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VEENAPANI (वीणापाणि) : MY WIFE

'None in the world can ever be more intimate than one's wife; none else can provide shelter better than one's wife, and none else can render help more than one's wife.'

— *The Mahabharata*, 'Shantipurva' Ch. 144 shloka 16

(i) My musings on the photograph

Never did I find a proper name so connotative as my wife's. My wife's name, 'Veenapani', means goddess Saraswati, known from the Vedic times as the goddess of knowledge, music and arts. When I saw her for the first time she was sitting on a straw mat in *padmashana* (lotus posture) under the mango tree in her maternal grandfather's house at Baidyanath Dham, famous for one of Lord Shiva's twelve *vyotirlingas*. This holy place is in the district of Dumka in the State of Jharkhand. She was dressed in the ivory-white silk with rich golden zari borders with emerald edge. She was lost playing on her *veena* whereon her dexterous nimble fingers moved in superb rhythm. She was singing in *raag vasant*: She seemed to me 'Veenavadini' (Saraswati) Herself:

या कुन्देन्दुतुषारहारध्वला या शुभ्रवस्त्रावृता
या वीणावरदण्डमण्डितकरा या श्वेतपद्मासना

I was appointed a lecturer at Samastipur College in July 1960, and was married that year in December with Veenapani. Over these five decades whilst I have spun the warp and woof of my life on the loom of time, she has carved thereon myriad patterns, and given them variegated colours. When I look back, I am driven to think that we two have lived on the branch of this *Samsarvrikschha* like those two birds on the branch of the tree about which the *Mundaka Upanishad* makes a reference¹. But whilst of the two birds in the *Mundaka*, one acted and the other was an onlooker, we both have acted, and have kept each other under critical gaze. She made my moments of joy intense and passionate; she made even my tragic moments superbly cathartic and elevating.

I begin this Chapter with my musings on her photograph. It depicts her performing the *Chhat pooja* in which the Sun is worshipped both when He sets in the west and when He rises in the east. It brings to mind what we read about the worship of Ra in ancient Egypt. It shows that while we worship the rising Sun, we worship it also when He sets. We see our God on all sides, in all directions. She

stands in the waves of the Arabian Sea adjacent to the seashore in Mumbai, the famous Juhu beach. She joins her both hands with her palms forming a saucer. My daughter Kishori painted certain symbols on them with rice-paste whereon she sprinkled vermilion and placed flowers. When right time for *pooja* came, the traditional *prasadam*, in the straw or bamboo-made basket, was held in her hands, and raised as an act of offering to the Sun who, we believe, accepts that, and also grants blessings, through His soft rays. As the photograph shows, her face glows with the radiance of the Sun, and her calm posture has the sublimity and serenity which come naturally when the occasion is so august, and mind is so serenely concentrated. The photograph shows her eyes half open observing the Sun, and her mind wholly focused. I saw how hundreds of others stood in the waters and on the shore. Our *pooja* materials were arranged on the sand of the seashore only a few dots above the points where the waves broke. My duty was to see that they were not washed away by the frequently advancing waves becoming gradually more and more aggressive.

Again to the photograph. Her hands demand some pointed reflections. We were advised by our elders that our first act every morning on waking up should be to look at our palms. We caught its import when we learnt what stood choreographed on them, thus described in a well-known verse:

*Kar agre vaste Lakshmi
Kar madhye cha Saraswati
Kar mule vaste Govindam
Pratah subh kar darshnam*

No greater tribute to human hands is conceivable than that expressed in these four lines. This is a rich paean to the very instrument of action with which we work in the *kriya* (action; cosmic creativity) we call this *samsar* (the universe). The palm suggests through its images, as described in that *shloka*, a philosophy of life never to be forgotten in our *karmayoga*. It is high poetry to view our hands as the support from Govind Himself. How else are we enabled to row our life's canoe across the shark-infested and turbulent ocean of life (निराधारधारं भवजलधिपारं)? The Goddess of wisdom and learning (Saraswati) is conceived to be at the centre of the hand. Whatever one does, one must do that after examining things to be done on the touchstone of wisdom (निकषग्रावा मतिहेम्नः). And the fingers (*Karmandriya*) represent the Goddess of wealth (Lakshmi) who helps us to acquire wealth that comes without blemishes. In her *Kar-kalash* (कर कलश, अंजलि) we had poured drops of milk and holy water which trickled down into the ocean after shining a little in the slanted rays of the Sun. Everyone, irrespective of caste or creed, could participate in the worship of the Sun. Once this ritual was over, she took turns at the same spot with some fruits and home-made sweets as oblations to the God. This was an essential part of our customary rituals. The Sun God never ate what was offered, but we believed that His divine kiss got planted through the rays. At the end of the *pooja*, we distributed, amongst all those present, the fruits and the sweets as the *prasadam* which everyone received as God's grace, and ate with all solemnity. I have reflected on her hands so much as nothing demands reflections more than the hands with which we all become active participants in the vast *kriya* of the cosmos.

(ii) My heart-attack: when She played the role of Savitri

I am convinced that her hands saved me from death in 1989 at Nagpur. While on the tread-mill for a routine cardiac medical check-up at Dr. Mahorkar's heart clinic, I suffered a massive heart-attack, so serious that even the doctors lost hope. I felt I was sinking in darkness, and for sometime I lost my consciousness. When after 72 hours of the crisis I recovered my senses, I felt the soft touch of my wife's hands on my forehead. When I opened my eyes I saw her in meditative mood. It seemed she was praying in her silence to God to save my life. She believed that He, who had come to save the King elephant from the death clutches of Makara (crocodile), when the elephant had been deserted by all the relations, would surely come to save her husband. She silently recited *Gajendramoksha*, which had made God Vishnu come to the helpless elephant's succour. Her expressions bore the serenity which could come only after a total surrender to God with soul singing in silence: 'You are my only resort, my only hope, my only strength' (गतिस्त्वं गतिस्त्वं त्वमेका भवानि).

