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Detachment and Faith

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I. INTRODUCTION

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Existentially, how do human beings live in disparate worlds, and come to terms with the many different codes of culture without creating schism in themselves?

I ask this question primarily because co-existence is accompanied by adaptation, but this adaptation is dependent on a mutual dialogue, which premises the understanding of one another's vocabulary. The Sociology of Religion has always foregrounded Comparative Religion as its most important apparatus. It is not possible to understand religious behaviour unless one accepts the axiom of the existence of the religious.

Experience is personal, and yet the vocabulary of believing assures us that there are the components of ritual and myth that accompany it. This is the essential aspect of the religious. Monks and Nuns practising transcendence still assure the laity that the text and the rite are part of the daily apparatus of the believing community. Silence is possible only to those who have accepted the ultimate space of the transcended. However, to reach there, the path usually taken is of erudition or revelation, both of which are dependent on visual and verbal imagery.

Auditory aspects are fundamentally significant where the participants share the domain of the heard and the experienced, and music is a part of this constantly changing scenario, using the voice or the instruments to codify. Experience is the opening up of the mind, and religious people know that tourism

elaborates the secular use of the music, architecture, texts, drama and performance of ritual. Thus, they open up their holiest sites to the viewer without distinction.

The *Vashista Yoga* is an important work that offers us insights into the nature of maya. Rather than seeing existence as a delusion, we are called upon to enquire. The mode of enquiry then foregrounds narratives not only as a source of spiritual sustenance, for it elaborates upon existence and the meta-language of reconstruction. Because we tell stories, we understand these manifold worlds. Time too is enhanced by the co-existence of many worlds.

Vashista Yoga comprises stories told by Vashista to Ram in order to communicate that boredom is unnecessary, and our call to duty is profoundly a form of ordering the world. To understand the world, then, we must allow freedom to our imagination. Truth is less objectively defined, for this truth is also part of existence as a dream, and reality is more elaborately configured. In order to enter the realm of this discourse, we must suspend belief or disbelief, and enter the domain of existence. This is because words are our only reality, and action is a by-product of words. By understanding words, we may then disseminate them to others; by listening we may proceed to a higher level of understanding.

Jean Baudrillard in *The Mirror of Production* argues that

The logic of representation – of the duplication of its object – haunts all rational discursiveness. Every critical theory is haunted by this surreptitious religion, this desire bound up with the construction of its object, this negativity subtly haunted by the very form that it negates. (Baudrillard 1975:50,51)

Whether it is the utopia of equality or the subservience of the body to evolution and the mind/soul dichotomy, we are constantly facing abstraction as the way in which we approach the existence of theoretical paradigms. Social Science deals with this not as 'true' or 'false', but as representation. The problem asserts itself only when we subscribe to these as articles of faith. Detachment then becomes the mystic's zone of arrival at a goal, as much as that of the Anthropologist's.

The art of documentation involves questions of bias as much as it does of suspension of belief. We choose to study something because we have a prior understanding of some of its elements. Rituals and communities of believers help us to locate ourselves within the axes of its reproduction through narrative or action. Demonstrably, time as memory and time as

action are encoded within it. Just as space can be identified with specific moments of history, modified by events, so also memories are encapsulated within both tradition as well as within the new orientations to post modernism. This is what makes the present so kaleidoscopic, since the time element is submerged in the immediacy of an ever-present significance, and the contemporaneous is commonly felt and known.

Rama asks Vashista, "Lord, the infinite consciousness is transcendental; pray tell me how the universe exists in it." Vashista replied, "This universe exists in the infinite consciousness as waves exist in a calm sea; non-different in truth, but with the potentiality of an apparent difference. The infinite consciousness is unmanifest though omnipresent-even as the space, though existing everywhere is unmanifest." (Swami Venkatesananda 2003:186)

Vashista tells Rama that just as clouds exist in the sky, so also reflections exist. And as light refracts, so too consciousness is manifested - and we understand existence through these. Seasons, time, space and events are all concealed and made apparent through this prism of consciousness, which is eternal. The body is the citadel, and consciousness realises its goals through the body. The self that is enlightened then allows for the Consciousness, which is all-embracing, to define itself.

