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MY BIRTH : MY ODYSSEY THUS BEGAN

जलते खिलते बढ़ते जग में घुलमिल एकाकी प्राण चला

— Mahadevi Verma

My Birth: reflections on this idea

James M. Barrie said that “the life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another, and his humblest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he hoped to make it”. Now I have reached a point when I should compare “as it is with what [I] hoped to make it”. But I am at my wits’ end: I do not remember what sort of story I intended to write when its prologue began at my nativity. Yet I must reflect on my birth as I intend to see my life in the round.

In this Chapter, I would reflect on what I believe I had been endowed with by Creator at the point of my birth. But recalling the past, when one is in the December of one’s life, is to enjoy bitter-sweet cocktail of pleasures and pangs: pleasure for my great luck, pain for my misfortune much of my own making. This is also an opportunity to reflect on how my Fate has made me a mere pawn in the game of chess that Time has played with Decay. In this Chapter I would record about the moments when I was caught in this cycle of life and death; thus commencing my journey about which Sankaracharya says:

Punarapi jananam punarapi maranam punarapi janani jathare sayanam;

[Again a birth, again a death, again an existence in mother’s womb.]

Those who see the Civil List of the Indian Revenue Service would find the date of my birth recorded as March 9, 1940. My own researches, and the discovery of my horoscope, drawn up immediately after my birth, have led me to believe that my correct date of birth is July 19, 1937. But I cannot testify its veracity as I couldn’t be a witness to my birth! Besides, one cannot exclude hearsay evidence when one intends exploring things pertaining to that sort of event. We know that in our traditional society, the day of birth was not considered very important, because at that point *jiva* (the being) comes under the bondage of this world’s existential tedium. Our society, by and large, did not attach much importance to the correctness of the date of one’s birth. Thus began my odyssey in the world: it matters not whether on this or that date. What matters (does it matter at all?) is that I began. Nobody could know then whether that was going to be just ‘a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing’, or a grand ascent on

the life's chariot with Lord Krishna as the *sarathi* to guide life from *vishad* (a phase of sufferings) to *vasant* (a phase of joyous peace). But I have never forgotten in my life what George Santayana said: "there is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval".¹ But the concept of enjoyment is not the same for all. To tell you in good faith, I haven't discovered one for me, and for me alone.

I

(a) Defining my observation-post

I never realized that writing about one's birth can be so difficult. My perception of that event evokes my divergent responses. I have discerned four dominant observation-posts from which to reflect on my birth: first, what my birth meant for my parents; second, what it has meant for me; third, what it meant for the world; and fourth, what it means in the cosmic flux.

(b) What my birth meant for my parents

My birth was a great event for my mother. When Krishna was born in Kamsa's jail, it is believed, the fetters of his parents, Devaki and Vasudeva, fell down bringing delight to the terribly wrenched souls whose six children had already been killed by the cruel King Kamsa, and the seventh, Balarama, had survived only because he had been moved to Rohini's womb. I have told you in Chapter 4 (Portrait of my Mother) about the sufferings that my mother underwent under the social indictment for carrying a barren womb. This petty reason for her great delight might amaze you because our attitudes towards sons, and our expectations from them, have now substantially changed. Then, it was customary to expect a lot from sons. They not only carried forward the family traditions, they even brought about a measure of immortality for their parents. They could become the great support for the parents in their old age. But the parents had a constant worry that Markandeya described in a well-known *shloka* in the 'Vanaparva' of the *Mahabharata*: he said:

"O Mighty King, thus after facing a lot of difficulties one gets a son, an achievement rare and great, yet one becomes worried as one doesn't know what sort of person his son would become later."

Now we see how attitudes towards, and expectations from, children have changed. Respect for family tradition has almost gone; belief in family values stands much shattered. Expectations have melted away. But I must not reflect from my present observation-post. I must go back to those days of my parents' agony which ended with my birth. When I look back over the years spent, and get down to brass tacks, I feel that they were lucky to live with some great illusion. But life has taught me that it is often much comforting to live with illusions. We need some illusions to survive.

If I am ever asked by a bird in the bush to single out one core reason for which I should value my birth, I would say: "I could save my mother from her agony". I know in this world of calculators, this reason would be trashed for being sentimental bullshit. My mother once told me: "Only two things I expect from you: one that you would recite the *Ramcharitmanasa* when I am gone; and second, you would lit my funeral pyre." I could do both, and became supremely satisfied.

