । ४/१

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्टताम् ।

धर्मसंस्थानार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे । ४/८”

[Ref: Geeta]

In the same token, the concept of reincarnation in Buddhism or other literature may be justified.

Theologians believe everything in the universe is due to God and behind every creation or change, there is a role of God. This concept is echoed generally in every religious book from the Rigveda to the Bible or other religious literature. For instance, in 'Chaitanya Charitamrita' written by KrishnaDasa Kaviraja Goswami states

“आदि अनादि कृष्ण सच्चिदानन्द विग्रहः सर्व कारण ओ कारानाम ।”

("Adi Aanadi Krishna Satchchidananda Vighraha is the cause for everything"). Similar statements exist in the Geeta, the Puran, the Bible, etc. As the reason behind any action is God in the religious literature, it is amazing that science understands the characteristics of energy from a similar angle and recognizes energy as a reason for any change or action.

Union with God or association with Him is the ultimate desire of every devotee. However, only a limited number of devotees can attain their divine goal. This is because it demands a strong urge, sincerity, and dedicated devotion that can be seen as the essential driving force to know Him. In the Vaishnav literature, through the Leela of Radha and Lord Krishna, what level of sincerity is needed and what types of barriers or resistance one needs to overcome to experience Him is vividly illustrated. This is to say that the degree of an individual's devotion and desire is the key or the driving force for the condition of experiencing divinity or the divine love from the supreme. However, the earthly resistance that Radha experienced is the barrier that works in the opposite direction in achieving that goal. Similar patterns and rules are found applicable for achieving the flow of energy in any form, say, transfer of electricity, heat, mass, or fluid flow from one source to another. It increases with increase in driving force and decreases with an increase in resistance. For example, the flow of electricity increases with the increase in driving force, i.e., the difference in voltage but decreases with an increase in resistance. In other words, no energy transfer is possible if there is no driving force, even though resistance is negligible or vice versa.

Realizing or experiencing Him within oneself is another aspect that is dealt with considerably in theology and ancient philosophy. Although we all are part of Him, and His blessing

is pouring continuously on everyone in the universe, it is felt by only a few people and not all of us. Lord Ramakrishna experienced His divinity within himself. Rabindranath Tagore is another great personality who felt His presence from time to time. His various devotional songs are these instances.

“মাঝে মাঝে তব দেখা পাই, চিরদিন কেন পাই না।
কেন মেঘ আসে হৃদয়-আকাশে, তোমারে দেখিতে দেয় না।
(মোহমেঘে তোমারে দেখিতে দেয় না।
অন্ধ করে রাখে, তোমারে দেখিতে দেয় না।)”

“Sometimes I catch a glimpse of you, but why not forever?
Why do clouds appear in the sky of my heart, preventing
me from seeing you?
(These blinding clouds don't let me see you,
They keep me in the dark, not allowing me to see you.)”

The theology generally points out that praying with high concentration as well as focused meditation is the precondition for realizing His presence. Exactly similar phenomena can be observed in the process of absorbing energy and its manifestation. If a bucket of water and a metallic substance are placed in the sunlight for a duration, it is observed that the temperature of both water and the metal cannot be the same although they are exposed equally for the same duration. Metal becomes hotter than water. This happens because the

specific heat of the metal is much lower than that of water. If we investigate further following the Bose-Einstein theory or Debye theory of specific heat, we realize that the degrees of freedom of the molecules in the metallic state are much lower than that of water. This is the reason why metal heats up quickly. If the degree of freedom of molecules is compared with the state of attachment of mind with earthly events like 'mohomegh' in the above song and one's mind is disturbed due to the possession of a high degree of freedom, one cannot concentrate well. This results in failure in experiencing Him even though all are equally exposed to His blessings.

In this manner, if we closely analyze each manifestation of the supreme authority that we call God with that of energy, we amazingly find similarities. Therefore, the question arises whether the concept of God, perceived by ancient people across the globe, is, as energy conceived by scientists and engineers in the modern world, or whether it is possible to improve our understanding of energy science through critical study of theology. It is true that the answer to all these critical questions is not straightforward without further study. However, it convinces me that the findings of theological studies on God should not be ignored. Perhaps, the whole civilization will benefit if all these can be taken as input for the scientific investigation to enrich our science. These theological findings are important to us as the basic principles of theology are an outcome of the critical thinking of several great people/philosophers across the globe over a period from the early inception of civilization.



My little box of Treasures

- Sougata Mallik

As summer months with longer daylight time keep rushing, the surge for outdoor activities, vacations crop in, and stealthily also befalls the undesired need to organize and clean your house – the garage, basement, nooks and corners, piles of document papers that get hoarded through the years. Such was my case, and I was determined to toss away the old documents that I have not touched for years. I stumbled on to this process and what do I find - a treasure of literary wealth, memories, and memorabilia that I had not remembered was there with me!

I delved into the first pile of papers to sort. There was the one-page tourist leaflet from the Louvre Museum that I had picked up long back. Seemed insignificant to keep one paper whose information is now all over the web and globally accessible. But the small font writing caught my attention, and the fascinating anecdote in it sent shivers through me all over. It spoke of the time when Leonardo da Vinci was perfecting Monalisa's smile. He had become intrigued as to how a smile on the face is created and how the smile forms. The famous painter was minutely exploring every movement of the face trying to uncover the basis of every nerve that maneuvers the facial muscle. Leonardo went to the extent of spending countless days and nights in the morgue hulling the flesh from corpses' remains and revealing the muscles and nerves beneath. I read this small description in one breath and felt bones chilling as though pins and needles ran through me. Curiosity is one thing and for curiosity's sake is a completely different realm. Leonardo's curiosity's sake needed to know all of it so he could give the world the marvel and enigma of Monalisa's smile. It was just a 1-page document that could have been tossed away easily. But I couldn't – I bent over to retain this page and hold it with me as long as I can.

As I looked through again, I retrieved an old paper which had turned yellowish in colour and with a handwritten short analysis. The handwriting seemed to be mine. I couldn't recall where, why, or how I had written this. As I read through it, it flashed back...a professional course I had taken on Probability/Reactive Management/ Solution undertaken for employment purposes. I work primarily in research, information area and the content of the course that I had to take was not at all in my genre of liking. But work is work, and what has to be done has to be done. So I had no choice but to complete the course and provide the successful completion certificate to my employer. One of the group discussions was transferal reasoning from automatic to preemptive, from reactive to proactive. The handwritten paper that I found was what I had written and presented for discussion subject to the focus of the professional course. My personal analysis of the topic began with the concept from the movie "Martian" played by Hollywood actor Matt Damon. In the movie, he is a multi-faceted hero, an astronaut from NASA Space Station, a plant Scientist, and an Engineer. The film depicts when he is left behind alone on Mars planet, he formulates ingenious methods to survive there all by himself. When Matt was left alone on the uninhabited desolate planet in a situation where there is nothing that can be done, he made it change diametrically to what alternatives can be done to overcome the obstacle. He grew plants from meagre resources to survive, scientifically generated water, adapted a vehicle by adding solar cells, and used his ingenuity to connect with the world. I remember how amazed I had been watching this movie. Matt survived, lived, made his existence known to

the world, formulated his rescue from deserted Mars planet. Matt showed us the array of possibilities when we all saw there were only collapsed walls. No one needs to be blanketed by adverse situations. Reading through my handwritten analysis, now I can recall...I had chosen Matt Damon's movie 'Martian' to augment my opinion on practical positive responses in adverse situations.

I cannot but admit that I was quite thrilled with this handwritten analysis I found. To realize that I had perceived like this, compiled my reflections conscientiously, that I went out of my comfort zone to accomplish what was needed at that moment – all this gave me a pleasant sense of fulfillment. Not to mention I could not throw this paper away; I filed in neatly in a folder to keep.

