

31

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MY LIFE'S SONNET: THE CLOSING CHAPTER

*I saw Eternity the other Night
like a great ring of pure and endless light,
all calm as it was bright,
and round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
driven by the sphere
like a vast shadow moved; in which the world
and all her train were hurled.*

Henry Vaughan

*The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day.
I have spent my days in stringing and in unstringing my instrument.*

Rabindranath Tagore *Geetanjali*

'I intended an Ode,/And it turned into a Sonnet'

Austin Dobson

I

At the confluence of the past and the present

I have seen over years how my frail self has rowed its canoe through the peaceful, slow moving rivulets into stormy seas whose waves it could survive only by God's grace. After my retirement, I felt to withdraw to my first love, literature. I recalled the day, sometime in 1960, when, on being selected to pursue my study at Cambridge, perhaps at Christ's College, I toyed with the idea of spending sometime under that mulberry tree in whose thick bower John Milton had composed his *Lycidas* (1637). I had discovered in *Lycidas* answers to problems which off and on had vexed me. I was in a frame of mind which most often gnaws many in their early years: how to decide which way to go when at a crossover point. For more than three decades in the Government service, I remained busy in the affairs pertaining to kings and cabbages. I felt, this Pegasus had become a rocking-horse. But that faded world has remained ever present in my inner oeuvre from which I keep on drawing both inspiration and solace. Sitting in my balcony of the MS Flat at Shah Jahan Road, New Delhi, I was trying to see before my mind's eye the course I was destined to adopt in my post-retirement years till

the call to return comes from the Supreme Commander of the Universe. Besides, I knew that if a boat stops moving, when it is through eddies and swirls of waves, it trembles, even capsizes: so it must move on. On the morrow of my retirement, in 1998, I recalled the Kanchenjunga which I had seen, both when it was dawn, and when it was dusk, marking the shifting patterns of light and shade creating illusions of various shapes. What I have seen of life before and after my retirement, has brought to my mind Bohr's idea of complementarity which was suggested by certain mountain peaks he had seen in Japan. His disciple L. Rosenfeld had once described such scenes in these lines:

"At sunset the top of Fujiyama disappeared behind a curtain of gold-fringed clouds: the black mass of the mountain, surmounted by this fulgent crown, conveyed an impression of awe and majesty. On the next morning, it offered an entirely different spectacle: the pointed summit alone, covered with shining snow, emerged from the dense mist filling the valley; the landscape was radiating gladness and joy. So, Bohr mused, the two half-mountains together are not simply equal to a mountain: to each belongs a peculiar, individual impression, and the two are complementary."

I had seen much of life from a set track over decades, now time had come for me to see things from a changed observation-post. On the morrow of my retirement I felt I was hurled onto the cusp trying to solve existential conundrum. My mind had become a chrysalis: the idea to write this Memoir sprung in my mind at that time.

My Three Passions

In the Chapter 3 of this Memoir ('Profile of my Father') , I had quoted some lines from Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography* in which he summarized, with crisp candour, the three passions for which he had lived, and worked:

"Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind."

I know my life has neither that plenitude, nor that profundity. But I know that even a glow-worm can have good grounds to think that the flickering light that inheres in it is great as it is an infinitesimal part of the Sun that makes the whole heavens luminous.

When I muse on the heaps of gone moments, when I cast a bird's-eye view on the peaks and valleys I have seen, trudged, and crossed, I feel that even this humble self has gone through his years, in some ways at least, not much different from Bertrand Russell's to whom I am infinitely indebted, and eternally grateful. When an ordinary person, like me, claims some similitude with the views of a person at such a lofty height in eminence, he himself feels flabbergasted, and knows not how to express himself. The words of John Milton (in *Paradise Lost*) creep into mind to liberate, and yet to enmesh. It is not unnatural if he finds himself on the edge of

.....that Serbonian Bog,
'Twixt Damiata and Mount Casius old,
Where armies whole have sunk.