She expected nothing else: she got what she expected. When she died, I scanned my memory to discover her two subsidiary expectations from me: one to cremate her at Semariaghat on the bank of the Ganges, and the other, to provide her an eternal repose by performing certain rituals on the sand of the river Falgu in the sacred city of Gaya. I could fulfil even these two wishes of my parents. To my mind, my relevance was established.

(c) The Starry Messenger

In our Indian society, people generally believe that the configuration of the stars and other spatial and temporal aspects at the precise point of time of one's birth do have vital bearings on a person's life. I must confess that I haven't been able to evolve any coherent and self-convincing view on these issues, mainly because of my deficient knowledge in this field that explores the relationship between the humans and the heavens. But I have gone by what my mother and other elders believed, and what I got from them. I had known about Galileo's *Sidereus Nuncius* (The Starry Messenger) recording his telescopic astronomical observations of high heavens. But the idea that the stars at the time of my birth had brought some message for me was my amazing discovery. It was high poetry to reflect on this speck of dust to discover something that established this bond with the stellar universe! My parents strongly believed that the stars do influence the course of one's actions. My modern mind was reluctant to accept such ideas, but I had seen so many mysteries in God's good world that it was not possible for me to deny them.

I was born in the month of *Asaadha* when the sky is most luminous with streaky clouds floating in the sky at random. I recall that winter evening when we sat around fire in the outer courtyard of my sprawling house. I was a boy barely of 10, and waited there for my sweet potato to undergo a 'fire ordeal' under burning charcoal. I heard my grandfather tell one of his friends accustomed to assemble there every evening. He said: "For me the month of *Asaadha* is important only for two things: one, because this Shiboo (myself) was born, and the other because *Yaksha* (a demigod), who had been banished from Alkapuri leaving there his beloved, invoked the clouds to carry his amorous message to her, and to testify to her about his plight". At that time his words meant nothing for me, but decades later they yielded their meaning which made me laugh, and laugh, and laugh. I came to know that the great Kalidas composed his *Meghdootam* narrating the story *Yaksha* who had implored the clouds to carry his amorous message to his beloved. He had seen the clouds from the hilltop of Ramgiri. That was the first day of *Asaadha* (*Aasadhasya prathamadivase megham*). When I was posted as the Commissioner of Income-tax at Nagpur (during 1986-'92), I went to Ramgiri to see how the sky might have appeared to *Yaksha* then. I sat on the stone railing of the Kalidas memorial at the hill, and my mind went back to my grandfather who had made such whimsical comments more than three decades back!

I was born at 7.39 AM on 19 July 1937 being the *Asaadha Shulke Ekadasi* popularly known as the *Harishyani*, the eleventh lunar day of the *Shukla paksha* (bright fortnight) of *Asaadha*. The *Padma Purana* tells us that on that day God Vishnu goes to rest on the sprawling coil of the *Sheshanaga* (the cosmic serpent) in the *Ksheersagar* (cosmic ocean of milk) where the *Nag* spreads its hood to provide a canopy under which the Lord rests for four months. Once I felt greatly

amused by my mother's explanation of my birth. She believed that when the Lord went to take rest, He sent this frail self to the world to take care of the universe. My mother's comment brought to my mind a poem by Rabindranath Tagore in which he says that once the setting Sun asked: "Who is there to take over my duties whilst I would go to sleep?" An earthen lamp, with a flickering flame, said with hesitation: "I shall do what I can, my Master". Of what worth this earthen lamp has been in playing his role in the world, is for God alone to judge. I fear, if judged, I would surely be found wanting. Hence my prayer would just be: "Judge me not Mother. Just be merciful: **करोमि दुर्गे करुनार्ण वेशि** (be merciful, Durga)."

My detailed horoscope told us that the specific star, under the spell of which I was born, was alluringly bright. It was *Anuradha* which means 'good luck' (सत्कीर्ति कान्तिश्च सदोत्सवः स्यात्.). Our family followed the ancient tradition of the *Sukla Yajurveda* (the White *Yajurveda*) as construed in the *Vajasaneyi Samhita*. All these together, I felt, amounted to an invocation to Light! It was the sacred day of *soomvaar* (the day of the Moon) named after *Chandrama*. I could gather that on that day the ladies of our family were busy performing *pooja*. Its detailed rituals were prescribed in the *Skanda Purana*. I was born under the *Singh Lagna* (Simha Lagna: Leo Ascendant) with the Sun in the first house, and the *Brischick rasi*. It is said that the *Lagna* controls the environment in which one lives and works. The *rasi* reflects one's state of mind in all its variations.

