

BOOK I
THE FRAGRANT YEARS

BLANK

1

MY LAND, MY PEOPLE

Om namo bhagavate vasudevaya:

I was born in Mithila, and there I set out weaving the fabric of my life 'on the roaring loom of time'. When Sri Rama saw Ayodhya from his *vimaan* (spacecraft), whilst returning from Lanka after punishing Ravana, he asked Goddess Sita to pay a respectful salutation to that august region of land: 'अयोध्यां कुरु वैदेही प्रणामं पुनरागता' ('Pay respectful homage through salutation to Ayodhya where we have returned'). Before I begin writing something about myself, I must salute my land Mithila where Goddess Sita had been born, where *Rajarshi* Maharaja Janaka had ruled, where Sri Rama had come to marry Sita, where Sri Krishna had sojourned for the happiness of the people (उवास कुर्वन कल्याणं मिथिला नरयोषिताम)' accepting simultaneously the hospitality of the pious king Bahulaksha, and the devoted but poverty-stricken commoner, Shrutdeva.

Culture of Mithila is an integral part to our Indian culture. A complex and abiding relationship exists in our country's culture, between its parts and its whole. If India is an epic, Mithila is a lyric expressing therein all that is the dearest in our country's culture scintillating even in the present-day gloom. My delight, which I get from reflecting on Mithila, has never diminished. The great poet Vidyapati expressed the supreme feature of Beauty: it becomes supremely new every moment that passes: जनम जनम हम रूप निहारल नयन न तिरपित भेल (I have seen you constantly over several life-cycles, yet I long to keep seeing thee.).

Defining my observation-post

My father was my guru at my *Upanayana* (Sacred Thread ceremony) performed when I had just commenced my adolescence. I learnt from him how one should define oneself in the cosmic frame of reference. I wondered how a speck of dust could explore his relevance in the frame of reference in which countless galaxies come and go on the rhythm of cosmic flow. I could understand that when he explained to me the import of the *samkalpa mantra*, which we recite at the commencement of God's *saaradhna* (worship). It expresses our resolution to do an auspicious act. My destiny established the trajectory of my life in Mithila, and there, I feel, I was hurled into the cosmic rhythm of the divine creation ('*akhil vishwa pravaha*')...

My ancestors began their long story, of which I am an insignificant paragraph, in the first phase of this 28th Kaliyuga of the Vaivashwat Manwantara of Sri Sweta Varah Kalpa, occurring in the second phase of the Brahma's day. The spatial point from which my trajectory operates is in Mithila located in the Aryavarta region of Bharat. I am grateful to God to get an opportunity to build my castle of sand in Mithila. This joy of creativity is enhanced by the conviction that this life is an opportunity and freedom to work for my salvation or damnation, for evolution or regression.

But what one sees is always determined by one's state of mind, in fact, by one's personality. The observer melts into the things observed. There is a point in David Hume's view that 'beauty' is what a contemplating mind sees in it. No better example of how the mind of the observers work can be thought about than what we get in the Canto X of the *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*. The poet describes how Krishna appeared to the persons assembled in the Court of King Kamsa. To the wrestlers he appeared diamond-hard, a *vajra*-like; to the ordinary people he appeared humanity at its best; to the women he was the very incarnation of Kama, the lord of love; to the people of Vraja (the Gopas) he was a friend most cordial; to the crooked kings he appeared an instrument of punitive justice; to the old people he was just a lovely child; to Kamsa he appeared as the Lord of Death; to the ignorant he appeared too big to be comprehended; to the Yogis he was the Reality Absolute; and to the devotees from the *Vrisni* dynasty he appeared one who was God Himself.

The great civilization of ancient Egypt revealed itself to the inquisitive souls through the statues, inscriptions, mummy portraits, pyramids and the things kept therein; the great civilization of Athens spoke through its arts and artifacts, literature and philosophy, lores and legends of the past, but the culture of Mithila speaks most eloquently through our people's customs and traditions, in their aesthetic sense and philosophical attitudes: to say in short, in their way of life. The savants have said: the *Shastras* reveal themselves in the idioms of Mithila's customs and traditions.

II

REFLECTIONS ON MITHILA

The constraints of this Memoir require me to be brief. I organize my thoughts under the following three heads: (i) the Mithila as I see her before my mind's eyes (*manasloka*); (ii) the glory that Mithila was; and (iii) the agony of the present-day Mithila.