The mind has no existence apart from the infinite consciousness: it did not exist in the beginning, it will not exist in the end, and so it does not exist now. One who thinks that it does exist holds sorrow in his hand. He who knows that world is the self in reality goes beyond that sorrow; this world give him both joy and liberation. (ibid 186)

In this discourse, the role of maya is significant, because that which is real appears as the unreal, and the unreal then, like the waves of the sea, represent the existence of Brahman, self limited by individualised consciousness. (ibid 190). It is our desires that bring about birth, for "bondage is the craving for pleasure and its abandonment is liberation." (ibid 185)

It is boredom that brings Rama a teacher, and the teacher tells his father that he, Rama, has been born to defeat Ravana.

Visvamitra asks that Dasratha should send Rama to him, and the king replies, "O Sage, Rama is not even sixteen years old, and is therefore not qualified to wage a war. He has not even seen a combat, except what goes on in the inner apartment of the palace. Command me and my vast army to accompany you to exterminate the demons. But I cannot part with Rama. Is it not natural for all living beings to love their young, do not even wise men engage themselves in extraordinary activities for the love of their children, and do not people abandon their happiness, their consorts and wealth rather than their children? No, I cannot part with Rama.

If it is the mighty demon Ravana who causes disturbance to your rite, nothing can be done to help you. Even the gods are powerless against him. Time and again, such powerful

beings are born on this earth; and in time, they leave the stage of this world. (ibid 7)

For Rama, time is the essential enemy, for it destroys everything. Time creates multiple universes, it does not come or go, it uses the sun and moon as its assets, and while creating the year and seasons it remains hidden (ibid 17) Krtanta is the end of time, and with niyati, the laws of nature, it subsumes human beings.

What then is the time of the dream? This becomes the central problem. The dream involves in real time, the sense of actors and of transcending space, time and the body. The preoccupation that Ramana Maharshi had with death as a time of dreaming is the real explanation of existence. We can only imagine the wandering soul, that identifies with the cosmic Atma, but when its endless desiring is to find a home, it chooses the body. Clement Rosset puts it elegantly:

The recognition of self, which already implies a paradox (since it involves grasping that which is precisely impossible to grasp, and since 'taking control' of one-self resides paradoxically in renouncing that control) also necessarily implies an exorcism: it implies exorcising that double that poses an obstacle to the existence of the unique and demands that the unique be something other than simply itself and nothing but itself. (Rosset 2012:60)

While theologies are culture bound, the perspective of the Self and the Other becomes premised on the codes represented by each given theology. Secular theologies are in this sense interesting because the dictum maybe the sacred charter as constructed by the citizenry or by the mores and rules and aphorisms ascribed to a savant. The sacred can be anything that stands apart from the everyday, mundane and routine activities of individuals and collectivities, as Emile Durkheim pointed out a hundred years ago. Therefore, our charters of human rights are universally important as signifiers of how wars had influenced the lives and minds of human beings in the 20th century.

Thiruvalluvar in the Thirukkural writes that detachment is a virtue beyond all else. While abiding in the rule of conduct, the great are those who have abandoned all desire. (Tiruvalluvar 1989:7)

Human Rights is one of the key issues that we need to be concerned with, when we measure the degree of detachment with which we engage with questions of justice. Do our religious views influence our action? Can we believe that what we do is a result of our faith, and that this directs us to act in what may be termed as judicially negative?

Some of the most important questions regarding politics and ethics may be placed here. Should we do things because we believe that we are religiously motivated, and others may not ask questions about their right to believe differently? Clearly, we are placed in situations where the dilemmas we face in our everyday lives regarding justice or reason are placed in

a strikingly ambiguous location. It is here that we are called upon to act, not as representatives of institutions, but in terms of the collective good. Should we presume that what the people want is a democratic right? Yet, what if the people want fascism?