In my detailed horoscope, the astrologer had expressed certain grosser features manifest from certain indicators he mentioned therein. These features were believed to determine one's dominant traits. I was charmed by the comprehensiveness of the description, and the beauty of the Sanskrit verse. It is possible to draw up, on reading the horoscope, a summary of the main features of the divine endowment that the Starry Messengers were supposed to have brought for me at my birth. If I display them on a scattergraph, their density and the directions would carry some sense. All these features and qualities indicated traits pertaining to the Realm of Light. The import of a *kirtan* that my wife often sings is a prayer to Light: उजाले अपनी यादों को हमारे साथ रहने दो, न जाने किस गली में जिंदगी की शाम आ जाये "O Light! Never depart from my consciousness. Who knows when the evening of my life comes commanding me to bid a goodbye to the world we live in."

When I reflect on my endowment, as indicated in my horoscope, I feel crushed under the feelings of dismay. I do feel that I have wasted my opportunities. It is easier to suffer when the sufferings are inflicted by others; it is most excoriating when they are wrought by one's own actions and inactions. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, after telling Arjuna the message and the instructions of the *Gita*, the Lord told him to exercise his liberty to make his right decisions in performing his duties. He tells him: "now reflect on the wisdom imparted to you, and then do as you please". I have believed that one's life, like our earth's, has two movements. With birth, one begins one's journey towards death, but with it also begins the process of one's spiritual evolution towards higher and higher cultural attainments. But I must not pursue this point further because, I feel, I must allow it to remain a thing between me and my God. I have realized that in one's life moments come when it becomes imprudent to be wholly candid.

(d) What has it meant for me

Once I read out to my father what a character said in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* said:

'All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...'

My father, after a short pause, said: "Yes, the 'world's a stage'. It is a part of the cosmic *kriya*, the players are out to perform their *karma*, and the Great Regulator of the whole Creation is the presiding observer and the supreme Judge, infallible and sovereign." My mother, who sat close sorting fruits, intoned the words of the great Tulsidas: "*Bade bhag manusa tana payo*" (It is great fortune to be born a man). These ideas have remained alive in my mind helping me to shape my life's course.

I had many moments when I had reflected on what my 'birth' meant for me. I would mention two contexts: one when I read T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, and the second, when I read Mahadevi Verma's assessment of her life. T.S. Eliot said in *Sweeney Agonistes*:

Birth, and copulation, and death
That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks

Mahadevi Verma: portrayed the course of her life in extremely touching lines:

विस्तृत नभ का कोई कोना मेरा न कभी अपना होना,
परिचय इतना इतिहास यही, उमड़ी कल थी मिट आज चली

(No portion of this wide firmament be ever for me a corner of repose. My profile and history come to this: I flourished yesterday, and am gone to-day.).

But my deeper reflections, led me to believe that Eliot's ideas were only context-specific in the tragedy of *Sweeney Agonistes*, and Mahadevi's just a way of describing herself as one caught in the cosmic process of creations portrayed in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. My reflections have led me to accept, without reservation, what my mother said quoting Tulsidas: "*Bade bhag manusa tana payo*" (It is great fortune to be born a man).

Whenever I think of my birth to discover its meaning and purpose, I get terribly confused, and my mind gets befogged. Whilst I am convinced that life is surely much more than 'birth, and copulation, and death', I am not clear what precisely Tulsidas's paean to human life means. Surely he was not thinking of the process of evolution at the biological plane about which Charles Darwin had said so much. The biological process is beyond human endeavour. Lamarck thought of cultural evolution to which human endeavour can surely contribute. But 'cultural evolution' might take place without spiritual attainments. I admit I am confused. It would be great if before I end my journey I succeed knowing the meaning and purpose of my life. I cannot persuade myself to summarise the course of my life with that measure of clarity and confidence with which Harivansh Rai Bachchan did in his verdict on own self saying: '*Mitti ka tan, masti*

ka man, kshan-bhar jivan, mera parichay' (a body of clay, a mind satisfied in joy, and life just a span of an ephemeral moment - that is what I am). How exact was he in assessing himself! I had not only read his poetry, I had some access to his vast learning in course of the interactions I had with him when I was a lecturer in the Department of English at L.S College, Muzaffarpur. There were occasions when Bachchanji spent a few days with Prof. Mahendra Pratap. They were good friends, and had studied at Cambridge. Bachchanji helped me in understanding the impact of Vedanta on Emerson, W. B. Yeats, Somerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood. He had obtained his doctoral research degree from Cambridge for his great work on W.B. Yeats, especially his idea of the occult finding expression in Yeats's *A Vision*.