I could regain consciousness within 72 hours, but had to remain on bed in the Intensive Care Unit with a trembling hope for survival. Certain lines from Browning welled up in my mind to mitigate, to some extent, my wrenching apprehensions of an imminent end:

'Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!'

For me the past had ceased, and the future seemed non-existent; and the present was slowly getting sucked into dense fog in which my mind often painted some rainbow with the fleeting rays of faltering hope. Whenever I saw around, I could always see my wife sitting in the room's corner in meditative mood. Often it became obvious to me that she was somehow restraining her tears by arresting them under her eye-lids and in her eye-corners. She was my best nurse whose dedication amazed even my cardiologist.

Whilst the conventional cardiologists prescribed the traditional and conservative regimen for my treatment, Dr. Khalilullah, a noted cardiologist, and my old acquaintance, examined me and suggested that I needed an interventional treatment at the Apollo Hospitals at Madras, or some similar centres in New Delhi. He said that not to undergo it would be running a grave risk. I felt I stood in the desert where visibility had gone on account of a blinding dust storm. We had none to help in the crisis we faced. My children then were very young, not capable of taking a decision in a crisis. My friends maintained silence on the issue as none thought I would survive even the journey to Madras. Besides, we had meager financial resources, and were not sure how much assistance I would get from the government that I had served for decades. My wife took a bold decision to take me to Madras with not more than Rs. 5000 with herself. Virtually she took me in her hands. She boldly responded to the challenge she faced. I never saw her morose as she never had lost her way, or light. She had infinite faith in Mahadeva: and believed that He would surely come to her help when she found herself helpless and hopeless. When I felt totally broken whilst travelling in the first class compartment of the Madras Mail, she pepped up my sagging spirit by telling me

that she would surely bring me back from Death, as Savitri had done to her husband Satyavan. She told me the story which she had read in the *Mahabharata*. I knew the story as I had read Aurobindo's *Savitri* in which he had turned the story into an allegory to express his philosophy. She narrated the story as is given in the epic. When Savitri found her husband dead, she made Lord of Death revise His decision through her indefatigable persuasion so deeply touching and moving that the Lord was pleased to grant her prayer. She brought her husband back to life. Whenever I look back, I feel she had been my Savitri.

For about a month we stayed in Madras. The first 20 days I was confined on the third floor of the Cardiology Ward of the Apollo Hospitals. The cardiologist, Dr. Samuel Mathews, after subjecting me to the exploratory procedures, told me that there was a critical block in the cardiac artery which called for an immediate removal through an interventional procedure known as 'coronary angioplasty'. Though the Apollo Hospitals had been recognized under the Central Government Health Scheme, this specific procedure had not been recognized by our Government as an approved mode of treatment for cardiac ailment. The medical charges could come to Rs. 60000, but we had only about Rs 5000. But my wife was not broken. She prayed to Krishna for succour. Then I found a miracle happened. One fine morning the Hospital received a fax message from the Government recognizing angioplasty as a mode of treatment. I became, perhaps, the first CGHS beneficiary in our country to obtain this costly treatment. My worry was over. Cardiac angioplasty was performed on me. Under this procedure the blocks in the cardiac vessels were removed by inserting through the blocked areas in the arteries a specially devised wire carrying a medicated balloon at its tip to press the accumulated plaques sideways to clear the flow of blood. This procedure was done under a local anesthesia, so I could see how the catheter, inserted through my groin, sent its wire up inside into my heart to discover the stenosis in the circumflex branch. I found the procedure of angioplasty very interesting. I could see on the computer screen my own throbbing heart. I could see how the wire was travelling inside in its quest of the obstructions to be removed. On seeing my heart, I found it wholly bereft of the romantic glamour we associate with it in our literature. For a short while, I felt I was performing what is called '*Shavashana*' in our Yoga. In *Shavashana*, one can see from outside how one's body looks and how it reacts to external stimuli, and emotions. It is a great experience.

As I had spent so many days in the Cardiology Ward, I had developed friendship with many persons undergoing similar travails. When I was taken down for the interventional procedure in the Cath-Lab, many of them saw me off getting into the lift. My friends from the Income-tax Department at Madras saw me off at the entrance of the Cath-Lab enclosure. My wife was permitted up to the door of the Lab where she sat meditating and praying for my welfare. And I alone was rushed into the semi-dark room for interventional treatment. Only my God was with me. On his lotus feet I concentrated my mind allowing my body to be carried to the operation table. After a month, she brought me back to Nagpur as Savitri had brought back her Satyavana by supplicating the Lord of Death. My children were overjoyed, my friends were amazed. So, with God's grace, none could derive the macabre delight of seeing a beautiful young lady, who had gone with a brilliant vermilion mark, return as a widow with the dim mark of ash on her forehead. But her gruelling experience did not leave her unscathed. She

developed high blood-pressure, and her sugar level went up causing concern over all the years thereafter. Thus she paid a heavy price for interiorizing her sufferings for my sake.

But this was not the only patch of bad time which had withered me, and wrenched my better half. The chemistry of my blood went wrong several times thereafter leading to the formation of new blocks in the cardiac blood vessels putting my survival to risk several times. I had to go through repeated hospitalizations. She bore the slings of my misfortune with a cheerful zest; and she cultivated her art of life with fortitude and Stoic patience. She had patience, and maintained her poise when it is not unnatural for many humans to bend, break, and melt away. I felt her strength emanated from her wisdom that she herself expressed in the lines she often sang, or intoned while alone:

इस अखिल विश्व प्रवाह में किसको नहीं बहना पड़ा
सुख दुःख हमारी ही तरह किसको नहीं सहना पड़ा

(Who escapes from the cosmic flux?
Who hasn't, like me, felt distress and delight?)