Perhaps with this renewed energy I started rumbling through the piles of paper again. Now what surfaced from the pile was a doctor's prescription, forthwith faded, dated quite a long time ago. The doctor had prescribed a calcium and a digestive medicine and his two words recommendation on that prescription stated, "Advised rest". It all flashed back in a moment. Long ago when I had just become a new mother and my daughter was very young, I hadn't quite gripped on the time balance between childcare, household chores, and outside work. All were unavoidable tasks and it got jumbled together. As can be obvious, it was taking toll on me with regular headaches, heartburns, ribcage pains, fatigue etc. This was also the time when Internet searches, downloading etc. was the new age. I too tried this home option of typing my symptoms and trying to find information. Most of you have tried this method sometime or the other, and whether it can be called online diagnosis or online therapy, Internet gave me enough information that it could be a rare case of cancer. I was startled to no extent. With this reading my headaches grew, heartburn doubled, rib pain suddenly crippled me, fatigue took over in leaps and bounds. I pondered in almost deep agony. I thought to myself I cannot possibly die now and that too of an incurable cancer. My daughter is so young, needs to be fed, bathed, clothed; my husband is not a kitchen person and will not have food on the table at home if I retire; my job needs a fair share of time as committed. I must try to make this better. I gathered courage and visited the hospital doctor. An experienced, proficient doctor listened carefully, conducted some tests and determined that I have overworked my time, overstrained my physical body and now it's telling me to less impose. Doctor assured me that I do not have any trace of cancer; some rest, some medicine to restore immune balance is all that is required. Dumbfounded at how I was thinking and delighted with the doctor's note, I remember I held my little daughter's hand and walked through the park, bought sundry stuff from stores, cooked a wonderful dinner for all of us to enjoy.

I looked intently at the faded prescription. My breath and respiration seemed to heave through it. My ignorant new search of technology and inexperienced knowledge of science had allowed me to rummage through my short span of thought, believe the unbelievable, trust my scanty understanding. And this was at a time that was most important to me – when I should be enjoying new motherhood of a beautiful new child. As I read the prescription now after many years, this piece of paper seemed like my lifeline....and all is well that ends well. Once more I neatly folded this paper too for keepsake.

My little box of Treasures

Piles of paper to sort had shortened by then, but still enough left to go through carefully. From the bunch peeped out a black and white photograph. It was my grandmother's, when I took her photo with my first camera that I had received as a gift. In the photo was her copper glass she used daily to drink water and the round spectacles that highlighted her face so well. I lived with my grandmother since I was in Grade 2. A young girl then pampered by her love and affection, her incomparable cuisine skills and the simplest innocent storytelling way to understand the epics of Ramayana, Mahabharata. As I saw the photo intently, I read the date, month and year in the calendar hanging on the wall. Long ago, but it seemed she is still real. Along with the photo was a short recipe that happened to be her own style and was passed on to me. A simple easy to cook vegetarian recipe, but as I read through this it seemed I could smell the flavour and taste the delicacy. My grandmother was a widow since her 26 years of age and had lived till the age of 87. It was life's blessing that we got to have her association for so long. But now that I go through the recipe, I realize that I had forgotten about it and hadn't cooked this in the years to come. I admonished myself sharply, and regretted my action. I realized that we know in our mind that the person is no more but the daily life, responsibilities, routine of existence doesn't let us attune with the past the way it should be retained. Passing of time gradually takes care of the hurt and agony, but I think it also makes us become oblivious of the reminiscences. We

remember almost everything at the moment when a loved one is gone, but with the passage of time also forget a lot about him or her. I felt despair all over again as was when the news of my grandmother's death came to me in overseas soil. I instantly decided will include this recipe in my daily cooking. If we can't hold on to the recollections every time, at least can try to retain it as a perception. I meticulously folded this old paper and placed it securely in the folder to keep.

I was almost towards the end of the task I had started to clean up old unnecessary papers and documents that had been lying around. I painstakingly browsed through almost all and have succeeded in making it cleaner and organized. As I looked at the tossed-out pile of papers, it was far larger than the small pile I retained that has now housed itself in the folder. The file looked thin and slender with few papers and documents in it. But it's no less precious. In it was an array of insight, memoirs, and passage of time. As I held the folder close to me, I seemed to hear the heartbeat and thuds of my life through these years. The striking memories, and interesting moments look as though alive for me again.

I confess. At the start, I was lethargic and sluggish to start the project of clearing out old papers and documents. But now, I admittedly bow my head - I am so glad I did this!



The Day All The Devices Disappeared

- Shoubhik Pal



I wake up extremely groggy and with a slight migraine, most likely from the Netflix binge I was on last night. My first reaction, naturally, is to restart proceedings, at the possible expense of my head exploding. After all, the season finale of the show I was watching is a mere 2 and a half episodes away. It's one of those police shows where every episode ends with a twist and you're intellectually blackmailed to watch the next episode.

But hold up. The iPad I was watching it on is gone. Disappeared seemingly into thin air. Initially, I thought it must be my kid sister, turning into a klepto for more face time with Dora the Explorer. But then, I noticed my phone was missing, too. Laptop's there, but the net is down, officially rendering it useless in my eyes. I step out of my room, much before I normally do, to see my parents and inquire about the matter at hand. Shockingly, their stuff is gone, too. Same with my sister. Then, for the first time in what seems like an eternity, we knock on the door of our neighbors, to ask if it's happened to them too. Turns out it has.

Struggling to fathom the situation, we turn on the TV, and of course, no channel is working. None except one, the national broadcast, conveying that what's happening to us is actually happening to everyone. It sounds awfully eerie when the presenter actually says it: *all the devices have disappeared*. Feels apocalyptic. But then, the thought of machines and AI overpowering us and taking over the world also feels apocalyptic. So which one is it?

I tell myself, now's not the time to contemplate on humanity's contradictions. Now's the time to cure the prevailing boredom I'm currently feeling. The nearest solution is the newspaper on the table in front of me, which, like my neighbor, I haven't interacted with in a while. But beggars can't be choosers, so I pick up and start reading. An hour or so later, having intently read the front page, global section and opinion pieces while skimming through the rest, I feel way more in tune with what's happening in the world. Funny how that feeling coincides with the disappearance of objects that tell you literally anything you want to know in just one click.

Soon after, the realization has hit - that unless these devices make a magical return, it's highly unlikely that I'll be able to finish that Netflix series. But thankfully, the reading bug has also hit, so I pick up a book and start on that, an experience that is somehow so much more enriching in comparison. Instead of my brain responding to visuals of what I'm watching, my brain conjures up visuals of what I'm reading. Inside-out instead of outside-in. Mind expansion instead of mind subjection.

And all this mind expansion ends up springing to my mind that I have an essay to be submitted today, which naturally,

I haven't started on. I figure, last minute is always the way to go with stuff like this. Now normally, I'd procrastinate and procrastinate till I ultimately give up and copy something off ChatGPT. But since that option is out the window, I pack my stuff and head to the library. Do it the old-fashioned way. Catalog, find, index, read, write, repeat. 3 hours later, when the essay is finally done, I am confronted with a completely alien feeling with regards to my work: pride. It's an achievement, made more monumental by the effort I put into it.