My Memoir : An Overview

'The Fragrant Years' broods over what could be the best in love that suffused my early years the fragrance of which has continued in mind to save me from the torrents of negative feelings, and to sustain me even when life cast me in some sort of gas chamber. Those moments have spread before my mind's eyes the rich rose petals on which I have read and enjoyed the lyrics which my Destiny composed. 'A Cog in the Machine' appears to me the years when, like the Earth, I had two movements at the same time: one trying to bear the heat and burden of the Revenue Service of our country, and the other, attempting to study men and manners, laws and morality, the earth and the galaxies, myself, and my maker..... During this period of my life, I was enriched on seeing life in the raw: I felt my several illusions stood pricked. Delight and distress came in varying proportions. I experienced enormous joys, and deep distresses. I shared the agony when my heart broke both literally and metaphorically. The slings of misfortune pierced often most unkindly making me realize the relevance of what Dante said in his *Divine Comedy* (Inferno V.121): "There is no greater grief than to recall a time of happiness when in misery". 'Illusion and Reality' traps me in the continuous intercourse with realities, rough and inclement. I had many moments when 'illusions' seemed 'real', and 'reality' turned 'illusive'. *The Bhagavada Mahapurana* tells us (in Canto 11) how Krishna sat in silence under a *peepal* tree. He was struck by a hunter's arrow. It is difficult to think what verdict he might have passed on his life in those final moments. But whenever I reflect on my life with fidelity, I get absorbed counting my life's yellow leaves, some fallen, some yet to fall, some severed from the twigs but still dancing in the breeze before acquiring rest on the soil. I have marked their beauty and rich poetry. I have my reasons to marvel, and to get amazed, at my Destiny's choreography of my life. I have enjoyed many pursuits but what has delighted me most is that 'noiseless sound' of the cavalcade of events about which I have written in this Memoir. When I hear this 'noiseless sound', I recall the words of Keats in his poem 'I Stood tip-toe upon a little hill':

A little noiseless noise among the leaves,
Born of the very sigh that silence heaves.

II

If I could have done

For all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these: 'It might have been'

-Whittier

I realized that I made a serious mistake by not acquiring proficiency in Sanskrit which had the richest treasure of human wisdom. My study of T.S. Eliot, Yeats, Maugham, Huxley and Isherwood convinced me that it would be humanity's worst disaster if the wisdom of the orient is not invoked to enlighten the way of life that the present-day Western civilization has adopted. Eliot was a great poet, but was also an expert in finance who had handled the foreign accounts at Lloyds Bank. He had studied under some most eminent European

minds, and believed that individual talent works best under its own cultural tradition. He had studied our Indian cultural tradition and thoughts, and was greatly proficient in Sanskrit. He had written that his study of Sanskrit left him “in a state of enlightened mystification”.¹ For a year I too studied Sanskrit. I felt inspired by Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who had directed the Manhattan Project with an assignment to develop the first nuclear weapon. He found learning Sanskrit easy. He quoted *ashloka* from the *Bhagavad-Gita* on seeing the first effulgence of the nuclear explosion.

III

My Life : its grammar and lodestone

In writing this autobiographical Memoir, I have reached my journey's end. Reflecting on a baby, J. Bronowski called him “a mosaic of animal and angel.”² Life is just a process for a bud to flower. I have not forgotten those scintillating gems of thought on the art of life which I had heard from my father and mother. Once he explained to me *ashloka* from the *Kathopnishad*. It considers human body as a chariot, one's soul as the actor on the chariot, human propensities as the horses carrying chariot, mind as the controlling force, and one's *buddhi* (wisdom born of *viveka*) as the charioteer (बुद्धिं तु बी सारथिं विद्धि). Ascendant on this chariot, one explores one's actions and their consequences, complex though their ways are (गहना कर्मणो गतिः *The Bhagavad-Gita* IV.17). I always saw that my mother's deepest reflections drew for support expressions from the *Ramcharitmanasa* of Tulsidas. Several times, she made me recite to her certain lines of that epic in which Rama tells Vivishan about the chariot of righteousness (*dharmarath*) which enables one to win victory in life. I have quoted the English rendering of those lines in Chapter 4 of this Memoir. I have felt over all my years that the ideas stated in those lines are of perpetual relevance in all human societies. Over my years, I had several occasions to participate in the management seminars organized by certain masters of Business Management. I had occasions to go through several research papers written by distinguished masters of some well-known B-Schools. I wish the text of those lines is made an essential part of study at all B-Schools. The complex existential problems are best solved only in the light of the wisdom that those lines convey. I often felt that my mother had summarized those ideas in her letter written to me in Maithili six decades back.

‘भगवान के ध्यान राखते काज करैत जा; औउर दोसर केर कौन भरोस. केबल तौ अपन ध्यान भगवान में राखइत काज करैत जा.’

I would render her instructions into English thus:

“Trust in the Divine power, and go on doing your duties.

Why expect anything from anyone else?

Concentrate on the All Powerful, and go ahead”.