Resistance always creates for us so many of the spaces by which we rethink our contexts. Faith and Reason are two sides of the same coin. When Durkheim wrote *Moral Education (1973)*, he was faced by the Dreyfus Case, and the implications it had for all Jews living in France. Therefore, this work essentially posed questions about humanism, science, rationality and rights. The obligations that an individual had drew from his or her position in the family, neighbourhood, school and university. The forms of socialisation were culturally given. How then can religious education be the hallmark of modernity or post modernity? How can faith be an equalising force for all?

The right to be secular, or agnostic or atheistic is a given in the Indian Constitution, and we see that both Nehru and Ambedkar were oriented to Buddhism in terms of the charter of conduct. This essentially meant that the dialogue of religions was implicit by the very codes of conduct given in justice and social interaction, and the right to citizenship. For Durkheim, a "religion without God" was expressed best in Buddhism, and yet for Indians, the sages were resplendent in their experience of nature and the oneness that human beings could experience in their understanding of Purusha and Shakti. The common language of experience was part of the process of refraction and naming, and Ramana Maharshi was most comforting in the ultimate theology of "Be As You Are." dent of birth, and the right to conform, or possibly to adapt to another faith, should one feel the call to do so.

Since Conversion is one of the most discussed topics in the Indian continent, it is imperative that we look at the concept of metanoia. This means transformation of the heart, and is perhaps an experiential concept that goes beyond the statistics of conversion and the matrix of forced conversions, ghar wapsi or money motivated conversions. Faith is something that is essential to the survival of religions, but it cannot be forced, it has its own ambience, and respect for one's own religion and the religion of the other is something that is fostered.

Many world religions practise a particular exclusiveness, and from the Human Rights point of view, it can be very distressful if another religion is abused. The freedom to worship is like the freedom to work. Marx devised the concept of Labor as freedom, and within that, *non labor* appears as the term by which fishing in the morning and attending a political meeting in the evening are accompanied by a sense of self worth, - which could be applied equally to writing, scavenging and cooking.

How do we reconcile this integrated notion of the body, and the breakdown of the distinction between manual and mental labour as a form of non-work or pleasure? It is the conditioning of the mind that allows for freedom.

Play, Freedom, Transparency: for Jean Baudrillard is still captured within the bourgeoisie ethics. To be freed of work is to enter the domain of work, but in a different way. Does Feminism reiterate the right to understanding, concupiscence, tragedy, tedium, weeping and tears and laughter? The contradictions of existence are now posed in the work involved to make the invisible visible.

Work and non-work: here is a "revolutionary theme". It is undoubtedly the most subtle form of the type of binary, structural opposition discussed above. The end of the end of exploitation by work is this reverse fascination with non-work, this reverse mirage of free time (forced time-free time, full time-empty time; another paradigm that fixes the hegemony of a temporal order which is always merely that of production.) (Baudrillard 1975:40)

Within this, he discusses the preoccupations of institutional structures, and how individuals are placed within the frameworks of rules, labour, death and mortification. We may also view pilgrimage, and therefore tourism too, as a show of non-work, which is essentially labour magnified. The hardship of non-work, of all art forms as liberation is similarly, creation and energy, which is typified as non-work. When the mind sees an architectural construction such as a religious site, or a landscape that has been prefigured by myth, legend and holiness, one presumes that it will be peaceful and life generative. But essentially, the emotions that holy places garner may be of deep discord, or of dissent, or of violence and death.

One of the most interesting works in this regard is Rodin's (1965) illustrated manuscript on the Churches of France. It was a diary kept on his travels to obscure villages, and to well known medieval churches such as Rheims and Chartres. The manuscript was a symbol of the fear that he experienced that with bombing all this would be lost. A memorabilia of nostalgia and vivid experiences, we are led into both text and illustration as if into the double vault of cerebral spaces, and the mnemonics of space and architecture. Very often, tourism highlights this dual experience of then and now, as well as the hiding away so necessary for conservation. Where Humayun's mortuary remains truly lie, is a secret known to the archaeologist and monument preserver: the tourist and the pilgrim only know the sarcophagus and the vault where pigeons are trapped, high above the ground.