(iii) She worshipped Lord Shiva, and performed *Rudravisheka*

Whenever she felt torn into pieces, she turned to Lord Shiva whom she had worshipped daily for twelve years before her marriage when she lived in the family of her maternal grandfather, at Baidyanatha Dham, Deoghar. She went to the temple every morning to offer flowers and *vilvapatra* on behalf of her maternal grand-mother. Her maternal grandfather, Pandit Chhedi Jha 'Shastri', spent most of his evenings in the temple complex reciting the *Vedas* which the crowd present there heard with rapt attention. We all believed that Lord Shiva was *Mritunjaya*, and His worship could save one even from death. Even now many of us perform, or get performed, the worship of Shiva with numerous recitations of *Mritunjaya Mahamantra*. Believing that Lord Shiva's grace alone had saved her husband from death, she decided to perform the great Shiva worship called *Rudravisheka*. It involved elaborate rituals and the continuous recitations from the *Vedas* over nine days. I couldn't do that as I was not medically advised to do that. I was not in a position to subject myself to the discipline for nine days: to fast for the whole day, and to have frugal meal of fruits only once at night. In our society, the ladies were not supposed to perform this *pooja*. We were advised to engage some professional pandit to perform this. But my wife decided to perform this worship herself, and all my effort to dissuade her failed. Once she decides, she does. Over all those days she made everyday a thousand tiny Shivalingas out of well-kneaded clay, besides a main *Shivalinga*. It is amazing how the images of clay, thus made, turned divine. She followed the prescribed schedule in all its meticulous details. I remained just a silent watcher of the things going on. She treaded the path of devotion, and was a *Karmayogi*. Once she told me that whatever she did was itself Shiva's worship (यद्यत्कर्म करोमि तत्तदखिलं शम्भो तवाराधनम्). In the evening of the ninth day, when the entire process of the *pooja* was over, she touched my feet with a glow on her face the like of which was unlikely to be seen in God's creation. I could describe her only the way the great Tulsidas

described the beauty of Sita when Sri Rama had seen Her for the first time in the garden of Maharaja Janaka: 'She made Beauty herself more beautiful. She seemed a flame of light in the dome of Beauty': (सुन्दरता कहूँ सुन्दर कराइ; छबिगृह दीप शिखा जनु बरई). She told me in soft voice: "I heard the Lord say that I would be on the funeral pyre with my vermilion mark. So you need not worry for your life till I am alive". Tears trickled down her cheeks. Her statement mitigated my pangs, but burdened me with the apprehensions of the days I would have to undergo the sentence of life when she would have gone.

Once we went to Baidyanathdhama on the occasion of *Maha Shivaratri* said to be the Night of Shiva. Some say that the Lord was married to Parvati that night, others say He performed that night the supreme cosmic dance (*Tandava*) capable of creating, and also destroying, the cosmic order. It so happened that the head priest of the great Shiva temple called on us to invite her to sing *Rudrastakam*, the poem composed by the great Tulsidas, at 3.30 a.m. from the wide portico at the crowning dome above of the main entrance providing ingress into the sprawling quadrangle in which so many majestic temples had been built, of which the Baidyanath Temple was most famous. This entrance was called the *Singh Darwaza* (the Lion Gate) as massive lion images had been put on both the sides of the entrance. She accepted the request. When we ascended the portico we saw an ocean of humans in the campus abuzz with all sorts of devotional sounds in different tones, pitches and tenors. Most of them had come trekking over all the way from the bank of the holy Ganges at Sultanganj singing devotional songs. Once she began singing, silence prevailed in the campus. It was still dark, and the electrical light created beautiful chiaroscuro effects. The sweet plenitude of her voice wove an environment which could be imagined, but not described in words. She sang the *Rudrastakam* which recites the glory of God who is eternal, and is all bliss. It begin with the melliflous *shloka*:²

नमामीशमीशान निर्वाण रूपं विभुं व्यापकं ब्रह्म वेदस्वरूपम
निजं निर्गुणं निर्विकल्पं निरीहं चिदाकाशमाकाशवासं भजेहं

We felt we were in paradise.

(iv) Our marriage: She was a Padmini

We were married in 1960 when she was barely fifteen, and I was twenty-two. She was a school student at Baidyanatha Dham; and I had just become a lecturer in the Department of English at Samastipur Degree College. The families to which we belonged shared the same value system. My father and her father were distinguished teachers, and had participated in our country's Struggle for Freedom. They liked each other, and disliked go-getting of any sort. I had never seen Veenapani before our wedlock though I had an opportunity to steal a glance at her even before our marriage when I had accompanied my mother to the temple for worship. She too had come to the temple with her grandmother who was distantly related to my mother. My mother saw Veenapani in the temple, and selected her to be her daughter-in-law. She said she picked up a flower that she found on the sanctum sanctorum of the Lord. My Mother lived with this belief till her end.

We were married in customary way. The ideal that is set for a daughter in Mithila is Sita's. All the rituals, going with songs, followed the pattern set when Sita was married to Sri Ram in ancient times. I have seen how the same protocol was repeated thrice in my family when my three daughters were married in the eighties and the nineties of the century just gone.