The Mithila as I see her before my mind's eyes (in my *manasloka*)

In the 1950s, I came in contact with Acharya Ramalochan Sharan. He was a class mate of my eldest uncle, Ramachandra Jha. They had studied only up to the middle vernacular examination, but were remarkably learned. My father held the Acharya in high regards. He was a patron of great distinction for the poets and writers. He was a great devotee of God Rama, and had rendered in Maithili verse Tulsidas's *Ramacharitmanasa*. The learned society of distinguished persons of the region of Mithila conferred on him the distinction of being *Maithil Vibhuti*. He was a trader by his vocation, and had acquired a lot of wealth. This octogenarian savant

told his near ones that he wished to spend his last days in Mithila where Goddess Sita was born, and wished to be cremated at Ayodhya where Sri Rama was born. His wish was fulfilled. In his mind, Mithila was the most revered place. I heard on several occasions crowds of all sorts waxing in joy singing “ *Parama priya pawan Mithila Desha* ”(‘this loveliest and holiest Mithila’).

For me, Mithila is a land of my *manasloka*, a country in the universe of my mind. It recalls to mind the holy Vrindavana, Nikunja and the Yamuna, which, as the Vishnavas believe, exist in the Goloka too: Goloka where we all wish our souls to find repose from life’s drudgery. They believe that whilst in Vaikuntha god Vishnu is present, in Gokula Sri Krishna, the supreme personality of godhood, is Himself present. The great Vallabhacharya made an insightful classification of the humans in three categories: first, those who love Sri Krishna and attain Goloka; second, those who work in accordance with the *Shastras* to reach heaven by dint of their good work; and the third, those who remain immersed in the worldly concerns and keep rolling over the waves of time through their swirls and cycles. But, when all is said, one’s *karma* (action), and Krishna’s *karuna* (mercy), decide in which universe of existence one is to be cast.

**The Seeds of Revolution sprout from the soil: the
Greatest *Krantiveeja*: Janaki (Sita)**

The greatest event of most revolutionary character, that ever occurred, was the birth of Sita from the furrows of the famine-stricken soil (Yamunacharya aptly calls her मेदिनीनन्दनाया). In our cultural consciousness there is a profound conviction that when exploitation and injustice become most horrendous, REVOLUTION springs up from our mother Earth. One may escape into the stellar universe, or choose residence secure in the plenitude of a floating city, or in a ‘swimming city’, the consequences of the crimes done on the Mother Earth can never be evaded. No Ravana or Kamsa can keep on playing truants with the instrument of God’s Justice. My mother told me two stories: one pertaining to the events of the Treta Yuga, and the other to the Dwapara Yuga.

First, a story from the tenth Canto of the *Bhagavata Mahapurana*. When the Earth’s sufferings grew unbearable, when crime against humanity crossed all limits, when none was available to rid the Earth of her suffering, the Mother Earth assumed the form of a cow, and went to the Creator of Universe, Lord Brahma, to bewail her sufferings. Tears were welling out and trickling down her face. She moored most distressingly, and told the saga of her sufferings to the Lord. The exploitative and predatory systems, built by the greedy, had brought the Earth to a morbid plight. The Creator of the Universe felt sympathy for her. He took her to the bank of the Kshirsagar where He invoked Lord Vishnu to come to the succour of the Mother Earth. God was moved to come to this world to fulfil the fundamental norm under the divine promise: ‘Whenever *Dharma* declines, I appear to sustain it.’ Lord Krishna’s advent was on account of the entreaties of the suffering Mother Earth to liberate humanity from the negation of *Dharma*. It is said that in the remote ancient, times, which we call the Treta Age, Sri Rama was born in Ayodhya. He had come because He had to come under the imperatives of *Dharma*. He was bound to come to destroy the forces of evil which Ravana epitomized, and to provide the standards for Right Conduct to the people at large.

Tulsidas put, with remarkable clarity and precision, the reason for His coming to the world. He said in the *Ramacharitmanasa*: तेहि अवसर भंजन महिभारा, हरि रघुवंश लीन्ह अवतारा (The Lord came to save Mother Earth from her crushing distresses).

It is said about Lord Shiva that without His consort, Shakti, He is a mere dead body (*shava*). Sri Rama would have been just one of the illustrious kings in the Ikshaku dynasty, if he had not married Sita (also called Janaki as she was the daughter of Maharaja Janaka who ruled Mithila). Sita emerged from the furrow created on account of the strokes of plough struck by Maharaja Janaka himself on the soil of Mithila. The King himself turned a farmer to save his people from a famine; he presented a model of conduct to his people. He did his duty as the king. And the Mother Earth produced Sita. Metaphoric potentialities of this event are tremendous. Such was its impact on the Indian psyche that even Lord Krishna referred to Janaka in the *Bhagavad-Gita*² Janaka provided the supreme example of the Karma Yoga. Sri Krishna had said: It was through 'right actions' that King Janaka (of Mithila) had attained perfection.

Our *Shastra* and literature tell us that certain moments come in eons when our good Earth has no option but to seek divine succor to subjugate the forces of evil. Sita was an idea, a revolutionary thought to promote and sustain *Dharma* for the weal of all. Towards the end of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Sanjaya describes what constitutes the very 'grammar of revolution'. A revolution is the function of the confluence of the lines of thought and action at a high ascent on the graph of creativity. The *Ramayana* had portrayed a great revolution; the *Mahabharata* portrayed another.