It is not just the past which ties us down. It is the understanding that the present is necrophilia oriented, and that we are constantly evading the shadow of war. Christoph Wulf (2015) suggests that the great landscapes of destruction, both a result of geological

transformations including climate change and man-made disasters, bring about a momentum to new forms. How we adapt to change is often a mystery.

Modernity is associated with optimism and the rights of citizenship. Post modernity is much more complex, because new enclaves of metropolis and hinterland relations begin to develop. It would seem that the right to be an individual and the need to belong to communities begin to interconnect in different ways. Tradition, orthodoxy, and modern lifestyles do not necessarily clash, but may embellish one another in contradictory and interesting ways. When these become coercive or life threatening, as in the case of dominant caste interlocutors who appear as wealthy farmers denying human rights to their clan members, and all the associated freedoms of citizenship and free choice, where then murder is the consequence (as for love marriages, daughters who rebel etc.) the State and citizen's groups do intervene. Religion and secularism are then dramatically posed against one another. The freedom to believe is not to take another's life. Khap Panchayats (the conglomerate of male agnates and male elders) are the new demon in post-modernist India. They take over from constitutional and elected bodies, placing repressive law as the given moral good, in seemingly totalitarian perspectives. Like terrorists who kill others in order to fulfil a personal and hegemonic dream, traditionalists here too, as in the Khap Panchayats, express their belief that religion and their traditional customs are for the total social good. Fundamentalism by any other name, murder as intent, 'honour' as an excuse, drags India back into segmentalisation and feudalism. Post-modernity has to deal with the question of hierarchy and tradition in a way that modernity did not. New media, both Television and Internet, have played a substantial role in highlighting the parallel of 'talibanisation' of religions other than Islam. Fearing the orthodoxy of other religions, Hindu elders of Haryana have become a law unto themselves. In a mimicry of feudal practises, women and men are murdered if they go against the customary laws of the clan.

Maosits too, have become similarly totalitarian in an area which politicians admit to being now one third of India. Ideology becomes a total social fact, where there is no manoeuvrability for the ordinary citizen. He or she is not powerless, and standing by the constitution, the majority go to vote. Places like Kannur in Kerala, which have the greatest index of violent feuding in the country between RSS and Marxists have also the highest voting indexes (up to 70 percent voter turn-out in the country) (Visvanathan 2011 :169).

The dialogue of religions asserts itself in every way in the most compelling circumstances. Part of the acts of forgiveness comes from the families who have lost their kin to annihilating acts of murder. The State may take a stand which is relevant to its political

orientation, but the political party only occupies the machinery of the State, it is not the State. As per constitutional rights, the 'right to believe' and the 'right not to believe' are equivalent. These are not contestatory. Raimundo Panikkar in the "Mantramanjari" writes:

Modern Human is a secular Human, which does not mean that he/she is not religious or that he/she has lost the sense of the sacred. The statement means only that his/her religiousness and even any sense of sacredness he/she may possess are both tinged with a secular attitude. "Secular attitude" means a particular temporal awareness that invests time with a positive and a real character: the temporal world is seen as important and the temporal play of Man's life and human interactions is taken seriously; the saeculum, the ayus, is in the foreground. Man can survive on earth, both as a species and as a person, only if he pays careful attention to everything secular. Otherwise he will be swallowed up by the machinery of modern society or the mechanism of cosmic processes. Secular man is the citizen of a temporal world. (Panikkar 1983:18)

It is in this context of the blurring of culture, that Raimundo Panikkar refers to the significance of the Vedas, as shruti and smriti, carrying forward the poetry of traditions 3000 years old, and signifying the manner in which translations globalise words in their new contexts. For Panikkar, translations liberate meaning and make them universal, from secrecy to shared wisdom. The utterance is the moment when the author is born; by taking away the authorial space of the text to the existential moment when language allows for new meanings and new contexts, the universalization of this experience is promised. Implicit is the need "to purify our relationship with the text and to avoid any kind of idolatory." (ibid 12). He says,