I could see her at close quarters only after performing rituals on the fourth day of marriage. Under our custom, the sacrament of marriage is considered completed only after this ritual. When I saw her for the first time, she was clad in traditional style; was fully draped in yellow sari. But I could see the glow of her body getting subdued transmission. I could see her hands exposed not more than what Leonardo Da Vinci allowed his Mona Lisa to reveal hers in his painting. I fancied that God made them at His leisure with Yellow Sapphire and gold. Till the fourth night after our marriage we slept in the same room but did not share the same bed. Two elderly ladies also slept in the same room so that the customary practice of total abstinence, till the ritual of the fourth day, was not breached. Deprivation and Plenitude coexisted! And I could weave and unweave rainbow only in my mind till the fourth night.

I grew infinitely curious when someone from my maternal uncle's village, who had some occasion to see her, told me that she had all the features of a Padmini. What he said was above me. He explained to me the features of a Padmini, one of the four classes into which women were classified in the ancient text of *Ratimanjari*. A Padmini is one who possesses features thus summarized:

भवति कमलनेत्रा नासिकाक्षुद्रंभ्रा अविरलकुच युग्मा चारुकेशी कृशांगी सुवचनसुशीला गीतवाद्यानुरक्ता सकल तनुसुवेशा पद्मिनी पद्मगंधा. Then came the cherished night; and in the dim light of an earthen lamp I saw her, and found her well qualified to be called a Padmini. She was a rose in her full bloom. A line from the *Ramcharitmanas*, where the poet describes Sita, came to mind: जनु बिरंचि सब निज निपुनाई; बिरचि विश्व कहं प्रगटि देखाई (as if with all His skill and deftness God created her to demonstrate His skill to the universe). The great Bhratrihari aptly said (which I render from Sanskrit): "What is the loveliest of all the things to look at? It is the happy face of the beloved. Which smell can charm one most? It is the aroma of her mouth." But no conversation was possible because of her sweet bashfulness. The situation brought to mind the line in which Tulsidas portrays the restraints in the impatience of Sita on seeing Sri Ram amidst the crowd of kings assembled in the court of Maharaja Janaka to break the Shiva's bow (as Janaka had taken the vow to marry Sita with him alone who could break the mighty bow which once upon a time Lord Shiva had wielded). The poet describes her facial expression of her agony:

गिरा अलिनि मुख पंकज रोकी, प्रगट न लाज निशा अवलोकी

(She kept her words confined, out of coyness, in her lotus-like mouth, as does a lotus by confining a bee inside itself by closing its petals when it gets dark.),

(v) Her First Coming to the house of her in-laws: the lotus unfolds its multi-layered petals

She received a traditional welcome when we took her to our house at Laheriasarai. My mother and others had boundless joy. But soon she discovered

that her daughter-in-law knew no Maithili, our mother tongue; and was not proficient in the cultural rituals of our family. As she found her greatly responsive, she decided to train this greenhorn. I was delighted to see the rich chemistry developing into close bond of love between the two till my mother died in December of 1973.

My mother engaged Pandit Chandra Nath Mishra 'Amar', a great scholar of Sanskrit and Maithili, and one of the greatest Maithili poets of modern times, to teach her Maithili. I had the good fortune of being his student while I studied at the M.L. Academy at Laheriasarai. He came to my house every evening for two years to teach her. Soon my wife learnt the natural Mathili accent. When she sang in Maithili, she sang with the characteristic Maithil melody. She sang the great poet Vidyapati's love songs with such sublimity that we could experience ecstasy, a sort of spiritual frenzy. I have noted with a sense of joyous wonder that the love songs of Vidyapati are capable of being enjoyed at different levels, mundane and spiritual alike. We know how Vidyapati's love songs made the great Chaitanya dance in the glory of God. Dr. Harivansh Rai Bachchan aptly said:

कहाँ विरत चैतन्य महाप्रभु, कहाँ मनुज ममता-रत कामी
पर विद्यापति के चरणों के दोनों है बरबस अनुगामी

(How different are the pleasure seeking humans from the detached and divine Chaitanya! Yet they all enjoy Vidyapati's songs capable of yielding meaning at diverse planes.)

The Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda's love poems are erotic but not spiritual; Vidyapati's are erotic and spiritual both, depending on the mind that reflects on them.

I recall, late Pandit Triloknatha Mishra, one of the greatest pandits of modern Mithila. He had told us while addressing us at our School : "the ladies are the custodians of the culture of Mithila". Credit goes to my mother for her decision to give my wife sound cultural orientation. Credit goes also to my wife who listened to what her mother-in-law told her, and acted thereon. My mother wanted her to become proficient in family customs and rituals which were performed in all the *samskars* (ceremonies) beginning from one's birth to death. The importance of customs prevailing in a family (*kulachar*) in Mithila was so great that if they differed from *shastras*, the customs generally prevailed.

In her expectations from her daughter-in-law, my mother was not dismayed. She learnt fast and learnt well. She presented a contrast to those daughters-in-law who come with closed mind and gross intellectual sclerosis. My mother got in her a good student. She was very much conscious that someday that young lady would succeed her on the throne of our family even though the throne was of cane of no value in our market economy. It is said that students fall into three categories: (i) those for whom suggestions are more than enough (as Janaka was in the famous *Ashtavakra Geeta*); (ii) those who are convinced only after ratiocination and arguments (as Arjuna was in the *Bhagavad-Gita*); (iii) those who refuse to grow into wisdom even if all efforts are made by the ablest teachers. My wife belonged to the second category.