(e) What does it mean to the world

I do not think my birth had any significance for the world. But I have realized that life is not 'management by objective' (MBO) with which the B-school students learn to live. One is born to die, and life is an interlude, at best an interregnum. George Santayana has a point when he said: "there is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval". But the problem is : how to enjoy the interval? Krishna has told us the art of life in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

I have seen in life a process and pattern that takes my mind to those six months which I spent at Mussoorie in 1964 while undergoing my Foundational Course training. Most often I found, while treading on the roads, my visibility lost because of dense fog. But as we advanced ahead on the road, more and more patches of the road became clearer and clearer. I could recall the night when I left my village to reach the railway station at the distance of 8 miles. Usually, we travelled the distance on a bullock cart which had a lantern hung under its chassis shedding poor light dispelling darkness not beyond a few meters. But it was miraculous to see how that light went on conquering darkness with every move forward by the bullocks.

In our society, the highest respect is paid to the *guru* which helps us acquire wisdom. Mother is the greatest guru, Father is the great guru, and the formal teachers are the gurus deserving respect no less; but Krishna is the *Jagatguru* (teacher for all the humans of all the times). For my mother, the supreme objective in life was to become part of the process of cosmic creativity of which procreation itself is an essential part. My father taught me many things. He told me to see *Parmatma* (God) in everyone, everywhere. He often emphasized that one must not be dismayed if efforts to do good go in vain. He narrated events from the *Mahabharata*, and quoted, with full approval, the instructions given by Vyasa: to quote what the great poet said (rendered into English by me):

Sorrow which we share in common,
It is unwise to shed tears thereon;
It is prudent to find and forge some ways
To diagnose the cause to get rid of what is wrong.

I was so impressed by these lines that I quoted them on the home page of my website www.shivakantjha.org. In my life, I have sincerely tried to follow the great poet's instructions. I have tried to tread, with utmost sincerity, the path of

Karmayoga. This has been greatly satisfying; and this has sustained me in the worst crisis I have experienced. A step taken in a good cause is enough in itself. Krishna has emphasized this when he told Arjuna (the *Bhagavad-Gita* VI. 40): “Doers of good never come to grief”.

But, what is good for the world depends on the motive with which one works, or earns, and on the attitude one maintains towards human beings, and our environment. In the present-day neocapitalist worldview, it is considered good for humanity to increase wealth, with no holds barred, in the hands of a few so that the trickle-down effects, from the wealth, so accumulated in the hands of a few, can do good for all others. I would request you to read the lines I have quoted from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* in Chapter 6 of my Memoir. It tells us about a man who had 100 hounds, each looked after by an exclusive attendant. One super-rich creature might need 500 human beings, or even more, for his own creature comforts. They can provide employment to a lot of human vermin. They can think themselves super-human benefactors of others. I would revisit this point in Chapter 24 of the Book III of the Memoir.

(f) What it means in the cosmic flux.

I wonder whenever I think about what it means to be born in the cosmic flux. All the events of life fade into insignificance if one compares them with the happenings in the mother’s womb. Mind boggles when we are told (i) “that there are 250,000,000 red cells in one small a drop of blood, and inside every red cell there are the same number — about 250,000,000 — of hemoglobin molecules”, and (ii) that all “ the information which specifies *us*, the information which specifies a human being, is laid down in 46 chromosomes, which together contain a length of DNA of about 1 meter. This one meter contains about 3 billion bases, the equivalent of a library of about 5,000 volumes, all packed together into a single cell.” The DNA is of atomic dimensions, and information is packed so tightly that it can fit into a single sperm or a single egg.”² When we think of a galaxy or an amoeba, of the stars or the cells, we become silent with a sense of wonder. When I think of my birth and the process of creativity that commenced with that event, I wonder in silence.

When I think of life in the cosmic flux, the ideas of birth and death become meaningless. We have seen clouds in the sky forming patterns which keep on changing from forms to forms. We see how electronic advertisements show shifting shapes, sounds and colours where nothing is born, and nothing is dead, and nothing is ever alive. Illusion goes on. When I read Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, ‘BIRTH’ and ‘DEATH’ cease to have any significance. When we think of birth and death in the cosmic context, we have no option but to become silent. A black bee buzzes only till it has not tasted the pollen of a lotus: once it does that, it becomes silent.