I feel: all instructions of all mothers to all children in all times and all lands cannot be different. When I measure myself by her standards I become crest fallen. But I have always drawn light and inspiration from the wisdom she so informally imparted. This simple sentence combines the *Bhagavad-Gita's* edict

that one's right is to action alone (III. 47), and assurance that one never perishes on the way of right action. I have often judged myself on her touchstone, but I sink into silence that ends in an inner prayer: 'Mercy, not justice'.

I have always felt that God's kindness has never been denied to me. What has sustained me, even in the moments of acute frustrations, is the edict of *Bhagavad-Gita* (Ch.II.47): कर्मन्नेवाधिकारस्ते म फलेषु कदाचनः³

'Your right is to action alone,
Not to its fruits at any time.'

My father explained that *shloka* to me. He said that it was this way of looking at life that led Arjuna never to cringe before anyone for gains; and never to abdicate his duty (अर्जुनस्य प्रतिज्ञे द्वै न दैन्यं, न पलायनम् : Arjuna had taken two vows, no cringing for favour, and no abdication of duty). I have tried to live with these ideas. It has made me bear the tedium of life with patience; it has given me light whenever I was sinking inside the pit of darkness, or when cruel circumstances writhed me in their coils.

IV

I tender an apology : my perspective on self

In this autobiographical Memoir I have concentrated more on some of the events and thoughts which I have been able to recall. Writing about self, with sincerity and candour, is difficult. While exploring my years already gone, I must have overlooked my faults; illustrating the common human folly to economize with truths in own matters. I recall the words of Tulsidas in his great *Ramacharitmanasa*:

जों अपने अवगुन सब कहयूँ, बाढे कथा पर नहिं लहयूँ
ताते मैं अति अल्प बखाने, थोरे महुँ जानिहहि सयाने

[If I tell you all about my failings, my story would become long, wholly beyond my competence to narrate it. This is the reason why I should be brief about that.]

Tulsi's life⁴ was a sprawling banyan tree; my life is no more than a mere tiny twig. Yet my autobiographical Memoir has become long, and that too in a 'learnt' language! Hence I apologize.

If I were my own judge, I would hang myself by the next lamppost. Lord Hailsham of Marylebone, who had been England's Lord Chancellor, called his autobiography *A Sparrow's Flight*. One's life in the world is like a sparrow's stay for a short while. He concludes his autobiography with a prayer for mercy, not with a prayer to be weighed and judged:

Father, before this sparrow's earthly flight
Ends in the darkness of a winter's night;
Father, without whose word no sparrow falls,
Hear this, Thy weary sparrow, he calls.
Mercy, not justice, in his contrite prayer,
Cancel his guilt, and drive away despair;

My feelings find expression in these lines of Rabindranath Tagore:

তোমার কাছে খাটে না মোর কবির গর্ব করা,
মহাকবি তোমার পায়ে দিতে যে চাই ধরা।
জীবন লয়ে যতন করি যদি সরল বাঁশি গড়ি,
আগুন সুরে দিবে ভরি সকল ছিদ্র তার।

[“My poet's vanity dies in shame before Thy sight. O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music.”]

V

As we are now

More than seven decades back, I was born in a big joint family resembling a big banyan tree on which, we birds, lived and sang, and saw God's great creations. Over years, all the branches have separated to become separate trees in God's garden. I have told you, in Chapter 2, about my ancestors after exploring the family records spreading over about seven hundred years. If time permits, I would write some day a comprehensive book on my Ancestors, some of whom had contributed a lot to the development of our culture. I have told you, in Chapters 3 and 4, about my father who fought for the independence of our country, and about my mother who made great sacrifice for our nation. Now my family has shrunk to two: myself and my wife, Veena. I have three lovely daughters, Janaki, Kishori and Anju. They are married, and they are playing the role of Sita in their families. My son, Nandan, is happy in his family. And we two live together, like the two birds on the tree, to whom the *Mundaka Upanishad* refers. Like those two birds, our attitudes, and outlook differ, yet the music of our life has never had a note of discordance. Credit for it goes to my wife. She is great in accepting life as it comes, whereas I often grumble at many things, though all in vain. She has learnt the art of life, which I am even now just trying to learn. She has saved me from the soul-scorching ennui that would have otherwise overtaken me making me spend time in counting the broken reeds of a storm-tossed nest that we had built. She has helped me how to live doing our duties, with the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as the ever-present catalyst. On the assessment of all the moments hitherto spent, my judgment on my life cannot be different from Bertrand Russell's: “This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if chance were offered me.”⁵

VI

Reflections on My Life

This writing of my autobiographical Memoir has given me an opportunity to converse with myself in utmost privacy. It has also made me look back over the years gone, and reflect over the cavalcade of events which I witnessed as an observer and, also, as a participant. One of my wishes in this whole process has been what a great Urdu poet said:

जिन्दगी भर तो हुई गुफ्तगू गैरों से मगर, आज तक हमसे हमारी न मुलाकात हुई

(I have interacted with all others all my life, but I am yet to meet my own real self.)