(vi) The Festivals and the family rituals

Our festivals are the products of our culture, and are also its most potential shapers of our values. They are sources of our supreme delight, and continuous inspiration. The important festivals in which we, and all others of our Mithila region, put our heart, are Basant Panchami, Maha Shivratri, Holi, Ram Navami, Rakshabandhan, Janmashtmi, Dussehra, Deepawali and Bratridutiya (Bhai Duj). My wife showed the same zest in performing them as is usual amongst the ladies of Mithila. What amazed me was their shared views on what the festivals suggested. These festivals constituted for us the sources both of light and delight. All the festivals have a central thread to emphasize the necessity of doing *kartavya-karma* (duties) for doing which all of us must strive and struggle. Our festivals reveal our ontological and metaphysical ideas about the cosmic order. Whilst the forces of good and evil coexist in Brahma, the *Shatras* provide us ways to ensure that the forces of good prevail. Our festivals turn our life itself into festivity. Our festivals are easy even for the poor to enjoy and celebrate. They bear all the marks of the agricultural society, and are informal; but demand great devotion. As I have already written, our *Chhat* festival recognizes no caste barriers: even the Muslims can participate (as I had myself participated in the “Tazia” procession organized by the Muslims).

(vii) When She met Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister

It was the early 1977 when we came from Calcutta to see Delhi. Our stay was for seven days only. We could see all that one should see in Delhi. We visited the Red Fort. Our children spurted with joy when they reclined on the marble throne of the great Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in the Red Fort. At the Red Fort I read, and explained to my wife, what the Emperor had got written in gold at the ceiling of the Diwan-i-Khas:

Agar firdaus bar ru-yi zamin ast
Hamin ast, u hamin ast, a hamin ast.
[If on Earth be an Eden of bliss,
It was this, it was this, it was this.]³

My wife mused on the gilded words, and let loose her imaginings to share what the Emperor might have felt in those great days of his imperial power. We were happy to see the “light and sound” show inside the Red Fort. It was a great experience to hear and imagine the gaits of horses in good number coming on their trot and canter. We were bemused by the cadenced sound of the *ghunghroos* of the girls advancing to present their amorous dance to the Emperor. It was all ‘sound and shadow’ but signified a lot to us. We made some stray shopping in the Meenabazaar which glittered with select wares displayed on both the sides of the long passage inside the fort. The Mughal princesses and the favoured damsels of the imperial household shopped for things they needed to enhance their glamour already great.

The next day we roamed in what is called Lutyens’ Delhi, and saw all that any visitor could hope to see. We had highest admiration for Mrs. Indira Gandhi who was at that time the Prime Minister of our country, and was at the pinnacle of her glory. My wife shared my father’s high admiration for Mrs. Gandhi. She

expressed her desire to meet her to see her at close quarters. As my experience went, my wife never went wrong in her decisions (except perhaps once, when she married me). She wished to meet Mrs. Gandhi. I was amazed at her wish. I told her the story which tells us how Lord Krishna's two wives, Satybhama and Rukmini, asked Him to get the Parijaat tree from the Heaven. No ordinary mortals could go to the paradise to bring the rare tree to the earth. But Lord Krishna could do that, because He was Krishna. I felt her wish could not be fulfilled. I thought my indifference would make her forget her desire. But she got what she wanted. It so happened that she was asked by Mukul Jha to accompany her to Mrs. Gandhi. Mukul was the wife of late M.K. Jha, who was a senior member of the Indian Police Service, and had wide contacts in Delhi. He was related to us, and was very kind to us. So my wife went to call on Mrs Gandhi. Mukul had in her company a third lady, perhaps a social worker of some distinction. I accompanied them to the Prime Minister's residence. They went inside whilst I waited in the Reception. I felt it was not proper for a public servant of my standing to meet the Prime Minister without complying with formalities, and without valid reasons. Mrs. Gandhi met them in the lawn of her house. She first talked to the two elderly ladies. She was not comfortable with them, perhaps, because they had gone with some veiled requests. She was visibly annoyed. The two ladies wanted her to pose for a photograph. She curtly refused their request. Then she turned to my wife and asked her what had brought her there. Their short conversation lasted for a few seconds. It went thus:

Mrs. Gandhi: "And what makes you come to me?"

My wife: "No work. Just to see you."

Mrs Gandhi: "Just to see me!"

My wife:

"Yes. I had read about you. I heard about you from my father-in-law, himself a freedom-fighter. And I was eager to see your beauty that goes with brain so well. I am overjoyed."

Mrs. Gandhi blushed. She knew that all those who met her always had some interest to promote, proximate or distant. Here she found someone, herself pretty, meeting her to appreciate her beauty, both as it was then, and as it might have been in those sweet years long gone. She asked her to take to social work. My wife told her that she was busy looking after her four children. For a few seconds Mrs. Gandhi looked at her, then She herself expressed her desire to be photographed with my wife. My wife wondered at her silence: it seemed that through a concentrated glance she read things not apparent. The other two ladies also joined. I collected that photograph from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. While returning from her house, we loitered near the India Gate. I asked her what she liked most in Mrs. Gandhi. She did not say anything but sweetly intoned Sir Muhammad Iqbal's lines:

सितारों से आगे जहाँ और भी हैं,
अभी इश्क के इन्तहां और भी हैं ...
तेरे सामने आसमाँ और भी हैं

(The universe remains even beyond the stars,
Many more tests still await in life,
And a wide sky is there within your ken.)

I got her answer.

(viii) Her judicial verdict in *A Rickshaw Puller vs. A Rickshaw Puller*

For some personal reasons I visited Mumbai sometime in 2000. I, along with my wife, went to a Shiva temple on the Marine Drive. It was just a chance that there I met some senior officers of the Income-tax Department whom I had known for years. They were apparently distraught as something was wrenching their mind. I had no wish to play God's spy, yet I asked them the reasons which had led them to that pass. They told me the whole story pertaining to the abuse of the Indo-Mauritius Double Taxation Avoidance Convention. They discharged their duty under the Income-tax Act 1961. They were quasi-judicial officers. Their orders displeased the corporate *imperium* which procured support of some powerful politicians. Instead of getting reward for good work done, they were threatened with punitive actions. I assuaged them that in our country they were not the first to receive displeasure for having done good work. But, I felt, I sounded hollow in advising them to take things just in their stride. But what they said lingered in my mind. I got light when a rickshaw puller told me his story of his sufferings wrought by the fraud and collusion of his friend. I have called that stuff *A Rickshaw Puller vs. A Rickshaw Puller*.