As soon as I head back home, I am welcomed by my reflection in the mirror. Maybe it's my prevailing sense of pride, maybe it's being away from the radiation all these devices emit, but I notice that I'm positively glowing. When I enter my room, I again have nothing planned ahead. But as opposed to earlier today, when that feeling translated into boredom, now it translates into opportunity. I have an entire half a day ahead of me, and the world is well and truly my oyster. Now, normally, I'd use this time to go down the Instagram rabbit hole and get well into the toxic social media FOMO loop. Glance with envy at one friend's vacation pics in some fancy resort in the Maldives, or at my other friend's pics with his way-too-attractive-for-him girlfriend. Perhaps wonder why a certain pic in another friend's handle has way more likes or comments than a similar pic I put up on mine a month or so ago, even though we have roundabout the same amount of followers. But these options, thankfully, have been taken off the table, so I head to the nearby park and enjoy the simple elegance of fresh air. The park's more crowded than usual, probably because everyone else is as jobless as I am. That inherent joblessness seems to make people more outgoing, as a group playing football impromptu calls me to join in. And I, completely off script with my usual behavior, actually say yes. We have fun, lose some calories. I even score a goal, both physically and I guess metaphorically. They end up calling me for a party they're having later tonight. I say yes at the time, and while I'd normally ditch the plan once I'm in the comfort of my bed with the empty calories of Netflix by my side, this time I'm thinking, why not actually go?

I come back home, take a shower and head for dinner with the family, where normally we sit quietly and eat while there's a shouting match masquerading as news on TV. In the absence of that, our family bonds, asks about each other's day, and listens to one another with interest. All the while, Dad cracks a few dad jokes here and there. Post-dinner always leads to a swift clearout: Dad checks up on the stock market, Mom watches saas-bahu, sis Dora, me Netflix. But now, we sit down and collectively tune into the movie being played on the national broadcast, *Beta* with Anil and Madhuri. We all laugh while Madhuri roasts Anupam Kher and all the other villains, cry when Anil drinks poison his mom meant to give to Madhuri, then gasp when Anil implausibly wakes up after drinking said poison once he hears his mom screaming. Instead of being in our solo silos, we bask in the wholesome quality of shared

experience.

Speaking of shared experience, I actually do decide to head to that party. Now, in a party full of people I don't know, a smartphone is the ultimate buffer. In case socializing ends up being exhausting, I can always pretend to be busy on my phone as a failsafe, right until I make up a flimsy excuse to leave the party. But that buffer is gone, propelling me to get completely out of my comfort zone. So I circulate, I network, I bond. With a large volume of people, from a large selection of fields. And in the process, learn a lot of things about the world that I didn't know before. A shocking conclusion hits me: I learnt

something new from every single person I spoke to in the party. Even the most seemingly dumb person ended up expanding my horizons. I leave the party all the richer for the experience.

And as I'm walking late at night, hit periodically by beautiful bursts of night breeze, about to put an end to this weird yet wonderful day, I think about all the things that happened and my transformation throughout it. How a day that initially felt apocalyptic ended up being well and truly abundant. And how the feeling of not having devices around me changed from being frustrating to well and truly freeing.

A Journey to Belur Math

- Abheek Dutta

This summer holiday, like every year, my mother and I went to India to visit my grandmother and grandfather in Kolkata. This trip was special because my grandfather and I spent a lot of time together visiting temples, and places of cultural interest, and eating out at several restaurants as well as trying various street food. My grandfather planned to take me on all forms of public transportation in Kolkata before I returned to Tokyo. He wanted to take me on autos, taxis, trains, rickshaws, minibuses, and ferries to broaden my experience in India.

One of the places we visited together was Belur Math. Belur Math is the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. The Ramakrishna mission was established in January 1897 by Swami Vivekananda, who was the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. The temple at Belur Math is the heart of the Ramakrishna movement. The Belur Math was built by the Ramakrishna Mission in 1938. I have been to the Ramakrishna Mission in Zushi, Japan, and have attended several BATJ events in which the Maharajas from the mission were part of. It was quite interesting to see where the Mission stemmed from. Belur Math is located on the west bank of the Ganga River in West Bengal. The temple is notable for its architecture that combines Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Christian art as a symbol of unity of all religions.

My grandfather and I set out to go to Belur Math after a long week of mishaps. It was a funny story thinking back on it. We had originally planned to go to Belur Math the week I reached Kolkata, but my grandfather and I had visited a biriyani restaurant, and although the taste was exceptional, the effect the biriyani had on my stomach was not as exceptional. I had stomach issues that day and the trip got postponed. I did not have any say in the matter. Then, we were supposed to go sooner but we got interrupted by other family members every time we tried to go to Belur Math. Eventually, near the end of our trip to India, my grandfather put his foot down and at last,

we were going to go to Belur Math.

We went to the nearest auto-stop to our home to catch a shared auto to go to the Rabindra-Sarobar station. However, when you want an auto, they are nowhere to be found. It's similar to life, where the grass is always greener on the other side and the food on the next table somehow always looks and smells better. When we did get an auto, I was surprised at how convenient and cheap it was to travel short distances. Four people (including the driver) fit into one auto and it cost only 10 Rupees per person. Although, I did see some autos with 5 people inside and that does seem a little too much. From Rabindra-Sarobar station we could go directly to Dakshineswar. After we arrived at the Rabindra-Sarobar station, we bought metro tickets, as I would obviously not have a metro card and my grandfather didn't frequent the subway. The concept of tickets is the same in Kolkata Metro as in Japan, but while in Japan the tickets come in the form of small slips of paper, Kolkata metro tickets come in the form of noticeably thick plastic coins. I was initially confused, but I soon found out that they work the exact same way as Japanese paper tickets. There is a small circular cavity underneath the card scanner and if the coin is inserted inside it turns green and allows you to go through. I was baffled as this seemed to be a lot more sophisticated than Japan's paper tickets. However, upon further reflection, I realized that although they appear to be more sophisticated, they have their own set of problems. Firstly, in Japan, the ticket comes out of the other side of the scanner faster or at the same speed as a salaryman who is in a rush, walking at a fast pace because he missed the earlier train. However, in Kolkata even if one person stops the flow of cards beeping against the scanner, a human traffic jam will occur. In situations like these, you simply want to disappear (if you are the person with the coin who caused all this commotion). To add to this, in Japan, at least there are lines and if there is an issue, you simply move out of the way and pretend that nothing

happened. In India, the concept of lines seems to be alien to begin with and secondly (and lastly), the thick plastic coin happens to be the same size as regular coins, diameter-wise. If the station from which you exit happens to be badly lit, you are not going to be finding that coin. For starters, if you accidentally slipped the coin into a pocket full of change, that coin is a goner. So, in conclusion, paper tickets seem more efficient.

Anyways, back to the train ride. The train itself was quite good. The one that we rode when going to Dakshineswar seemed to be a new model and was quite comfortable. This is just a theory of mine but when moving objects shudder for a moment it gives you the impression that they are going at an extremely fast speed. This is probably because we associate these shudders with a rocket blasting off and steadily going faster each time a massive shudder is felt throughout the rocket. This 'theory' is used in reverse on the Kolkata Metro trains. When the train left the station and slowly accelerated, there were about 8 massive shudders, each with a sound so loud that it could only have been the breaking of the sound barrier. Each time there was a shudder, it was simply not possible to stay still and not sway a lot. But the men and women who frequented this train had uncovered the secret to stay completely still throughout the ride with no support while standing. I was not able to enlighten my soul with this secret even after careful observation throughout the train ride. I also noticed that the younger people in Kolkata are very respectful to elders as they part like when the sea did after Moses held his staff out. They are glued to their phones but as soon as they get even the faintest whiff of an elderly person, they immediately vacate their seat. My grandfather immediately secured a seat for himself and asked the person next to him whether I could squeeze in between them. The thing with seats in India is that unlike in Japan where each seat is clearly marked in the shape of the seats, seats in India are completely flat. People abuse this simple fact and no matter how many people are sitting; someone will always ask for them to make some space for him and they will eventually make space for someone else. I sat down but I was far taller and bigger than my grandfather and almost twice the size of the elderly man who had made space for me. I felt guilty for sitting in the priority section and tried to stand up several times, but my grandfather forced me to squeeze in. The elderly man eventually left after a couple of stations had passed. I apologized with my eyes, and he smiled at me. I assumed that I was forgiven, and I tried to sleep the rest of the trip in the recently vacated space. As I tried to sleep, we eventually went above ground and I realized that we were going at the same speed as a regular motorcycle. I could not understand what the train was shuddering for if it had been going at this speed the whole ride. Eventually, we arrived at Dakshineswar. During my last trip to India, my entire family and I had gone to Dakshineswar. The main deity of the temple is Adishakti Kalika (Goddess Kali). The temple was built in 1855 by Rani Rashmoni, a devotee of the Goddess Kali. From here we caught another auto to cross the river Ganga and then another one to go directly in front of Belur Math. Finally, we reached our destination.