After having written a little more than 300000 words, I find myself in a strange frame of mind. I feel I am yet to write my autobiography that I intended to write. I am yet to understand my life in all its changing contexts. I have met and chatted with all others but not with own self. Besides, I have yet not found the right idioms to express my inner self. Often, I feel I can express myself only through silence, or through metaphors. I hope, I shall discover someday apt 'objective-correlatives' to express what has remained unsaid⁶. I think 'truth' is most expressive only in fiction or poetry. I am now convinced that someday I would be able to discover a medium to express myself with utmost candour and good faith.

In the 'Introduction' to this Memoir, I had said; "My life has been, like Keats's a mansion of many apartments." I have told you something about the three apartments in the three Books of my Autobiographical Memoir: 'The Fragrant Years', 'A Cog in the Machine' and 'Illusion and Reality'. But while writing this concluding Chapter of this Memoir, my life seems to me a sonnet the two quatrains of which Time has already composed and recited, and the closing couplet is still to be composed. After having written, with a single finger incessantly kissing the keyboard of my laptop, I thought to go through the written text again to see what I had written about myself and my world to which I would remain eternally indebted and grateful. But I couldn't do that: I felt fatigued counting the old yellow leaves of my life most of them already blown away far and wide by the tempestuous Time. My life seems to me an existential process. "Where wasteful time debateth with decay", to quote a line from Shakespeare's sonnet.

I have drawn up in this Chapter an inconclusive conclusion as my journey is still on. My life's accounting is yet to reach a point when it would be possible for me to draw up my life's final accounts. In fact, life's final accounts are struck only at a point from which none ever comes back to say whether the credits exceed the debits, or the debits outweigh the credits. This metaphor from Accounts had struck me deep when I was studying the Double Entry Book Keeping as a probationer at the I.R.S. (Staff) College at Nagpur. It was 1964. And this metaphor seems to me to have become now a metaphor, the poetry of which is now my greatest delight.

VII

Shri Krishna : My Light and Delight

My study over more than a decade has led me to feel that 'Krishna' is the richest metaphor to reveal all that is the best in our cultural thought. You might have marked what constitutes my observation-post in the Chapter 20 of this Memoir. The poetry of Krishna's personality is all absorbing as it is all satisfying, and all inspiring. Over these days I am writing about Krishna, and am enjoying the greatest joy while reflecting on Him. He seems to me most relevant to our times. Through his acts and thoughts he teaches us not only the art of life, and the ways of socio-psychic management, but also provides a worldview which appears to me most enlightening and satisfying. He propounds, and illustrates through His deeds the principles of the existential grammar under which we work (योगः कर्मसु कौशलम्). When I told my wife that I intended to write on Krishna, she came out instantly: "You want to write about Him. You need not do that. A black bee hums on the lotus only till it has not tasted pollen: once it does, it becomes silent. Better make Him your soul's song, and sing inside. (हरे कृष्ण हरे कृष्ण, कृष्ण कृष्ण हरे हरे hare Krishna hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna hare hare)" I could see what she meant, but could say nothing. A black bee hums a lot before it descends on a lotus flower: once it does that it becomes silent even when, at the end of the day, it gets imprisoned in the flower for the whole night.

I consider Krishna the richest 'objective correlative' that our culture ever conceived in its most creative moments. I feel, on deep reflections, that many things which I could not express, in this Memoir, about myself, and about the world I have witnessed, would get felicitous expression in my reflections on Krishna, if this book gets ever written. I intend to discover the metaphorical implications of the high poetry of the *Bhagavada Mahapurna* and the *Mahabharata* which express Krishna's thoughts that found expression in His actions. I intend to undertake a quest to understand Krishna from my present-observation-post. Krishna is of great relevance to our modern times. We need Him as the *Jagadguru* to guide us how to move towards love and light. We need Him to help us save ourselves from the present-day versions of Kamsa, Jarasandha and the Kauravas. We need Him to expound the *Bhagavad-Gita* in modern idioms. We need Him to play again His flute for the world's light and delight.