It is amazing that our Mother Earth gave birth to Sita. When the time came for Her to go, the Earth gave Her a resting abode. Sita is still resting in the inner embrace of the Mother Earth. We wish She comes out again because without Her there can be no Rama to deal with the present-day Ravana.

This daughter of Mithila is herself an epic for all times, for all to read and reflect over. They, Sri Rama and Sita, were complementary to each other. Tulsidas expressed this by referring to their eternal love for each other (प्रीति पुरातन लखए न कोई). If she wouldn't have gone to the forest with Her husband, sent by His father on exile for fourteen years, no *casus belli* could have emerged for Sri Rama to destroy Ravana whose people had looted all lands and had even eaten many good and peace-loving men. The *casus belli* was wrought when Ravana carried Sita off to his capital Lanka to imprison her in Ashokavatika. But Ravana couldn't have got this opportunity unless Rama would have gone to hunt the golden deer leaving Sita alone. One might think that it was Sita, who had cast her spell on Him, making Him believe that there could even be a deer of gold grazing in the forest. Rama was made to believe the existence of a golden deer, when even the ordinary mortals would reject the idea itself as most fanciful. Surely He was under Her spell which drove the course of events which the *Ramayana* narrates announcing the triumph of *Dharma* on the forces of Evil. It seems Sita was leading the cavalcade of events towards the destruction of Ravana's *Sone ki Lanka* (Ravana's golden Lanka). She crossed the *Lakshmanrekha* (line of fire drawn by Lakshman so that none could cross that to enter Sita's cottage) throwing off her protective shield. A step towards revolution is always a stride towards the unknown. She took that

step initiating the process of the revolution in which Ravana's floating world of wealth and power, high in the clouds wholly beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, got destroyed. Sita created a situation in which Ravana, before he was killed, saw with wrathful anguish how his cloud castle of wealth collapsed, how the heap of the looted wealth turned into ash, how his mighty ramparts and the weapons of devastating destructive power could not save him from his ruin. I wish those of our times, busy in building up their golden Lanka in the remote islands of our Earth or in the space, should draw lessons from Ravana's plight. But Sita was most merciful: She provided Ravana an opportunity to work out even his salvation. By keeping Sita in Ashokavatika with utmost reverence and dignity, and creating situation in which he is killed by Rama Himself, Ravana created for himself situations in which he deservedly got *moksha* (salvation). Even when Sita was alone in Ravana's confinement in Lanka, She was the bravest, boldest, and most astute in Her responses to the mighty demonic King. When Ravana comes to the Ashokavatika to persuade Sita to accept his solicitations, he appears lackluster and crestfallen before that daughter of Mother Earth. Sita gave to the Mother Earth a sense of supreme achievement in witnessing the triumph of *Dharma*. Sita Herself practiced *karmayoga* as her father had done.

I feel: withdraw Sita from the life of Sri Rama, nothing remains which could provide stuff for the epic *Ramayana*. Sri Rama would just be a great king who carried on his *Rajdharma* well. But take Radha or Rukumini away from the life of Sri Krishna, He still continues to possess His epic dimensions as a teacher of humanity and the upholder of *Dharma*. Sita can be seen in our literature as a great role-model for revolution against any tyrant or exploitative system.

Nowhere in the world literature we notice in one personality the capacity to suffer and the capacity to create expressed so fully as in Sita, and also in Krishna. Sita suffered in her life the most excoriating distresses with tongue-tied patience, but never swerved from Her duty and mission, never ceased to provide the examples of the noblest conduct in life. She was, it seems, a devastating arrow shot off from the Earth's bow, which returned back after striking the target. Krishna too had his moments of great distresses: to be born in a prison, to part company from his parents, made to face the monsters out to destroy Him, to become the target of the demonic kings. He witnessed His failure in convincing Duryodhana not to tread on the path of impropriety, and, at the end, He experienced his failure in convincing his own men in the Prabhas Teerth not to tread on the road to their destruction. Sita sank into the Earth bidding adieu to the world of humans; Krishna went to the forest to breathe His last under the *peepal* tree away from even the dearest ones. Both reached the state of *parama vairagya* (perfect renunciation). The peaks of our sufferings are always lesser than theirs. Every broken spirit amongst us can draw strength to suffer, yet live, for higher cause as perceived through *karma-sannyasa*. Such feelings bring about revolutionary changes in one's spiritual make-up enabling one to face life as it comes without grudge or grumble. Sita and Krishna teach us the art of life at its best.