Whilst arguing before the Hon'ble Delhi High Court, the case which questioned the misuse of the Indo-Mauritius Double Taxation Avoidance Convention⁴, I told the Court the story of *A Rickshaw Puller vs. A Rickshaw Puller*. Do not try to find out this case in the books as it is not there. Everyone knows the cases of *Shylock vs. Antonio* and *Jarndice vs. Jarndice*. These cases are stated for illumination, but never cited as authorities. The *Antonio's Case* is narrated in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to highlight the greed of the hard-hearted Shylock, and *Jarndice's Case* is from Dickens's *Bleak House* wherein law's delays ruined the litigants but delighted the greedy lawyers. *A Rickshaw Puller vs. A Rickshaw Puller* is the figment of my imagination, but is a delightfully suggestive metaphor. I got the nuggets of its plot in course of my conversation with someone I met in the J.J. Colony at the periphery of Delhi which I had visited, along with Mrs. Gita Mittal, (now one of the Hon'ble Judges of the Delhi High Court), at the request of the Chief Justice S.B. Sinha of the Hon'ble High Court (as he then was). The story goes thus:

Two rickshaw pullers came from Bihar and settled down in the J.J. Colony (the Jhuggi Jhopri Colony). They had with them their families. To economize, and to reduce the drudgery of the domestic chores they entered into a gentleman's agreement that whilst they would have their lunch in the house of one, they would dine in the house of the other. They were good friends and assumed good faith in the discharge of these contractual obligations. But one of them turned greedy. He felt that reaping benefits at the cost of others was the way of the world. Lucifer's logic sprouts naturally when Mammon casts its spell. The first party to the said contract found that not only his friends' wives multiplied, even his children grew by leaps and bounds. When questioned, he said that law permitted

him to have more than one wife, and the kids were no different from his children. He even procured from certain Government offices certain papers bearing round seal in support of what he asserted. When the other contracting party grumbled and protested, he was told to carry out his obligations as he was bound by his words. Change of circumstances did not matter. Having lost everything this way, the swindled Rickshaw-puller went back to his village to become a hapless grain-picker in other's fields.

I narrated what happened to this hapless Rickshaw-puller to my wife though I knew she never had the misfortune of wasting time over law and litigations. "Well dear, was it fair and just for the first rickshaw puller to do what he did?" She instantly replied; "It was unfair." The derelict Rickshaw-puller had committed a breach of faith: his act was fraudulent. I felt that Mauritius tax treaty was bilateral: it was only for the benefit of the residents or Mauritius and of India. To allow the residents of the third States to masquerade as the Mauritian residents was obviously fraudulent. Her verdict led me to initiate a Public Interest Litigation before the Delhi High Court which upheld, to my mind, her verdict⁴. I have discussed that litigation in Chapter 23 of this Memoir. This story brought to my mind what CG Jung had said; "Great innovations never come from above, they invariably come from below."

(ix) The *Srimad Bhagavad Mahapurana*

A story goes that once Narada visited the cottage of the great Vyasa in Naimisharanya on the bank of the holy river Saraswati flowing there. He found great Vyasa sad as he was yet to acquire the bliss of peace. Narada, omniscient as he was, could understand his plight, and he asked the great poet what ailed him. Vyasa asked Narada how could he get peace, and enlightenment. Narada told him that he did great work, but something still greater was yet to be done. Whilst writing the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa missed to realize the supreme value of *Bhakti* (devotion). Besides, whilst composing that great epic, he, as its creative artist, experienced, no doubt creatively, the ideas and feelings of all sorts, noble or not so noble in the diverse characters in their diverse situations. His mind that created such situations and characters couldn't have escaped experiencing such emotions. Vyasa suggested that the only way to overcome his distress was total devotion to the Lord. Vyasa saw the seer's point, and he, in holy Naimisharanya, composed the *Srimad Bhagavad Mahapurana*. Someone said about this *Purana* with deep perspicacity:

कलि-मल-मथनि त्रिताप-निवारिनि, जन्म-मृत्यु भव-भय-हारिनि
सेवत सतत सकल सुख कारिनि, सुमौषधि हरि-चरित-गान की

(In substance it says: the *Srimad Bhagavad Mahapurana* saves one from all the evil traps of life and death to which we are all exposed in this Kaliyuga. This *Purana* provides never-failing remedy through God's *kirtan*.)

It was sometime in the December of 2005. My wife wished to hear the *Bhagavad Mahapurana* at the 'Veenapani Bhawan' at Laheriasarai where she had spent some of her best years with my mother and father. At her initiative we set up there 'Bhagavad-Gita Swadhyaya Kendra'. She herself sang the *kirtan* she had learnt

from Swami Satyanand Saraswati, the great Sannyasi who had founded the Munghyr School of Yoga. It expresses the very gist of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. [You can hear her singing this at my website www.shivakantjha.org in the folder relating to the said Kendra.] I wish everyone hears it, and recites it inside himself.