VIII

I bring this Memoir to an end with the lines once recited by my father-in-law, Shri Hem Narayan Jha⁷, from a poem by Shiv Mangal Singh Suman⁸

| The Hindi text | Rendered into English |
|---|--|
| <p>चलना हमारा काम है कुछ कह दिया कुछ सुन लिया, कुछ बोझ हलका कर दिया अच्छा हुआ तुम मिल गए, कुछ रास्ता ही कट गया क्या राह में परिचय कहूँ, राही हमारा नाम है. इया विषद विश्व प्रबाह में किसको नहीं वहना पड़ा सुख दुःख हमारी ही तरह किसको नहीं सहना पड़ा पर व्यर्थ क्यों कहता फिरूँ मेरा विधाता बाम है. . मैं पूर्णता की खोज में दर दर भटकता ही रहा प्रत्येक पग पर कुछ न कुछ रोड़ा अटकता ही रहा पर हो निराशा क्यों हमें जीवन इसी का नाम है.</p> | <p>To tread ahead alone is my duty. It is good we have met on the way. We said and heard each other: and thus have avoided the tedium of marching all alone. What sort of introduction about myself should I give while still on our way? Who has escaped from being caught in the cosmic flux? Who has not undergone pain and pleasure as I have done? But why should I grumble against my lot? I have been on the quest for perfection, despite odds at each step. But why should I become despondent? This is the life we all live.</p> |

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 T. S. Eliot, 'After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy' (London: Faber, 1933), p. 40
- 2 J. Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man*, p. 31
- 3 The English version from http://www.atmajyoti.org/gi_bhagavad_gita_intro.asp
- 4 Tulsidas, the poet who composed the immortal epic *Ramcharitmanasa*.
- 5 Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography*, p. 9
- 6 The concept of 'objective-correlative' explained in Chapter 25.
- 7 www.shivakantjha.org
- 8 These lines, as composed by the poet, can be read on <http://www.kavitakosh.org>; and can be heard as sung by my father-in-law, on my www.shivakantjha.org.



The Force that sustained me, the Light that led me.

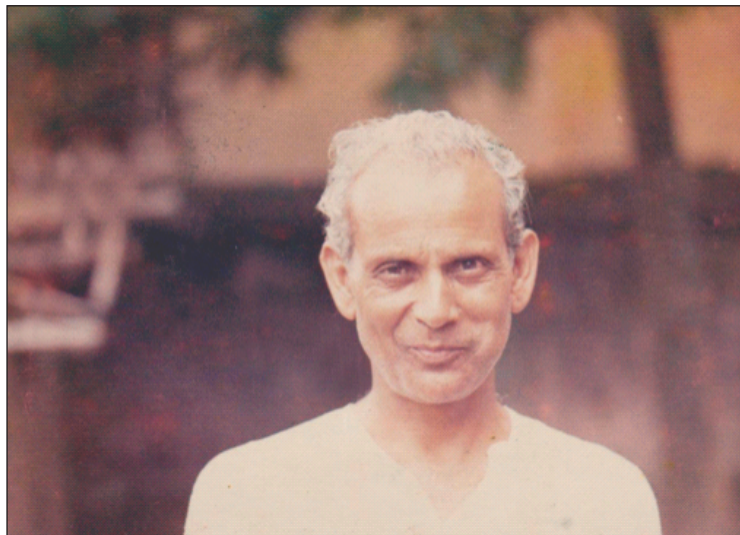
जीवन का मैने सौप दिया सब भार तुम्हारे हाथों में
उद्धार पतन अब मेरा है सरकार तुम्हारे हाथों में

(Binduji in *Mohan-Mohini*)

[My massive heart-attack, in 1989, brought me to the brink; and my wife into the veil of ceaseless tears. My friends had written me off as a spent squib. The photograph portrays us as we were in the Madras Mail on way to Madras to get medical treatment at the Apollo Hospitals.]



Addressing the National Seminar on treaty-making power of the Government, organized on July 21, 2007 by National Working Group on Patent Laws (NWGPL). The Seminar was inaugurated by the Former Prime Minister Shri I. K. Gujral, and was presided over by the Former Chief Justice of India Shri J. S. Verma. Special address was delivered by Shri D. Raja, M.P. Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, M.P. delivered the Valedictory address.



My father-in-law late Shri Hem Narayan Jha.