This context reminds me of a discussion I once had with my wife at my 'Veenapani Bhawan' at Laheriasarai. She said: "Do not tell me about Krishna's frustrations and problems He faced. He had Himself created all those problems. If He got caught into the gossamer web of the self-created problems, none else

could be blamed for all that befell Him. Like a spider, He built the net of problems, and allowed Himself to get caught in that. All that He faced was His own *prapanch* (craft): who else could be blamed for His plight? But a question survives. Why should Sita be made to prove Her innocence? Why was Draupadi dragged to be humiliated in the court of the Kauravas? Neither Sita got justice in the Treta Age from Sri Rama, nor did Draupadi get it in Dwapara Age in the Court of the Kauravas. How can the Sitas and Draupadis expect justice in this Kali Age considered degenerate and decadent? Where can they seek justice?" I did not know what to say in reply. Her questions still haunt me: I am yet thinking and thinking and thinking how to answer them.

I couldn't have begun my Memoir in a better way than by writing something about Goddess Sita. Her role in our culture, Her impact on our life-style, on our aesthetic sense and system of values, have been great. In Mithila, every daughter is considered a Sita, and most of the daughters of Mithila are often named using Her synonyms. My mother named my eldest daughter 'Janaki' (the daughter of Janaka: Sita), and my second daughter 'Kishori' (Sitaji is also called 'Kishori'). My third daughter, 'Anju', came to be named after 'Anjana' the mother of Hanuman who had at His heart 'Sita' and 'Rama' together.

I remember those halcyon days when on the earthen ridge in my sprawling mango grove on the outskirts of my village, we, the children, enacted the 'Sita Swayamvara' (the marriage of Sita and Rama in the courtyard of Janaka). My little sisters had made beautiful dolls representing Sita and Rama, and also a ferocious creature that we called Ravana, the King of Lanka. I played the difficult role of sage Vishwamitra in whom love and fury were harmoniously yoked together in mystical proportion. Years later when I read about Rama's visit to the Pushpavatika (Janaka's garden), where He saw Janaki (Maharaja Janaka's daughter, Sita) for the first time, and also about Her *Swayamvara*, I wondered with how much fidelity we had played those scenes in our mango grove! Our witnesses were the cows and the goats we had taken them there to graze the lush green grass, and the monkeys jumping from branches to branches displaying their symmetrical teeth and giggling while fighting tooth and nail amongst themselves to pluck, or snatch, the ripe mangoes. When I used to see my sisters and daughters plucking flowers for the worship of our family deity Kali in the garden adjacent my house, I always felt they were plucking flowers the way Sita had done in Janaka's *Pushpavatika*

The customary rituals, with which our marriage was performed in 1960, recalled the customary rituals with which, our tradition believes, Sita was married to Rama. I would say something about these when I write about my wife in Chapter 26 in the Book III of my Memoir. Here it is enough to say that when I had entered her father's inner courtyard on the day we were married, I heard the songs from an ensemble of ladies describing Sita's marriage to Rama. The songs were the same which my little sisters had sung when the dolls were getting married in the mango grove. I would try to recall some of those lines and to render them into English³. But I must say there could be no substitute for hearing them in the mellifluous voice of the Maithil ladies. No translation can transmit the effect of such songs. I never thought rhythm could be so throat-specific! When the medium becomes a message, it remains ever present in mind with its 'slow release action' generating joy that lasts for ever.

When my eldest daughter was named 'Janaki, one of my uncles told my mother to change her name because in Janakiji's life distresses, difficulties, and storms abounded. But she rejected his suggestion. She had her ideas about Sita. The world could not have stood so much of light as Sita had. One might even need eons and eons to evolve to appreciate Sita. But She remains in our consciousness as a star that invites us to move on the path of action through thorns and thistles unfazed. She is a flower that delights, a thought that stimulates, an objective towards which humanity must advance to evolve to the higher levels of consciousness. Her life is great poetry as rich as that we get in Krishna's. If the *Bhagavad-Gita* is seen amply illustrated in the actions of Krishna's life, it can also be seen at work in the events and thoughts associated with Sita. They reveal our cultural consciousness through sets of powerful and immensely fecund imageries. Age cannot wither such imageries, nor customs stale their infinite variety, and deep impact. Sita is the embodiment of what is the best in our culture. Whenever we think of Her, we bow before Her saying: 'गतिस्त्वं गतिस्त्वं त्वमेका भवानि' (Thou art my last resort, O Goddess Sita!).

When I think of Mithila, I think of Sita. I am convinced that if I can understand Sita, I can understand what is the best in the culture of Mithila. She guides us at all planes. I know I can go on reflecting on Sita till the end of eternity, but this Memoir requires me to move to other things of some relevance.