I felt her request to hear the *Bhagavad Mahapurana* was her great spiritual quest. It is often said that one can through one's endeavour attain heights through the *Karma Yoga*, or the *Gyan Yoga*. But the *Bhakti Yoga* is unique as it comes through God's grace alone. We had the happiest experience when over seven days we heard the *Mahapurana* at the 'Veenapani Bhawan'. It was expounded everyday in the afternoon by Dr. Bighnesh Chandra Jha of Darbhanga. His mellifluous and interesting exposition was often punctuated by *kirtans*. The schedule of this *pravachan* (exposition) ran over seven days. Every day was well-structured from morning to evening. In the forenoons we sat for the worship when four expert Brahmins slowly recited the *Vedas* in the four corners of the sprawling room; and a distinguished pundit recited the Sanskrit text of the *Mahapurana* as fast and loud as he could do as he had to recite all the *shlokas*, with refrains, within those seven days. We fasted for the whole day and had simple food only in the evening. My wife prepared that, and sprinkled thereon the tulsi leaves. Lots of persons assembled over these days to hear the divine exposition, and most of them expressed gratitude that they could get that great opportunity to hear the religious discourse. It was great to see how so many persons had such deep spiritual yearnings despite their absorption in the world's materialistic ways. We sat together all through such rituals listening to the *shlokas* so mellifluously recited. The exposition of the *Mahapurana* commenced each day at 3 o'clock in the afternoon to continue till 7 p.m. Every day this began with the worship of the book, the *Bhagavad Mahapurana*, which is itself considered Sri Krishna. Each day's exposition was concluded with *aarti* followed by *kirtans*. On some of these days my wife sang certain *kirtans*: some of which can be heard⁵ at www.shivakantjha.org.

On the seventh day, the main Pandit wanted us to pray for the fulfilment of whatever desires we had. But neither my wife nor I had anything in our mind to wish for. We stood, with folded hands, before the Lord but had nothing to wish for, nothing to ask for. She told me later that she could only get at that time the words in which Sri Billvamangalachraya prayed to his own tongue:

त्वमेव याचे मम देहि जिह्वे समागते दंडधरे कृतान्ते
वक्तव्यमेवं मधुरं सुभक्त्या गोविन्द दामोदर माधवेति

She told me later; "What could I ask for? He Himself has given so much. I felt I had nothing to wish for". She sang Billvamangalachraya's 'Madhurashtkam'. It can be heard on my website⁶. In this Sanskrit *kirtan*, the poet prays to his tongue only for one act of kindness: it should just recite 'गोविन्द दामोदर माधवेति' when he is at the point of his death.

(x) Her song that moved Dr. Sri Krishna Sinha

Veenapani had known, with empathy, the sufferings of many who were the victims of the exploitative and extractive social system in the rural areas of Bihar. She was born in an important Zamindar family, and had seen how mercilessly the

poor and the indebted were treated. Her heart bled for those who suffered. She had an occasion to sing at a function organized at her school. It was 1957. The function was presided over by Dr. Sri Krishna Sinha, who was the Chief Minister of Bihar for the longest period, till 1961. She sang a song in Bhagalpuri language called *Angika*. This song portrayed the sufferings of a poor farmer's family. It was caught in a debt-trap, and the mighty zamindar had deprived the distressed family not only of whatever tiny piece of land it had, but also of its farming equipments and the bullock it had purchased. Veenapani sang a song in which the poet had portrayed the pathetic plight of the poor farmer's wife who saw all her dreams shattered, and means of livelihood gone. The song was touching: it ran thus:

छिनी लेलहो कहिने बाबू मोरे जमिनवा हो
अहि रे जमिनमां पर मोरे जीवनमां हो

Her song touched the heart of the listeners amongst whom none could remain without film of tears in their eyes. Dr. Sri Krishna Sinha was moved by the sentiments expressed in the song. Veenapani received the first prize for singing a song that cast its spell so much, so effectively.

Dr. Sinha was himself devoted to reforms for social justice. He was deeply anguished. It was good that our politicians those days had not lost milk of human kindness. He heard the song with rapt attention, and his heart went for the suffering souls. History tells us how passionately he strove to do things to heal the wounds of those who suffered because of deprivation. He was himself well-versed in *Angika*, he could catch the suggestions that those well-chosen words made. His heart bled for the downtrodden and suffering souls. He became the first to see that the Zamindari system was abolished in Bihar. He led the Dalits to the Deoghar temple to break the conventions which had prevented them from entering the temple. He pursued with zest the ideas and ideals which were dear to us during our Struggle for Freedom. Dr. Sinha was himself a distinguished freedom-fighter.

When we think of the present, as being shaped by our politicians pursuing the neoliberal agenda of the present-day Economic Globalisation, we have good reasons to feel greatly anguished. Persons, like Dr. Sinha, have gone. Now things in our country are becoming different. Thousands of the farmers have killed themselves, and lakhs are being driven to starvation death. They are thrown to be treated as the market forces decide. The Government is busy drumbeating its 9% GDP, and also selling dreams that our country is going to become a super power soon. Her song takes my mind to our suffering countrymen who feel the same way as the farmer felt in that song. They too have the pangs on account of the deprivation of their land and cultural environment for the benefit of the present day big corporations, the neo-liberal economists and their lobbyists. Crudities of greed and deception have polluted our perception, and destroyed our sympathetic responsiveness. We see again the emergence in our country of a system of 'corporate *zamindari*', more noxious than what we had abolished in the early years of our independent India. Greed-driven depravity has no bottom, it is abysmal. Are we going to build a socio-economic system in which the hard-hearted creatures rule the roost? Are we going to enact the scenes which shock us

whilst reading Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* to which I have made reference in Chapters 6, 12, and 22. The days have gone when the mighty political power-wielders could be moved by the soft plaintive melody of 'छिनी लेलही' to become creative and responsive.

**(xi) Her life: a many coloured dome. She could smile
even on the Wheel of Fire**

Her life has been "a dome of many-coloured glass". The chiaroscuro effect of light and shade made her life rich and meaningful. I recall Byron in his *Don Juan* who put his heart in a rhetorical question:

"Why don't they knead virtuous souls for life
Into that moral centaur, man and wife?"