II

(a) The First Faces

I was born in village Shernia, a village now under Khagaria district of Bihar. The event of the birth of a child was not generally allowed to take place in the family’s main house. For this, it was customary those days to construct a tiny hut

in one of the neglected corners of the inner courtyard. This one room in which I was born had a thatched roof supported on a frail bamboo frame. I was born on the bed of straw and hay spread on the mud-floor. My mother told me how one day a snake was seen creeping inside the hut. It entered unseen and went out unseen. Fire was continuously set ablaze day-and-night over all the days till the *Chhatthi*, a *pooja* that is performed under our custom in the sixth night after one's birth. It is interesting that I was born in the presence of blazing fire into which my dead body is destined to be consigned someday. This tiny hut was called the *Saurighar*. It resounded, when I was born, with the mellifluous songs called *Sohar*. Most of the songs had as their central themes the joy at the birth of Rama and Krishna. The overwhelming joy deepened my mother's sorrow on seeing this rickety skeleton panting and gasping with not much chance for survival. This delicate rickety mouse was put on a banana leaf believed to have cooling and medicinal properties. To my mother the whole show might have appeared grossly ironical as she could see *Kritya* (the Goddess of Death) round the corner to snatch her baby away. Yet some 'Hope' sustained her. She even distributed a lot of silver and gold amongst those present there.

It is interesting to note that both words '*Sohar*' and '*Saur*' come from the same Sanskrit root from which is formed *Sukagriah* meaning 'the house for a bird'. How profoundly suggestive this expression is. What else is our life if not a mere house for a bird: ? Our existence resembles that of a bird. We come from the unknown, and fly to places not known; and spend time after the first and before the second, in some prison which our existence, when all is said, is. .

The first human face that I saw was of a woman of the lowest caste in our society, called *Chamaina*. She was trained under the prevailing customs to help women in delivering babies. It was she who declared first to which gender I belonged, or also, whether I was born alive or dead. It is strange that the advancing years made us ungrateful to such humble benefactors.

(b) The Goddess: the Chhatthi Mata

It is said that the storms in life begin the moment one is born. It is believed that one comes under the magical spell of some demonic being soon after one's birth. To exorcise the baby from that sinister spell, and to wish the newcomer a long life, a *pooja* is performed at the midnight. This practice had been recommended even in some ancient scripture, like the *Grihisutra*. This *pooja* was performed in the *Tantric* tradition of Mithila. With the white paste of rice various images, mostly of hands, were drawn on the wall and on the floor, with vermilion and petals strewn thereon. These geometrical patterns were images and metaphors expressing ideas, and aspirations for a happy life. Vermilion marks and flowers of different colours suggested the life's many coloured dome. *Alpana* becomes an excellent example of sensuous shining forth of ideas. In accordance with the prevailing custom, an elderly lady (in my case, it was my mother) wrote, in the course of the *pooja*, my fate on a Tal leaf. It was secretly done as it scripted the baby's destiny. It was commonly believed that God scripted one's destiny in course of that *pooja*. The function of *Chhatthi* is symbolic. The book of life is written the moment a child is conceived. Through the imagery of the imprint of palms, the role of *Karma* and *Kartvaya* in human life is suggested. Such imageries are

drawn up on many sacred occasions. I cannot forget their lusty shine and beauty when done on walls near the main doors, done every year during the *Durgapooja*. They symbolize *karmayoga* which conceives the universe *askriya* (action). Speaking about the mark of the man's hand in El Castello in Spain, J. Bronowski says³ : "All over these caves the print of the hand says: This is my mark. This is man." Human civilization bears the mark of man's hand: it reveals the glory of *karma* that man does. So the panegyric to *Karma* was made earliest in life through imageries.

On the day next to this *Chhati*, I was taken to the family temple in our courtyard. Our family deity is Kalika. No auspicious function in the family ever took place without the loving worship of this deity. Whenever any one of us left home to remain away, even for a night, or returned from other places, it was customary to bow before the deity seeking her blessings. Every evening an earthen lamp was lit on her altar, and *kirtans* were sung by all the members of the family assembled together.

Thus began my relationship with my parents, all others of the family and with the world, and also with all the galaxies in the cosmos. Thus I began the game of my life. Omar Khaiyyam said:

*"But helpless pieces in the game He plays
Upon this chequer-board of Nights and Days
He hither and thither moves, and checks... and slays
Then one by one, back in the Closet lays."*

(Fitzgerald's translation)

Thus I was put on the chequer-board.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 *Soliloquies in England 'War Shrines'*
- 2 Both the quotations are from 'Molecular Biology by M. F. Perutz in *Cambridge Minds* ed Richard Mason
- 3 *The Ascent of Man* p. 56