The glory of Mithila

It is said that the history of Mithila began with Maharaja Nimi, the son of Ikshaku. In accordance with the genealogy given in Canto 71 of the Baalkand of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, Janaka figured in the twenty second generation from Maharaja Nimi. I enjoyed reading Mahamopadhaya Parmeshwar Jha's *Mithila Tatva Vimarsha* which gives a concise account of the history of Mithila from ancient times to the period when Maharajadhiraja Kameshwar Singh became the last holder of the Raj Darbhanga.

Mithila passed through the vicissitudes of history. She was exposed to all the waves of the Indian history. It was governed over the centuries by orthodox Hindu kings, the atheists, the Buddhists, the Muslims and the British. But it is a remarkable fact that it has maintained its cultural integrity as the most competent inheritor of the Vedic culture. It assimilated new thoughts, and modified the inherited traditions to suit the challenges of the changing times. The social mores, which the region developed through *samskaras* and customs, provided the society of the region remarkable stability, and blessed it with richly evolved culture. It was amazing that the society in Mithila so evolved that a formal government, in its conventional sense, became optional. This amazing achievement was the outcome of our cultural restraints, family discipline, and enormous respect and obedience to our traditions. In such stable and satisfied society, even a figurehead king was enough to oversee the public affairs, and administer justice in accordance with our *Shastras* and the customs.

The ancient Mithila evolved a structure and ethos conditioned and controlled by *Dharma*. The principles of *Dharma* had been determined by the value system evolved in the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*; and later glossed over by the learned to come to terms with the changing needs and the imperatives of times. Yagyavalkya,

who lived in Mithila during the time of Janaka, explained *Dharma* as one's Duty. It is a dynamic concept. One cannot perceive one's duty unless one has a right perception of things through *Jnana*: (knowledge). And one's duty changes from context to context. Its guiding principle is always improvement and ennoblement of self, and the welfare (*lokamanga*) of people (in fact, the weal of self is not possible without the weal of all others).

The generally shared worldview of Mithila never approved the life of withdrawal or renunciation. How can one cease to be at work when even a drop of blood in our body presents a pageant of incessant work: the countless cells at work, each within its own universe. The story of Shankaracharya's discussion, in Mithila, with Mandan Mishra and his wife Bharti, is an excellent story providing a powerful "objective correlative"⁴ to express this very profound insight. Mandan was a householder, and believed in ritualistic religion (*Karma Mimamsa*). Shankara was a *sannyasi* who had renounced the world in his childhood holding this world a mere illusion (*lila* or *maya*). But that great event brought about a revolution in Mandana and Shanker both. Mandan's *skarma* matured into *sannyasa*: he became Shankara's disciple, the well-known Sureshvaracharya. And Shankara, the *sannyasin*, realized that *kartavya-karma* too could lead one where *sannyasa* could lead, and that too under much less rigorous discipline. He must have realised that even *Jnana* has its ratchet effect only through *karma*. This is illustrated in the great work done by Shankara himself in achieving his mission. This dimension of his philosophy is exquisitely expressed in the following lines said to have been composed by Shankaracharya:

"O Sambhu! You are my *Âtman*, *Girijâ* is my mind, Your accompaniments are my life-forces, Your body is my residence. My various enjoyments and creations be Your prayers. My sleep be the state of thy meditation. My walking be Your circumambulation and my spoken words be Your eulogies. And whatever I do, that be Your adoration."⁵

Dharma was the guiding principle not only for the select few with exceptional attainments, but even for the ordinary folk carrying on mundane and pedestrian work. This point of seminal importance is expressed nowhere better than in the *Mahabharata* in the stories of 'a Brahmin and a *vyadha* (hunter)' narrated in the 'Vanaparva', and of 'Tuladhara and Jajali' occurring in the 'Shantiparva'. The first story tells about the coming of the great Brahmin sage Kaushik to Mithila to learn the basics of *Dharma*. He called on the hunter whom he had been instructed to meet. The hunter made his living by selling meat! The great Brahmin stood before him for light. The *Mahabharata* gives a comprehensive account of their conversation. The dealer in meat could tell the Brahmin what, in effect, were the fundamentals of *Dharma*. The quintessential statement on *Dharma* can be found in the well known *shlokas* like these⁶:

"O Brahmin: this work that you see me doing is my family business which I have inherited. I have adopted this calling as it has been found quite in order in the tradition of my family. I have just carried on the vocation only as my *dharma*. Hence, be not angry with me seeing what I do."

This trader in meat set for his commercial conduct a standard which provides a model for our world driven by market forces. What he said was stated in the story of Jajali and Tuladhara with still greater precision using the metaphor of

scales. I would tell that story later as these two stories complement each other. These stories would be summarized in the Chapter 19 on 'Understanding the imagery at the Supreme Court of India'.