Centaur is a creature in the Greek mythology: it is half a horse and half a human being. But under our Hindu culture when God kneads husband and wife together, what comes out is the 'Ardhanarishwar', composed of Shiva and his Shakti, the masculine and the feminine forces of nature fused dexterously together without which creation itself is inconceivable. We have experienced this over all these years we have travelled together through shade and shine of life, with that synergy which exists between a word and its meaning, two no doubt yet not different (गिरा अर्थ जलविचि सम कहियत भिन्न न भिन्न).

She, on her marriage, came to a family which had a glorious past but, from economic point of view, a bleak present. We had small land holding just enough to provide resources for food that we consumed. My father had retired before I joined the Indian Revenue Service. My salary was poor, enough only to exist. My wife had come from an important feudal family. But she, like her mother-in-law, learnt the art of managing things with scarce resources. She never grumbled, she never grudged.

We too have suffered the slings of misfortune, and the ungratefulness even of the dearest ones. We have seen trust betrayed, we have tasted bitter chalice, and we have cracked, and got crushed under avalanches of inclemency of all sorts. But she has taken her life with zest: with tongue-tied patience even while seeing it ebbing away so fast. In this evening of our life, we experience that the clouds which our pursuits produced were not rain bearing. But I get solace from her words which linger in my memory to assuage me when mind is wrenched: 'संसार की घटा से क्या प्यास बुझ सकेगी' (Who has ever got water to quench thirst from the clouds which overcast the World?) It was beyond me to understand this. But I got some light from her song she had learnt from her father:

कैद दुनियां किस अजब जादू की है टोने की है
इससे कैदी जीव को नफरत नहीं होने की है

(This captivity of the world is the wondrous spell of some magician's wand,
The prisoners undergoing this sentence suffer, yet they are in love with it!)
I do not think any better portrait of life can ever be drawn up.

This capacity to look at life this way comes only when one knows how to accept, whatever comes, as God's wish (*Ishwareksha*: ईश्वरेक्षा). She told me once that

she would wish to leave the world listening inside herself the sound of Goddess Kali's *ghunghroos* so beautifully described by the great poet Vidyapati in words which defy translation into English: "घन घन घनन घुघरु कटि वाजय, हन हन करि तुअ काता". Every morning I hear her recite a prayer to Goddess Durga: आपत्सु मग्नः स्मरणं त्वदीय करोमि दुर्गे करुणार्णवेशि (Whenever my distresses grind me, show me, Mother, Thy most merciful face). It reminds me of Lord Hailsham's memoir, *A Sparrow's Flight*, which ends with a prayer to the Lord that when his story of life ends he be not judged, but be simply granted divine mercy.

She drew strength to suffer with smile from Krishna Himself who never lost serene sublimity and subdued smile even when He had worst tryst with most painful situations. In her sufferings, she took Him as her role model. I must not say more about her on this point. Even 'candour' in an autobiographical memoir must be subject to 'prudence'. But what has struck me most is her sense of resignation to the Lord. She acted as she thought appropriate. She has drawn her support, and wants me to do likewise, from the sense of total surrender to the Lord:

‘पतवार को हमने छोड़ दिया सरकार तुम्हारे हाथों में
उद्धार पतन अब मेरा है सरकार तुम्हारे हाथों में’

[The oars of my life's boat are now in Thy hands,
It is for Thee, My Lord, to save me, or to let me sink.]

Leo Tolstoy said in his great novel *Anna Karenina* (Ch. 1): "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Our experiences have led us to believe that we differ from others no less in happiness than we do in unhappiness. There are ways and ways to become happy; there are situations and situations when we become unhappy. But it is 'unhappiness' that makes 'happiness' so dear. George Bernard Shaw made a valid point when he said in his *Man and Superman*: "A lifetime of happiness! No man alive could bear it: It would be hell on earth". Life is a mix of happiness and unhappiness. How we live through the years is the art of life.

(xii) Conclusion

The reader may tend to think why so much has been said about someone who might yet have many more years to be at work on the loom of time. But we feel we have reached a point of time when a look-back may not be unjustified. Our visibility of the future is now poor. Final words, of course, must be deferred to life's final moments.

It is difficult to draw up this Chapter's Conclusion for two reasons. First, I cannot do this here as this would be integral to the very 'Conclusion' of my Memoir. Secondly, 'Conclusion' of a life is always a wholly private affair, between oneself and one's Creator, at a point from which none returns to tell anything to anyone. So this 'Conclusion' must remain an inconclusive 'Conclusion' Whilst the past cannot be erased, things of the past might take new turns, or acquire a new gloss, a new meaning. But one thing is obvious: she has enjoyed living a rich life, through all its colours: to say in the words of Mirza Ghalib,

'*Shama Har Rang mein Jalti hai Sahar hone Tak*' (a lamp burns in all its hues till it is needed no more).

I have often felt that though we have lived together over all these decades, we have belonged not to the same universe of thought. Our duet is good but her solo is excellent.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Cf. The Bush of Life: "All basic evidence from history of life leads us to an interpretation of *Homo sapiens* as a tiny, effectively accidental, late-arising twig on an enormously arborescent bush of life." Prof. Gould in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica Year Book 1999* p. 8
2. You can listen to it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPw3A1k6N58>
3. Rendered into English by Dr. Kalinkar Datta in Majumdar, Raychaudhuri, and Datta, *An Advanced History of India* p. 586
4. *Shiva Kant Jha vs UOI* (2002) 256 ITR 536
5. http://shivakantjha.org/openfile.php?filename=trusts/bhagavadgita_study_centre.htm
6. [http://shivakantjha.org/openfile.php?filename=trusts/bhagavadgita_study_centre.htm]