We entered through an extremely large steel gate, and I immediately noticed the multitude of different people who were leaving this holy place. The people exiting ranged from families, office workers, students who were possibly praying for a good exam outcome, and holy men who left with a smile. We walked about half a kilometer on a straight clean road with several monuments on either side of the road such as the lodgings for Belur Math, Educational institutions, and a building titled the Religious Headquarters. We entered a second beautiful golden gate which had a large sign that read "no shoes". However, my observations contradicted the sign. Some people walked about barefoot while others wore shoes without a care in the world. We took our shoes off anyway, as not obeying a sign in a holy

place was sure to send some bad karma after us. We handed our shoes in and got a small coin with a number on it with which we could claim our shoes later. The man at the counter informed us that we could not take pictures. The signs that read "no pictures" were further into the Math so we were not aware of this. While my grandfather told the man behind the counter that he understood, I looked around and saw everyone taking selfies while talking and laughing loudly. I had not brought my phone to the Math because I knew that we would be taking several autos and I was afraid that my phone would disappear by the time we returned home.

After we left the counter, we entered the main temple, the Sri Ramakrishna Shrine. This temple was easily the biggest compared to all the other monuments in the area. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa was one of the leading spiritual leaders in 19th-century India. In Sanskrit, 'Hamsa' refers



to a swan and 'Paramahansa' is used to describe spiritual leaders who have become enlightened. The temple had a very calm and serene ambiance but unfortunately, everyone was speaking very loudly. I took a step back and admired the elegant architecture of the temple. The sculptures atop the temple were perfectly symmetrical with their counterparts on the opposite side of the temple. The temple had also probably been recently re-painted because the surfaces glistened in the afternoon sun. We ascended the steps and the columns inside the temple were just as impressive as the ones outside. The supporting pillars inside the temple were all immaculately sculpted. When we passed through the rows, we finally saw the statue of Sri Ramakrishna. The statue was made completely out of marble and rested on a carving of a fully blossomed 100-petaled lotus. There were two swans on either side, they represented the Paramatman. When I did pranam, I prayed for things such as health, good grades, etc. We exited the temple after taking a last look at the statue. There was a signboard that directed us into a courtyard that had several names, such as Sri Ramakrishna's room, Swami Vivekananda's room, Swami Vivekananda's tree.

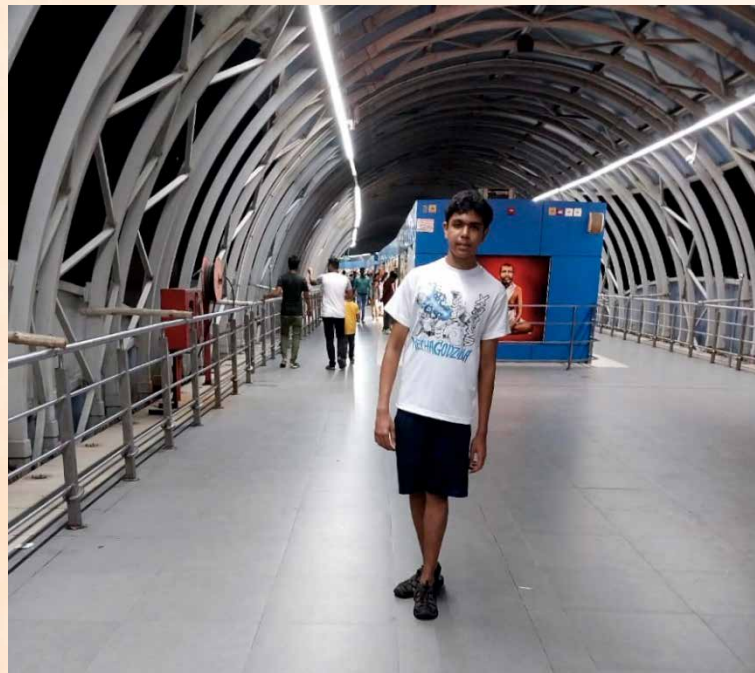
First, we entered the building which had Sri Ramakrishna's room. It was on the second floor and while ascending the stairs, you could feel the breeze from the river Ganga and get a clear view of the mighty river from an angle. In the room, there was a large area for prayers, a desk, and a bed which was covered with a white cloth. It was quite a simple room and had the

strong fragrance of incense. I learned that Sri Ramakrishna had breathed his last in this room. So it was quite sombre. We exited the building and then walked towards the Bel tree under which Swami Vivekananda had sat and rested and meditated. This tree was quite small but there was a patch of grass that did look quite comfortable if one rested against the tree. Swami Vivekananda's room too was on the second floor and its contents were almost the same as Sri Ramakrishna's room but the desk in this room was a lot bigger and there were still papers on top of the desk. After exiting I noticed that this area caught most of the breeze from the river Ganga so it would have been really nice to wake up to. We left this building and went to Swami Vivekananda's temple; the temple was built on the same spot where Swamiji's mortal remains were cremated. This temple was a lot smaller than the main Sri Ramakrishna temple and had an interesting design. There were constellations on the ceiling and Swami Vivekananda's statue was also made of marble, but Swamiji's statue seemed to have a smile on his face. We sat down on a bench and my grandfather told me about the history of the Math for about half an hour. We finally decided to leave and take a ferry across the river Ganga.

After taking the ferry, I would have officially gone on all forms of transportation in Kolkata. We claimed our shoes and my grandfather's phone and left the Math. We boarded the ferry which left every half hour. We reached just when the ferry arrived at this bank of the river, so we quickly purchased tickets and boarded the ferry. The ferry ride was quite uneventful except for a couple of sways. The boat looked quite new as its fresh coat of paint shone in the setting sun. It was surprisingly big

compared to the size which I had imagined. It was about the size of 3 non-step buses back in Tokyo, stuck to each other side by side with some space at the back to spare. I had expected the engine to be very loud, but it could almost be described as quiet and the takeoff from the dock was quite smooth. When I closed my eyes, it did not feel like we were moving at all, but the breeze running past my ears told me otherwise. There were a lot of big branches floating in the river, which was quite alarming, but our ferry pilot seemed to be quite skilled as he dodged and weaved through the branches with ease. The Ferry ride itself took about half an hour or so. It was a peaceful ride except for the vendor selling snacks, who yelled repetitively "Ei pash, oi pash, snacks kheley timepass". After we docked on the other side of the river, we walked to the station and went onto the Dakshineswar Metro Station while munching on some Bourbon biscuits as my mother had strictly prohibited me from eating anything that did not come pre-packaged.

My trip to Belur Math was an interesting excursion as it was impressive to step foot into the pages of my Amar Chitra Katha comic books, from where I first read about Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. From one auto to a train to two back-to-back autos to a ferry and then a train again, I can say that my grandfather did indeed succeed in taking me on all forms of public transportation (we had gone on a rickshaw, the iconic yellow taxi, and minibus on previous occasions). We returned to Japan about a week after this trip and this trip already felt more worth it than previous ones. I made lots of fun memories with my grandfather on our adventures together.



Dakshineswar Metro Station

Cultural Musings – Mishti is Always Sweet

- Brajeshwar Banerjee

Sweets (*mishti*) are a key component of Bengali cuisine or some may say of Bengali identity even. The universe of Bengali *mishti* is vast – *rosogolla*, *sandesh*, *chamcham*, *pantua*, etc. - but in this vast universe, it is the *rosogolla* (or *rasgulla* in Hindi) – a white cottage cheese ball (“*golla*” or “*gulla*” meaning “round”) soaked in sugar syrup (“*ros*” or “*ras*” meaning “syrup”) - that is undoubtedly the leader of the pack.

