

SPIRITUALITY, THE MASTER-KEY OF THE INDIAN MIND: A REFLECTION

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Spiritual significance: Contemplation of the Divine
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“Spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it.” (CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 6)

The above sentence from Sri Aurobindo’s essay *The Renaissance in India* is perhaps one of the most-quoted lines when it comes to describing the foundations of Indian culture. In this short write-up I take the opportunity to reflect a bit on this profound truth and share with the readers something of what I am beginning to grasp.

In the paragraph which opens with this quote, Sri Aurobindo further says,

“...she [India] saw that the physical does not get its full sense until it stands in right relation to the supra-physical; she saw that the complexity of the universe could not be explained in the present terms of man or seen by his superficial sight, that there were other powers behind, other powers within man himself of which he is normally unaware, that he is conscious only of a small part of himself, that the invisible always surrounds the visible, the suprasensible the sensible, even as infinity always surrounds the finite.” (pp. 6-7)

This sense of Infinite is an essential characteristic of Indian culture. In the same paragraph he also speaks of India’s great yearning to grapple with the infinite

and possess it. What does it mean to grapple with the Infinite and how is it native to Indian mind? A brief reflection follows.

This yearning has no limit, this aspiration is not for a certain limited truth, but for the Truth that is Infinite, just like the Infinite is...well, Infinite. So the yearning to possess the Infinite may be more about a conscious attempt at manifesting the Infinite in a finite form so that the intellect can grasp it, but with a deep awareness that no form can ever truly capture the Formless Infinite. The Divine is Infinite, Limitless, and hence the aspiration to identify or unite with the Divine is infinite too. Yet the aspirant continuously seeks to see or feel this Transcendent Infinite manifested in all finite forms and names. The artist-aspirant captures the Infinite in the art she creates, the sculptor-aspirant possesses It in the Durga statute he makes. And with each spiritual realization the aspirant moves from one partial truth to a higher, deeper, completer truth... that too is perhaps meant by possessing the Infinite, yet always yearning to grapple with it more.

I am reminded of the famous lines by T. S. Eliot—“We must not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time” (Little Gidding). So even at the end of exploration, it is as if the journey hasn’t begun yet. But still, the journey did begin, the yearning has begun, the grappling is continuous, and even after possessing the Infinite, the Infinite still remains Infinite...beyond possession.

When we reflect on “spirituality is the master-key of Indian mind”, several examples quickly come to mind—the intricate symbolism behind the forms of Nataraja, Ganesha, the splendour and magnificence of Indian temple architecture, the true meaning behind elaborate puja rituals, etc. But a part of me feels that all these examples are also a bit....well, bookish. So I am tempted to share a simpler example based on personal experience, and perhaps more from a ‘secular realm. [But then, what is really “secular” if All is Brahman in the Indian view?] Many years ago when I was living in the US, my husband and I went to a concert of ghazals (Urdu poetry set to music) and Punjabi folk music. The singer was a woman of Indian origin and settled in Canada, who was visiting different US cities for performances. The write-up about the singer was impressive, so even though we hadn’t heard any music of hers we went to the concert hoping that it might be reasonably good. Sadly, we both were quite disappointed—not just with her singing, but I specifically felt that the selection of ghazals (poetry) she used for her compositions lacked something very important. She made a point in her performance to highlight the fact that she prefers more ‘contemporary’ poetry which captures the sensibility of our times and reflects our modern experiences. Except for one selection that she sang—a nazm penned by Bahadur Shah Zafar (the last Mughal emperor of India) which he wrote in the prison after being captured by the British, all the other poems she sang were quite disappointing. At least to me, they were. On our way back as we were debriefing about the concert, I remember saying

things like—"her music wasn't doing anything for me, it is as if the singer was not "all there", or as if the 'soul' was missing." I will perhaps never be fully able to express what it was that I found missing in those poems or her singing, but I know that I wasn't experiencing what I have experienced while listening to many other ghazals sung by other singers, even when the poetry has been very contemporary and very 'secular'.

The story however doesn't end here.

A couple of days later, on a quiet evening at home I was listening to a recently purchased CD of ghazals sung by Jagjit Singh. *Kuch Baat Chale* is the title of the CD, and all the ghazals are written by the acclaimed Hindi/Urdu poet and film-maker, Gulzar. The second track opens with a very contemporary couplet recited by Gulzar himself. It goes like this—I will first write down the Hindi words of the verse—though he uses a couple of English words too in some of his contemporary writing - and then translate the verse in English:

"Yaad hai ek din mere mez pe baithe-baithe cigarette ki dibiya par tumne chhote se ek poudhe ka ek sketch banaya tha? Aa kar dekho, us poudhe par ek phool aaya hai"

"Remember one day while just sitting at my table you had made a little sketch of a little plant on a box of cigarettes? Come and see, a flower has blossomed on that plant."

And the moment I heard this verse, I knew what was missing in the poetry sung by the Indo-Canadian singer at the concert a couple of days ago. It was as if there was no attempt by the writers of those poems to take the listeners beyond their limited experience of the world. It was as if both the poet and the singer were themselves not ready to go beyond a finite world of experience and sensory-rational input, nor were they interested or able to move their listeners to that world of imagination and mystery. It was as if they were not interested in grappling with the infinite world of imagination where even the most contemporary and secular thought can become an instrument for showing us a little glimpse of the Infinite Mystery that surrounds all the finite, limited world of forms and names we see and experience around us. May I be bold enough to say that this line of Gulzar about the flower that is blooming on an old sketch of a plant is an attempt of grappling with the Infinite?

The story still doesn't end here.

I was so touched by this verse about the flower, I went online to read up a little about this album and some new poetry that Gulzar was writing at that time. And on one website I learned that Gulzar has invented a style of writing three-line verses which he calls 'Triveni' (some of these triveni verses are in this album mentioned earlier). Gulzar explains why he calls this poetry style Triveni—"The third line changes the meaning of the first two lines which seemed complete by themselves. I named it triveni. Like at the sangam in

Allahabad, Ganga and Yamuna are the two apparent colours of the water, the gupt (hidden) one is Saraswati; after the first two lines if you can show a Saraswati, it becomes a triveni." (http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070111/asp/calcutta/story_7247106.asp)

What Gulzar may be referring to as the "gupt" (the hidden) third line which when revealed changes the meaning and essence of the first two lines, is perhaps the X factor, the yearning and grappling with the Infinite to possess it, yet being aware that it is always beyond possession. If we can experience the essence of the third line, we grasp the meaning of the first two lines also, but in a new way. And this essence can only be grasped by entering into a relationship of identification, a perfect union. If we can experience that hidden Saraswati, it is a Sangam, it is a possession. To recall the beautiful words of Sri Aurobindo—"Behind everything in life there is an Absolute, which that thing is seeking after in its own way; everything finite is striving to express an infinite which it feels to be its truth" (CWSA, Vol. 25, p. 112).

When we speak about spirituality being the master-key of Indian mind, and sense of infinite being native to it, I am beginning to realize that we are not only speaking of the heights of excellence and those wonderful accomplishments achieved by certain gifted individuals who are able to rely upon this master-key of spirituality. I humbly suggest that we examine a little more deeply whether the 'wonder' that is possible by accessing this inherent master-key of spirituality happens only in these extra-ordinary achievements or accomplishments, or whether it also manifests itself in our day-to-day ordinary acts of living and working in many different fields of human activity...even including listening to music or enjoying poetry.

Perhaps it indeed is a matter of the inner attitude regardless of what activity one is engaged in!



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