The people of Mithila in ancient times were affluent and happy. Its worldview never kept society static, and its people poor. There is a graphic account of Mithila's affluence in the *Mahabharata* which tells us what a distinguished visitor had seen in Mithila:

"The city of Mithila had its embellishments in massive gates of entrance, magnificent palaces and the walls encircling fort. The beauty and worth of this captivating city were enhanced very much by aircrafts (or air-cars), and a lot of shops. Excellent thoroughfares and roads added to the beauty and comforts of the city. Mithila, was rich with countless horses, chariots, elephants and soldiers, and its people were able-bodied, healthy, and happy. Every day was the day of festivity, and of notable events. The Brahmin [the visitor] entered the city and surveyed its wealth that charmed him with its abundance."

MITHILA'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD

(a) Tradition and Individual talent

Mithila was never isolationist in pursuing its cultural traditions. External influences and internal innovations went together. In ancient times the Buddhist impact was powerfully felt, but it could not survive because it lacked relevance in Mithila. It got assimilated into the dominant drives of the Vedic culture. The Maithil culture could come on terms with Islam during the Medieval Period, and it evolved harmony between the communities which, unfortunately, we have disturbed only of late for sinister reasons. Mithila's creative vigour was at its best in responding to the challenges coming on the waves of times: the finest model how the present should interact with the past. Mithila illustrated how best the past should come to terms with the present. The art of the cross-enriching the new with what is valuable in the past is now being forgotten. Our family system is disintegrating. When the family disintegrates, or abandons its integrating values, the nation itself comes to an alarming precipice. A society which suffers from such a malaise runs the risk of committing, individually, suicide; and collectively, harakiri.

(b) The Worldview saves people from death wish; and helps us accept life as it comes

The Maithil worldview loves life as a great opportunity: hence suicide is rare. Life is a mere instrument to perform *kartavya karma* (duty) as it is merely *karma-samigri* (कर्मसामिग्री). We get life by way of trust. Life is wonderfully great. How can one throw away one's life, the most precious gift ('बड़े भाग मानुष तन पाया') which equips one for the highest achievements. In the worldview, that Mithila promoted, none could be wrenched by loneliness and isolation. How could one be alone when God is everywhere? Under this worldview one's life is not considered one's own property. How foolish is the statement we find being often made by our young boys and girls when they say: "This is my life, I have right to

do whatever I wish to do". The statement is factually wrong, conceptually idiotic, morally unsound, and obviously ungrateful. One is indebted to parents, to the members of one's family, to the society, the nation and to the whole of mankind besides being under debt to whole cosmic order of which our earth is just an obedient and insignificant speck. In Mithila we are told that one's life is the opportunity to discharge debts towards God the Creator, the parents the begetter, the teachers the enlighteners, and all others facilitators and well-wishers. Life must be preserved to repay the debts, and to render better accounts of talents with which one is endowed.

The number of suicides is growing in the western society at a pace which makes many apprehensive that the western consumerist civilization is on a sure and certain path to commit even collective suicide someday. We have seen how some of their ablest minds broke on the life's anvil. The vast bulk of persons, who matter most in the western society, suffer from loneliness, lack of purpose and meaning in life.

(c) Maithil culture does not promote consumerism

T. S. Eliot said: "Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind." Another feature of the Maithil worldview got expression in the idea of the 'simple living and high thinking'. Needs are kept at the minimum, and desires under reasonable restraints. Foppish life-style was never appreciated. Life teaches us to shine through deeds: the deeds which advance the weal of all.

(d) Our agricultural way of life

Over centuries the agricultural pursuits shaped Mithila's worldview, which revealed itself in our people's religious convictions, artistic modes, socio-cultural values, and the standards and principles shaping the quality of life. It is interesting to note that, like the Greeks and the Romans of ancient times, they 'ascribed moral superiority to farming'. Galbraith points out that the idea of the moral superiority of agriculture survived in the French economic writers of the 18th century.

Mithila is a lush green region with luxuriant trees and saplings. The land is nourished by a rich tapestry of big and small rivers, and deep and shallow tanks. The land is so fertile that none ever dies of starvation in Mithila. A story goes that Goddess Sita, before going to her in-laws' place at Ayodhya, blessed the people of the region that none would ever die of starvation. Even the poorest of the poor live by this hope. The high fertility of land, the minimum needs of the people, and great socio-cultural values of interdependence and mutual help have proved this story substantially right. Like most others of my boyhood days, I spent my early years in my village enjoying the vast wealth that lay around me in paddy fields, mango groves, and in the labyrinth of the creepers coiling upwards on the mud and daub houses to spread wide on the thatched roof. The delight I got from observing the green buds and yellow flowers gyrating on the spread of the green is something beyond words (as is the beauty and grace of Krishna Himself). I, like most others, regularly visited paddy fields, and had observed how the uprooted saplings were planted again in mud, and how they grew through subtle stages to become ripe turning gold. We had seen with a sense of wonder how their colours