All Bengali sweet shops will inevitably stock *rosogolla* and variations, such as spongy, orange or *nolen gur* (palm jaggery) flavored ones, adding interesting twists to an essentially simple sweet. No wonder then, the *rosogolla* finds its place on family dining tables, as puja offerings and on the dessert and gift menus for all social occasions, big or small.

In 2017 *Banglar Rasogolla* was granted a Geographical Indication (GI) status, followed by *Odisha Rasagola* in 2019 (<https://ipindia.gov.in/registered-gis.htm>)! A *Rosogolla Utsob* (festival) has begun to be celebrated on 28 December every year in West Bengal and in 2017 a 9-kg *rosogolla* was prepared to commemorate 150 years of *rosogolla*'s invention.

Now what about Japan? Is there a sweet here like the *rosogolla*? Even though there is no single Japanese sweet that is the clear leader, I would like to highlight the *dorayaki* and *baumkuchen* (pronounced bam-koo-hen) that may come close.

Dorayaki has *azuki* (red bean) paste sandwiched between two round pancakes. The name comes from the round pancakes which resemble gongs (“*dora*” means “gong” and “*yaki*” means “baked”). Origin myths of the *dorayaki* attribute the naming to a samurai named Benkei, who forgot his gong in a farmer's house. The farmer did not know what to do and supposedly used it to make the first *dorayaki*.

Just like the *rosogolla*, *dorayaki* too is characterized by its widespread popularity across Japan and multiple variations. It is found in almost every convenience store as well as at high-end specialized confectioners. In Kansai, the *dorayaki* is referred to as *mikasa*, out of which the larger *mikasa* from Nara is well known.

Not just among living people, *dorayaki* is also the favorite

food of Doraemon – that Japanese cat character loved by kids all over the world! So, does Doraemon love *dorayaki* because of the common “*dora*” in both their names? Maybe, but when Doraemon speaks English, he calls *dorayaki* a “yummy bun”!

The filling of the *dorayaki* can vary depending on the area, season and maker and April 4th has been *Dorayaki* Day since 2008 as per the Japan Anniversary Association (<https://www.kinenbi.gr.jp>).

The other contender for the top spot is the *baumkuchen*, which has its origins in Germany or Hungary. The name “*baumkuchen*” means “tree cake” as “*der Baum*” means “tree” in German and “*der Kuchen*” means “cake.” It is so named because the concentric layers of *baumkuchen* resemble the annual growth rings of tree trunks.

Baumkuchen too is readily available at convenience stores, supermarkets and at high-end shops and department stores across Japan, so much so that it is now more famous and popular in Japan than in Germany. The advantage of its wheel-like shape is that it can be cut into small slices/arcs that can be packaged as a convenient snack and the whole cake is a popular gift at weddings and special events with its multiple rings being a symbol of prosperity. Like *dorayaki*, *baumkuchen* also comes in multiple flavors from green tea to chocolate to name a few.

Baumkuchen's introduction to Japan is an interesting accident of history. During World War I, the Japanese Army captured a young German baker called Karl Juchheim living in China and interred him in Okinawa. Karl managed to exhibit his *baumkuchen* at an exhibition in Hiroshima in 1919. Upon his release, he opened his own bakery in Yokohama but the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 caused him to move to Kobe where he and his wife set up the company that was the forerunner of the current Juchheim Co., Ltd. that continues to make *baumkuchen* even today.

With Japanese *baumkuchen* celebrating 100 years in 2019, *Baumkuchen* Day is celebrated on March 4th which is exactly a month before *Dorayaki* Day on April 4th! Now isn't that another sweet coincidence?



Comeback of Indian Cinema

- Arnab Karmokar

In a world that had only just begun to appreciate the magic of Indian cinema, the spotlights dimmed, the grand curtains fell, and the screens faded into darkness as the ominous shadow of COVID-19 stretched far and wide—India's cinematic dreams faced an unprecedented hiatus. Even as the pandemic ebbed away, the film industries across India struggled to recapture their former glory. Bollywood, in particular, faced its toughest period in recent history.

As the most internationally recognized facet of Indian cinema, Bollywood struggled to produce hits during lockdown. In 2021, only two of the top five highest-grossing Indian films worldwide were from Bollywood; *Sooryavanshi* and *83*. This number dwindled further in 2022, with just one Bollywood film—*Brahmastra: Part One - Shiva*—making it into the top five list.

COVID wasn't the only cause, though; it was also partly due to the nepotism scandal that unfolded in the aftermath of renowned actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death by suicide, portraying Bollywood as a toxic villain. As a form of protest against the wrongdoings of the industry's star directors and actors, the public chose to boycott Bollywood movies as a whole—as films continued to be released, the people simply did not go to watch.

Bollywood, once the undisputed kingpin of the Indian film industry, found itself in a precipitous fall from grace. Disillusioned voices proclaimed the end of an era, declaring that Bollywood had breathed its last breath.

However, a remarkable and transformative resurgence took place in the shadows. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Indian cinema, against all odds, began to soar to unprecedented heights. And today, it stands bigger and bolder than ever, shattering records and scaling new summits globally.

The purpose of this article is to dive deeper into the extraordinary resurgence of Indian cinema and to unravel the narrative of India's cinematic renaissance, shining a spotlight on the pivotal role played by regional cinema and its profound impact on the global stage. As we embark on this captivating journey, we shall witness how Indian cinema, once considered a niche fascination, has firmly established itself as a mainstream force that captivates audiences worldwide.

Global Outreach of *RRR*

The first success Indian cinema witnessed post-COVID was the success of *RRR* (2022). Following the back-to-back successes of *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015) and its sequel, *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* (2017), film director and screenwriter S.S. Rajamouli decided to make a new film. Teaming up with Telugu superstars N.T. Rama Rao Jr. and Ram Charan, the project was unveiled in 2018 under the tentative title *RRR*, a clever acronym of their three initials: Rajamouli,

Rama Rao, and Ram.

Set against the backdrop of British-ruled India in the 1920s, *RRR* (2022) features fictionalized versions of two real-life Indian revolutionaries. Komaram Bheem—played by N.T.R. Jr.—is a tribal leader from the Gond community who travels to Delhi to save a captive girl with a beautiful voice. Meanwhile, Raju—played by Ram Charan—is a British police officer with a violent streak who is tasked with finding Bheem. Despite their differing backgrounds and goals, the two men meet and form a friendship after a train crash and the rescue of a boy. In a series of action-packed and dance-filled scenes, they eventually join forces to defeat their British oppressors.

With a staggering budget of approximately ₹550 crore (\$73 million), *RRR* stood as the most expensive Indian film to date, heightening concerns that the pandemic would hamper the film's performance. Initially slated for release on July 30th 2020, Rajamouli and his team opted for patience, awaiting the perfect moment to unveil their magnum opus.

After five years of anticipation since its announcement, two years since the original release date, and multiple postponements due to the pandemic, *RRR* finally graced theaters on March 25th 2022. Theaters across the country erupted as the film grossed ₹240 crore (\$31 million) worldwide, securing its place as the highest opening-day collection by an Indian film.

The success didn't stop there, as *RRR* went on to bag over ₹1200 crores (\$175 million) globally, setting several box office records for an Indian film, including the highest-grossing Indian film of 2022, second-highest-grossing film in India and the third-highest-grossing Indian film ever.

What was truly surprising was how much international recognition and acclaim *RRR* received. In Hollywood, renowned director James Cameron praised *RRR* and expressed interest in working with him, saying, "If you ever want to make a movie over here [in Hollywood], let's talk." The film was also nominated for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Original Song for "Naatu Naatu," winning the latter, making the song the first Asian nomination to win the award. The song also won the Academy Award for Best Original Song at the 95th Academy Awards, making it the first Indian song to win at the Oscars, a historic feat for Indian cinema.

RRR saw massive success in Japan as well. During its Japanese release, the film collected a gross of ¥73 million (₹4.07 crore) in its opening weekend, the highest for an Indian film. The film collected a total gross of over ¥2.3 billion (\$15.8 million), thus cementing its status as the highest-grossing Indian film in Japan. *RRR* is still screening in Japan's theaters over a year after its theatrical release.

The magnum opus, *RRR*, can most certainly be cited as the beginning of the comeback of Indian cinema post-pandemic and stands as a testament to the boundless potential of Indian filmmaking on the global stage.

Dark Blockbusters from Sandalwood: *KGF Chapter 2* & *Kantara*

Deep within the intricacies of human behavior lies a phenomenon known as “negativity bias,” where we will, on average, stare at something negative and dark for much longer than we will stare at something positive. Social media companies use this against us in their algorithms to manipulate our online experiences so that we can maximize the screen time on their platforms. This subtle influence took center stage during the outbreak of COVID-19 when everyone stayed home and scrolled through their phone.

Amid this global pandemic, a fascinating trend occurred; more and more people were becoming obsessed with dark and somber content. Many social media influencers grew exponentially during this period as they capitalized on the success of dark content across various platforms.

With this in mind, two dark/thriller movies from the Kannada-language film industry—also known as the Sandalwood film industry—became two of the year’s top blockbusters: *KGF Chapter 2* (2022) and *Kantara* (2022).

KGF Chapter 2, written and directed by Prashanth Neel, is a sequel to the highly successful *KGF Chapter 1* (2018) and unfurls the saga of Rocky (played by Yash), a mercenary for a syndicate. This film, similar to *RRR*, had multiple postponements due to COVID-19 restrictions; however, it finally made its theatrical debut on April 14th 2022. The film recorded the second-highest opening day after *RRR*. Within a mere 2 days, it surpassed its predecessor to become the highest-grossing Kannada film of all time. With estimated global earnings in the range of ₹1,200-1,250 crore (\$144-150 million), *KGF Chapter 2* ascended to become the fourth highest-grossing Indian film worldwide and the second highest-grossing film in India.

On another note, *Kantara*, written and directed by Rishab Shetty, delves into the feud between a buffalo race champion (portrayed by Shetty himself) and the forest officer (played by Kishore). The film is categorized as an action-thriller film and was theatrically released on 30th September 2022, to positive reactions from the audience. The film, with estimated earnings ranging from ₹410-450 crores (\$49-54 million), soared to become the second highest-grossing Kannada film of all time, trailing behind the *KGF Chapter 2*. Remarkably, the film also secured its place as the fourth highest-grossing Indian film of 2022.

The infusion of dark and compelling themes definitely helped catch the attention of audiences across India. While the Sandalwood film industry may not occupy the same pedestal as some of the country’s other film industries, they managed to showcase their potential and marked their territory on the top highest-grossing Indian films of 2022. The successes of these two films serve as a powerful reminder that all that matters to make a hit depends on how good the content is.

Comeback of Shah Rukh Khan & Bollywood: *Pathaan*

As South Indian film industries such as Tollywood, Sandalwood, and Kollywood began to assert their dominance on the Indian film scene, Bollywood began to fail due to taking

advantage of the audience. Leading Bollywood superstars such as Salman Khan and Akshay Kumar gravitated towards poor, lackluster scripts and rushed project releases. This continuous disappointment with each new release prompted audiences to reject their movies completely. The nepotism scandal only exacerbated the growing disillusionment and made things worse.

Even Shah Rukh Khan, to some extent, faced the same consequences. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, his recent film releases struggled to create box office magic—*Zero* (2018), his last film before the pandemic, marked one of the lowest points in his career regarding box office performance. Many film critics and the audience claimed that Khan’s stardom was coming to an end, and this repeated failure and the public’s negative response led him to take a four-year hiatus.

However, behind the scenes, while the world believed Khan was on hiatus, he was preparing for a monumental comeback. *Pathaan* (2023), produced under the Yash Raj Films banner and starring Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone, released in theaters on January 25th, 2023, as the fourth installment of the YRF Spy Universe—which includes the *Tiger* franchise starring Salman Khan and *War* (2019) starring Hrithik Roshan. Despite not being a “star kid,” this film faced significant backlash amid the Bollywood boycotts. However, once it hit the theaters, it generated significant buzz and excitement among the audience, ultimately shattering numerous records.

Pathaan revolves around an exiled RAW agent (played by Khan) and his mission to take down a former RAW agent (played by John Abraham) who plans to destroy India with a deadly virus. The film grossed ₹106 crores (\$13 million) worldwide on its opening day, becoming the first Bollywood film to surpass ₹100 crores on its first day. The film went on to amass over ₹1,050 crores (\$126 million), making it the first Bollywood film in the 2020s to make it into the ‘1000 crore club’, with only *Dangal* (2016) achieving this feat previously. *Pathaan* also stands as the fifth highest-grossing Indian film of all time, making it Shah Rukh Khan’s biggest film to date, even after 3 decades in the business. The film was also recently released in select theaters in Japan.

The success of *Pathaan* lies with Khan’s background and the context in which it was released. As a legendary actor and icon, Shah Rukh Khan did not have the same level of box office success compared to his peers Salman Khan and Aamir Khan; in fact, prior to *Pathaan*, the top five highest-grossing Bollywood films were dominated by Salman and Aamir. Despite being arguably the most iconic figure to emerge from India, Shah Rukh, as a middle-class outsider, was determined to solidify his status and stardom, pouring his heart and soul into *Pathaan*. While the film may not be a masterpiece, Khan’s hunger and determination resonated with audiences and garnered their support.

-- Last Words --

Upon delving into the recent successes of Indian cinema, I realized that one of the most essential things correlated with all the movies was the unwavering passion that fueled creation. *RRR* stood tall as a magnum opus, a labor of love that director S.S. Rajamouli had nurtured for a long time. *KGF Chapter 2* harnessed the anticipation of the audiences generated by its predecessor, *KGF Chapter 1*, propelling it forward. *Kantara* came from a beautiful story woven together by Rishab Shetty, who wholeheartedly put his all into the film as a writer, director, and lead actor. *Pathaan* epitomized Shah Rukh Khan’s desire

to captivate and entertain the masses.

There exists no formula for a guaranteed box office hit; rather, attempting to replicate the success of previous films rarely yields results. There has to be a USP—a unique selling point—for a film so the audience can genuinely appreciate it. If anything, the key to making a successful film that the masses love lies in genuine passion and relentless dedication to the craft.

Recent films born from such passion have been successful. *Jailer* (2023), starring Superstar Rajnikanth, released on August 10th, 2023, fulfilling the anticipation of his devoted fans. *Jailer* is about a retired police officer (portrayed by Rajnikanth) and with cameos and appearances from actors of other Indian film industries—including Bollywood's Jackie Shroff and Mollywood (Malayalam Cinema)'s Mohan Lal—as one of its USPs, the film made an electrifying impact at the box office. *Jailer* raked in an outstanding ₹72 crores (\$9 million) on its opening day worldwide and amassed an astonishing ₹600-635 crores (\$72-75 million) by September 16th, 2023, securing its position as the third highest-grossing Indian film of 2023, as well as the third highest-grossing Tamil film of all time.