changed. We had seen how they appeared at the dawn, and at the dusk, how they appeared when the sky was star-lit, and also when the sky was overcast with dark clouds drooping down with drizzles, slow or fast. Cattle-rearing was a part of agriculture. Almost every household had a cow, or a buffalo, or a goat. We depended on them as they were virtually the earning members of our family. We saw in them our own *atman*, and often could share our emotions with them. Agriculture and cattle-rearing needed good knowledge of the climatological changes as they had great bearing on such pursuits. Aphoristic sayings and couplets, mostly attributed to Ghagh, abounded in our conversations. And they were exact to the point of our amazement. We looked to the sky: by day scanning the ascent of the Sun and its decline casting spell on the earth; and by night exploring the stars above creating patterns and images providing stimuli to our imagination. Atmosphere was free from pollutions. People believed that it was wrong and sinful to pollute soil or water. We lived in tune with the rhythm of seasons, and treated life a festivity.

In Mithila's worldview, the vocation of agriculture was universally considered great. It used to be said that 'agriculture' was the best vocation, next to that in social recognition was 'trade'. 'Service' was considered degenerate, and on the scale of social valuation, just a shade better than begging'. The view, generally shared, resembled what was held in France before the French Revolution. Describing the view held by the French savants of those days, J.K Galbraith says:

"Central was the role of agriculture as the source of all wealth. The merchants were accorded their appropriate subsidiary position; agriculture, its ancient eminence affirmed, emerged dominant and triumphant."⁷

This attachment with land and agriculture bred a sense of patriotism for the Motherland. You cannot understand Bankim Chandra's 'Vande Maatarama' without appreciating what agricultural land meant to us. This attachment bred a sense of equality and fraternity as the sons and daughters of the soil. Now things are changing. People earn more money through virtual operations done through computers. But this wealth is mirage, as it is unreal. It does not add anything in real terms to meet the needs of our people. The Rogue Finance of this marketized world has established extractive economic system to operate through the Cloud-cuckoo-land of the virtual world. I would come to this aspect of the matter in the Book III of the Memoir.

Here I intend to emphasize how our agricultural society made a powerful patriotic response to the call for India's Freedom Struggle. Mahatma Gandhi got best response to his call in the north Bihar, especially Mithila and Champaran which were wholly agricultural. The world of trade and banking can produce a Rida Khan, an Amichand, or a Jagat Seth, but not such patriots without whom our country would have remained under servitude. Mithila had greatly contributed to our Struggle for Freedom. My father and one of his brothers had been active participants in the Struggle, and had gladly suffered for the national cause.

(e) Our religious syncretism

The Maithils (the people of Mithila), like most Indians, have been syncretic in their religious ideas. When I come to reflect on my ancestors, I would dwell on this topic a little more. The Vedantic idea of the oneness of the cosmos in Brahma

provided its philosophical justification. This helped us to recognize that Islam and the *Bhagavad-Gita* shared common ideas. This was reflected in the amity which I witnessed during my boyhood days between the Hindus and the Muslims. I cannot forget those Maithili songs which the Muslim brothers and sisters sang while reaping in the paddy fields. I heard them reclining on the bundles of hay in the sprawling fields. Their voice made my heart quiver with delight. I remember to have beaten breast in the *tazia* procession. Now things have much changed. It is not the appropriate place to examine reasons: only one I mention: now our social cordiality is muddled on account of 'vote bank' politics.

Whilst we accepted the universality of One Supreme God, we worshipped various deities often with elaborate rituals. The deities, widely worshipped in Mithila, are Shiva, Kali and Durga, Rama, and Krishna. Religious syncretism has been evident everywhere in Mithila. These temples were vibrant centres of worship and religious discourses on the *Srimad Bhagavata*, the *Ramacharitmanasa*, and the *Devi Bhagavat*. Villagers, young and old, used to assemble in good number to listen to these discourses. It was this tradition which helped even the illiterates to share the profound wisdom and supreme delight that came naturally from listening to these classics. Songs related mostly to Lord Shiva and His socialist life-style; and also to Lord Krishna's *sila*, and the life of Sita and Rama. The songs of Vidyapati are mostly about them. They could delight persons as dissimilar in taste and ideas as the greatest renunciant *Bhakta* Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and such worldly people, as we, craving for most intensely romantic experiences. If you go to Krishnanagar or Nabadwip Nadia in Bengal you can hear many of Vidyapati's love songs being sung with ecstasy in the Radha-Krishna temples.