Another recent success is Shah Rukh Khan's *Jawan* (2023), released on September 7th, 2023. This film featured Shah Rukh Khan in a dual role as father and son, both determined to eradicate societal corruption, primarily orchestrated by an arms dealer portrayed by Tamil actor Vijay Sethupathi. One of

the USPs of this movie is its fusion of talents from Kollywood (Tamil cinema); every facet of the film, from the director, the story, the female lead, the antagonist, the music director, and the editor, are from Kollywood. Shah Rukh Khan's swift return to the screen with *Pathaan* heightened audience excitement, contributing to its box office success. The film set several box-office opening weekend and first-week records for a Hindi film, overtaking even those set by *Pathaan*. As of September 16th, 2023, the film has grossed over ₹735 crores (\$92 million), securing its place as the second highest-grossing Indian film of 2023 (trailing only *Pathaan*) and the ninth highest-grossing Indian film of all time.

With this revelation, I hope other regional industries recognize the key ingredients that endear a film to its audience, resulting in profit and acclaim. This sentiment is especially directed towards the Bengali film industry. The Bengali film industry is said to have peaked at least 30 years ago with Satyajit Ray, who made monumental contributions to Bengali cinema and earned a record-breaking 36 National Film Awards—a feat unparalleled by any other director—as well as receiving the Academy Honorary Award for his lifetime achievements.

As an Indian Bengali, I hold a special place in my heart for Bengali cinema and aspire to witness its growth and evolution. I hope to see the creation of films that resonate with the masses, contributing not only to the cinematic heritage of West Bengal but also to its continued prosperity and positive recognition on a global stage.

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In-flight Entertainment

- Joyita Basu Dutta

It's summer vacation time and my son, Abheek and I are Kolkata bound. After the series of misdemeanors on our erstwhile national carrier this past year, by grown-up men and their infantile reactions to spirited beverages, I was naturally a bit wary to set sail in the skies. Fortunately, we didn't have any such messy disasters. But to our dismay, our journey from Tokyo to New Delhi was utterly lackluster due to a problem with the inflight entertainment units. All the 3 screens (the third seat was free, so we played around) in our row refused to turn on and both son and mom were rather disappointed. As I complained to the air hostess about our predicament of not being able to turn on our screens, she apologized sweetly enough but also very matter-of-factly told me that it wasn't just us but the entire three ABC columns that suffered the same fate. That I believe was deftly handled and it put an end to all expectations whatsoever. After all, the biggest reason for disappointment has always been the expectation. With expectations wiped away, there was nothing to hope for. Also, it's easier to suffer together than alone. Misery loves company as they say. Now we were left to our own devices for an eight-and-a-half-hour flight. Luckily my son was so miffed, sulked so hard and stared blankly long enough, that he dozed off out of sheer boredom. Yes, we're a bit old school and prefer books to gadgets, if we can't catch up on in-flight movies or when we've had our fill. But the books didn't interest him either. I thanked my lucky star that he was old enough to handle the situation, and he did a fantastic job of not whining and moaning. However, for all the in-flight entertainment that we missed, we were amply compensated on our subsequent flight.

One of my favorite legs of our journey home is the Air India connecting flight carrying passengers from several inbound international AI flights, all with a stopover at New Delhi and a final destination to Kolkata. Not at all because of its service or anything the long overdue yet-to-be-spruced-up airline has to offer. But because of the people who board it. As soon as one boards the plane one can sense they're headed to the City of Joy. I feel a palpable sense of familiarity after a yearlong sojourn in a foreign land. Perhaps we're otherwise so far away from our homeland and we finally recognize bits and pieces of our dear city reflected by the people headed to Kolkata. It is a moment of a convergence of people living far and wide, of a coming together of sorts and so naturally there's a bristling excitement. There are uppity families from California or Boston sporting an air of confidence that's quite often discernible in people from the land of opportunities, on the contrary, there are familiar grounded faces from Tokyo or other eastern cities, with their humble demeanor; easygoing folks from Down Under, eager to get done with the long journey, enterprising people from the Middle East. These can easily be brushed off as generalizations and not to be taken seriously at all. It's like a microcosm of the globe packed within a single flight. I've traveled several times with this mixed international crowd from all corners of America, Australia, and Asia, who sport enviable accents that quickly transform to pure Bengali unaccented tirades at the whiff of trouble, especially involving their children. After all, there's more relish in screaming "Beshi barabari korchish kintu", "Chup korbi? Matha dhorieydili..." It gives me a perfect opportunity to observe people from different continents and countries. How irrespective of our locations we're all quintessential Bengalis. All agog with excitement for a much-awaited trip home.

As Abheek and I seek out our seats we encounter in our row an elderly lady (arguably she might refer to me the same way as I'm unabashedly sporting more greys these days) seated on the aisle seat. She seems unable to stand up to make way for Abheek and me to take our window and middle seat respectively. On the other side of the aisle was seated her daughter who seemed to be suffering from some severe pain. The daughter appeared to have had a genuine medical issue, which made everyone around quite concerned. The air hostess comes to our aid. A quick maneuver ensures we get to our seats without the elderly lady having to stand up. We settle down in our seats and within a few minutes for a second time Abheek decides sleeping is the best option, as it's a domestic flight and wasn't equipped with, well you know what, an inflight entertainment unit. This time around he's more pragmatic, doesn't waste even a second on sulking, and immediately dozed off. By then it's been close to 20 hours since he's been up. Consequently, I'm left to entertain myself.

Coming back to the lady and the daughter, they were accompanied by an elderly gentleman, whom I'm assuming is the daughter's father. The father bore an uncanny resemblance to Einstein, with salt and pepper disheveled curls and was all jacked up (but of course - we fathom they're traveling from the southern hemisphere where it's currently winter) and seemed to be in a state of perpetual consternation. Rather prematurely, he's taken the liberty to seat his daughter across from his wife for their mutual comfort. As more passengers board and the father inquires after their seats, they comfort the busy as a bee father saying what does it matter who sits where, after all, we're all headed to Kolkata, except that it was none of their seats that the daughter had occupied. Finally, the rightful occupants arrived, and they would have none of it. To be fair, they themselves were traveling with a young child. So, the daughter trudged back to her original seat beside her father in a row behind us with great difficulty. The rightful occupants wore a stoic expression while the father seemed crushed at the cruelty.

Have I mentioned that there's a toddler involved as well? Well, I might as well, as the toddler is the apple of the eye around whom the whole universe revolved for the three. You know, the typical, "Bhai er sweater ber koro. bhai er thanda legye jabey." "Bhai er juto khuje aano, kothai churey pheleychey." For the life of me, I couldn't fathom why grandma called grandchild Bhai. I craned my neck to check if they really had a Bhai around. But one always lives and learns. That's how the grandmother addresses the child, I note for future reference. The mother is not quite in a position to care for her child due to her injuries and the grandparents fill in with lavish affection.

Anyway, the third passenger alongside the father, daughter and toddler Bhai arrives. I wasn't paying attention to all those boarding and missed seeing his face, but as they were in the row immediately behind me I overheard them engaging in conversation. The young man in question comes across as amiable and friendly. What use is an amiable man if you don't immediately think of some way of how his kindness can be partaken off. The father soon requests the young gentleman if he could message his son in Australia and inform him that his family have safely reached New Delhi and that they've boarded the plane to Kolkata. Just as the amiable gentleman delivers the message, Mr. Einstein duly informs him that his son might

not respond to the message as it's very late in Australia. But the young gentleman, the owner of the phone, informs the father that his son is very much awake and is in the process of typing a response and out of the blue very spontaneously and generously asks the family if they'd like to call him. The family couldn't have asked for more, are elated and too readily accept the proposal, and lo and behold a very merry video call ensued. There's a lot of information being exchanged, waving galore and mention of mashis and meshos and pishis and pisheymoshais. May I add that our flight has yet to take off. It's been mighty interesting so far, and I can't wait to find out what more they're going to offer by way of entertainment. As far as I can recollect, they've beaten any in-flight entertainment hands down.