(f) Dome of many coloured glass

Enjoyment of life and spiritual perceptions of our people expressed themselves in the various festivals round the year so that the tedium of life could be got rid of, and social solidarity improved. Main festivals are Holi, Diwali, Durga puja, Chhath and Shivaratri. Holi is the festival of colours. This festivity of colours becomes, at times, symbolic, even metaphoric. Durga Puja lets us perceive the presence of the Supreme even in clay. Diwali illustrates our innate quest for Light: *tamso joytirgamaya*. In *Chhat* we worship not only the rising Sun but even the setting Sun; we see God not only in the East but also in the West. In Shivaratri, Lord Shiva is worshipped. It is said He was married that day. It is also said that He danced that night on the cosmic rhythm of creations and destruction. Most Maithils (The people of Mithila) go, or wish to go, to Baidyanath Dham where the image of Lord Shiva is one of the most sacred images. Besides these festivals, there were many other festivals, one of which is *bhratridutiya* when brothers go to the houses of their sisters for performing certain holy rituals. Besides, we had elaborate events pertaining to the various *samskaras* from birth to death. I must give credit to the womenfolk of Mithila who did most to preserve the Maithil culture. Without their efforts, the culture of the land would have been dead by now.

Reflections on the present-day Mithila

The earthquakes brought about big changes in the earth-crust, the climatic conditions, and the quality of life in the Mithila region. These have substantially

altered the worldview of the people. The memory of the great Mithila still lingers, but its present is saddening. When we think of the great city Pompeii destroyed and buried on account of the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, or nearer home, the Ross Island, off Andaman & Nicobar, which was once a magnificent city and a centre of the British power before it was destroyed by the Japanese military actions during World War II, we get something to console ourselves in these lines from Bharatrihari's *Vairagya-Satakam*:

“That lovely city, that grand monarch, and that circle of feudatory kings at his side, that cabinet of shrewd counsellors of his and those beauties with moon-like faces, that group of wayward princes, those court minstrels and their songs of praise—under whose power all this fled away and became objects of memory, to that *Kala* (Time or the Principle of Change) salutation!”⁸

The buildings and castles and forts, which Kaushik had seen, must have collapsed in some earthquake, or on account of some devastating floods. The earthquakes must have brought about changes under the earth-crust making the region unfit for such constructions again. The people, in all probability, responded to the challenges posed, and concentrated wholly on agriculture.

The present-day Mithila is changing fast. Now we see a rampant craze to imitate the West. The impact of the present phase of the Economic Globalization is evident everywhere. Never in the past had our society faced a challenge of the sort that bedevils its cultural existence in our days. The young boys and girls are getting enticed to the neoliberal market culture of consumerism. The social segments, which are now emerging on economic affluence bred by marketization, are fast becoming monochromatic: all after money; and their gaudy life-style pampers and promotes limitless needs and boundless desires, and is flat to the point of obnoxious tedium. The society, which the present circumstances are evolving, is narcissistic. What is happening in Mithila is no different from what is seen elsewhere in our country. To this aspect of the matter I would come again in the Book III of this Memoir.

The plate on which the Mithila region exists is hyperactive and is constantly drifting north causing frequent earthquakes. A whimsical friend once told me with reference to Mithila : while the subjacent earth of the region is hyperactive the superjacent biomass (he meant human beings) is almost inert! He made a veiled reference to seismic activity under the Earth crust, and the indolence which had overtaken the people of Mithila. But the most devastating calamity that visits this land annually is Flood. We are told that the over-flooding is a punishment for playing imprudently with the ways of nature through rapacious deforestation, and our ‘foolish’ meddling with the courses of the rivers descending from the Himalayas in Nepal. Massive destruction of forest in Nepal has led to massive over-flooding in Bihar causing criminal soil degeneration, inundation, erosion and heavy siltation of the rivers raising every year the levels of the river-beds. It is high time to enter into an understanding with the Government of Nepal that the growing deforestation of the Himalayas and their foothills must end. The problem of annual devastating floods cannot be tackled unless there is a close co-operation between the two Governments as most of the rivers flow from the

MY LAND, MY PEOPLE

Nepal Himalayas. It is hoped that Nepal would behave as a good neighbour obedient to the 'Standard of Economic Good Neighbourliness', now considered a norm of public policy under international law⁹.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*
2. Chap.3 shloka 20
3. किशोरी जी के अंगना बिलाकु बहिना (Let us go, dear sisters, to see what is happening in the courtyard of Kishoriji.) चली देखू भरी नयना नवल दुलहा, पंचमी के तिथि अगहन महिना (Let us go to see the new bridegroom with our eyes' full saturation on this Vivaha Panchami of Agrahanya (the wedding day of Rama and Sita).
4. "A situation or a sequence of events or objects that evokes a particular emotion in a reader or audience."
5. http://www.stutimandal.com/gif_adi/parapuja.htm
6. Translation from the original Sanskrit. by the author
7. John Kenneth Galbraith, *A History of Economics The Past as the Present* p. 48.
8. English translation by Swami Madhavanand (Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta)
9. G. Schwarzenberger, *Manual of International Law* p. 111