The call is done, father breathes a bit easier for a split-second till like a bolt of lightning another very valid worry strikes. Mr. Einstein isn't feeling too sure if his luggage has made it to the cargo on the same flight as him. Off he rushes to the front of the craft because only the head steward could solve his gargantuan problem. To my bewilderment and shock, the crew seems ready to oblige and ask him to show them the boarding pass, the one with the luggage stickers. Oh ho, oh no, those point-of-origin boarding passes weren't with him. They were in another bag. So, he rushes back and asks his wife for help, who of course can't stand up, remember? Despite her challenge, she takes control of the situation, gives him clear instructions, and duly asks him to bring her the handbags and open each of the 8 handbags (don't ask me how or perhaps 4*2 each) they were carrying, only to find the required boarding passes in the last of the eight. After all that effort the crew assure them that the luggage is definitely on the same plane. I'm not convinced that they really checked but Grandpa was and who was I to question it? A mere observer. The least I could do was to worry about my luggage and get them to check mine as well but when other's business is so captivating why worry about myself?

I realized that I'd had enough entertainment and material for a story, that I needed to learn from my son and focus my attention on getting some much-needed sleep. I drift off with a nice fuzzy feeling of heading home. I skip dinner but I seem to have gotten a headache with all that observation I was engaged in (the husband would have put a stop to it had he been there) so I gulp down a full cup of coffee for relief. Mind you, I was given only half a cup of coffee. Having refused dinner, I had all the confidence in the world to ask the steward to fill my cup to the brim. Anyone who's traveled by aforementioned airline knows fully well how intimidating that could have been. The steward obliges but is still old school, so with some degree of suaveness he informs me that he'd given me half a cup in case there was turbulence. Ugghhh...just as he hands me a full cup I sense the onset of turbulence. Starting with a vibration, then some quivering, building up to an intense trembling, rumbling, and shaking. I gulp down the hot beverage and bring it back to half level, where I might not put myself in danger of spilling it all over me. When am I ever going to learn the ways of the world?

Coming back to my companions, for all their ailments both mother and daughter genkily devour their meals and exchange notes to and fro on how far they've progressed with the chicken biryani served. That the dessert was savored by Bhai. An entire family satisfied with the flight meal is a first for me. But I suppose long-distance flights make you ravenously hungry and more appreciative. Those still reading might point out at certain discrepancies-like are Mr. Einstein and Mrs. the parents or in-laws as I initially mention a daughter and then refer to a son in Australia. To which my response is that whichever set of parents they were, they were so earnest that it really didn't matter. They treated their daughter/daughter-in-law with

just as much love as either deserves. Or they accepted their son-in-law as their son.

Post dinner when it was time to call it a day, I'm somewhat conscious of a battle between the grandparents and the grandkid in an endeavor to sheath him in a sweater. Sadly, the grandchild won the battle fair and square. The grandparents cannot position the flailing limbs, are kicked at by the other set of limbs that weren't exactly required for this particular task, and ultimately concede defeat and meekly retire for the rest of the flight. I avoid eye contact to spare them the embarrassment of their defeat, but they make an admission that the child was in fact not cold in the first place. Ensuring it was audible. I feel very much at home in their company. They remind me of my over enthusiastic and sincerely dutiful parents. Except for some turbulence which propels me into ardent prayer, I smile reflecting on the interesting experience in the company of inherently good people.

We land in Kolkata. It goes without saying that both mother and daughter are wheelchair passengers. I debate about being considerate and waiting for them to deplane rather than disturb them and put them through any trouble. But worldly matters like my sister chewing me alive if I keep her waiting too long at arrivals and my husband paying extra for our seats so we have some advantages (?) press hard on me. I request the lady to kindly let me exit. She's all smiles and graciously lets me and Abheek step out. She probably thinks I was a nice co-passenger (bragging isn't my specialty so I'm keeping it at nice) little knowing I was the one enjoying her family's rigmarole throughout the flight. Once I'm on my way out of the airport I share my experience with my sister and her family, who've all come to receive us. They're satisfactorily entertained - they always are, with stories of unpredictable and inscrutable NRIs. Once home, between going through umpteen WhatsApp forwards that my father shows me (that's all the attention that he ever asks for) and my mother's cantankerous Bengali serials, I punch away on my phone to write about my travel companions and freeze the experience for myself. Life's little and obscure moments can be a reason for a smile.

Postscript

Happy to report that as far as in-flight entertainment goes, our return journey was absolutely unproblematic. So, Abheek bid goodbye to sleep and happily stayed up most of the night to guzzle down as many movies as he could. I too groggily watched a couple. For my part, I was glad my 14-year-old had comfortably interlocked his arms with mine as he was lost in his world of movies. For some inexplicable reason, he's oblivious of his teenage self and to my joy, had slipped back into my little boy mode with his arms locked with mine. I savor the precious and rare moments of affection and closeness before he joins his new grade and will be reminded by his peer group that hanging out with mommy is uncool.

There wasn't much in-flight entertainment provided by other passengers onboard - after all, this flight wasn't taking me to Kolkata with fellow Kolkattans but to a destination far east, thousands of kilometers away from it. Where the converse of free-spirited chattiness predominates. The unique warmth and camaraderie that distinguishes our city and is a priceless treasure that gives it's a distinct character has been left far behind. I prepare to put on my garb of nonchalance, a veneer of distance and silent composure as we arrive at our destination. It's touchdown time and necessary to switch from Honne to Tatema?

The Dream

- Soumitra Talukder

(This poem reflects the conflict of our life and what we sometimes yearn in our inner heart. We often long for those loved ones who are no longer with us and live with us in our subconscious self. It is then we dream to wish a nearness to their self. But then that is what dreams are for.....an illusion!)

The still of night still prevailed,
Trying in vain to save its hopes of illusion,
While the heart was stunned,
All day long in the swing of its fated destiny!
Longed for a void in trance of a reverie.

The dream had cast its opulence,
In the opening of a "Play" in its own grandeur,
As realistic as ever been,
In the descant of ardency of limitless passion.

There you were, poised in an attire of an angel, the flow of emotion,
In a smile that could evanesce,
the feel of a charlatan, the piety of my heart in vain.

Yet I could not call your name,
As I had ever been in your presence,
The delights of my wishes were wrapped,
In the inevitable sorrow of emotion.

The dawn had seldom been so jivey,
In the array of its verity,
As the myth of elusive truth cleared on the shades of twilight.
You were gone yet again to live for the paths of life's subsistence,
The cry of my heart grieved in futility,
like in the stanza of some unfinished ballad.

Oh God! If wishes in indolence were ever to get fulfilled,
Thy beatitude in life is but a dream in solitude.

BATJ`s Durga Puja

(A Legacy of Love & Unity)

- Arjyama Choudhury

BATJ`s Durga Puja – A legacy of love & unity!

We adore every bit of each other with the arrival of the deity!

This is the festival of love, fun, laughter and joy!

You will find everyone here in the crowd - Bose, Paul or Roy!

From all the way far and beyond this year, our `Maa` has arrived!

With every bit of hard work, we once again have thrived!

`Hoi` `Hottogol` & `Halla` keeps our mind upright!

`Luchi` `Alur Dom` & `Rosogolla` holds our stomachs tight!

We squeeze out all the fun in 1 single day!

Just as united in every single way!

Engulfed by Maa`s presence, and her beautiful colors of abundance!

We wish each other on this day every year,

being absolutely free of vengeance!

We embrace simplicity in a way that is so pure and humble!

We caress and nurture the idol, with a love never to fumble!

Draped and dressed like in no other day!

We pay tribute to the Goddess, before we make our way!

With fun and laughter throughout the day, we keep hanging all around!

The gastronomical delights to accompany, keeps us all sound!

A day so united, as the stars in a gaze!

BATJ in every way, never fails to Amaze!

With spirits all high and energy that never fades!

Let the coming years be filled with colors in many more shades!

May BATJ rock in Tokyo and the SKY be its limit!

Let`s unite in this dream, to make it climb the summit!