Any one of us is the author of the Vedas when we read, pray and understand them. Nobody is the author of living words except the one who utters them. The Vedas are living words, and the word is not an instrument of Man but his supreme form of expression. What has no author, according to the apaurusa insight, is the relation between the word and its meaning or object. The relationship is not an artificial or extrinsic relation caused by somebody. There is no author to posit the type of relationship which exists between the word and its meaning. To do this, we would require another relationship and so on ad infinitum. When a word ceases to be a living word, when it ceases to convey meaning, when it is not a word for me, it is not Veda, it does not convey real or saving knowledge. (ibid 12,13)

The central focus of this paper thus has been the dialectic between faith and Human Rights. How can we pursue our right to be believers (or as non believers protect our spaces as atheists or agnostics), and how can we entrust our societies to the postmodern contexts of withdrawal of rights? Migration histories and climate change show us that we have no choice when it comes to the extreme situations in which we may find ourselves. This then forces us to consider our existential situations in terms of age and gender contexts in which we find ourselves.

While ascription has its moments of closure, yet technological changes, and digital resources make our understanding of the world so much more complex. This adaptability to the modern world, which simultaneously compresses and expands our worldview, is essential. We see the beauty of the world through digital photographs, just as we submit to its entropy. What could be more heartbreaking?

Many of the resolutions modern individuals make are to safeguarding earth's resources for future generation. The dictum that Christ gave in the Sermon on the Mount, so well known to the Gandhians, was: "The meek shall inherit the Earth." Within postmodern contexts, talking to plants, and believing that they can hear us, has become an essential scientific attribute of horticultural and farming technologies, leading to new survival strategies.

One of the more successful experiments in practical wisdom, with its empirical follow up, has been how Kerala has ushered in a domestic revolution with regard to growing vegetables and fruits for the table. Women were trained by the State in classes organised by their local Krishi Bhavan. They learned about seedlings, manure, water harvesting, bee-keeping and bio-diversity. Kochi, Ernakulam, Trivandrum, Palakad, Wynadu and Kasergode, for some reason, took to the social movement with great enthusiasm. Part of it also revolved around the resurgence of the indigenous cow as a fount of milk and organic manure. The religious undertones of this movement are not articulated except to communicate the love for mother earth. The joy of growing things seems completely unanimous. It is not gender specific, as men and children also participate and share in the momentum of growing food for the table.

Part of how we understand modernity is to engage with how tradition reinvents itself. When Logan's *Malabar* famously recorded how Malayalis lived in their enclaves of gardens, lagoons and coconut groves, the attempt was to communicate the resilience of an ancient culture, which represented this humility, this ownership without partisan identity, this ability to renegotiate with cultural demands made multi-tongued by varieties of colonialism. Organic farmers today do not give up their spice gardens, or rubber cultivation; they grow *payr* or beans as nitrogen fixers instead of chemical fertiliser and thus protect their vegetable patches.

Similarly, in Ladakh, farmers have adapted to climate change by using tarpaulin green houses in the winter months to grow vegetables in the dry season, irrigating their produce with water which does not freeze as it runs in underground pipes. The work of the scientist and technologist Sonam Wangchuk and his wife Betty Norman is a compelling account of faith and reason. They have run SECMOL, a school committed to ecological values, guided by their Buddhist faith. No story could be more enchanting than that of their

committed dream to green the desert. The ice stupa, which is the formation of an artificial glacier which rises upwards, to melt slowly through the summer providing water to the fields is a case in point, of how science depends on team work, and on the detachment that allows failure to be followed by endless trials, till success is achieved. The mystical moment of Eureka is surely when the sense of surprise is compounded by reason and intuition coming together. In *Remembering Sir J.C Bose* (2009) one of the Editors, V.A Shepherd quotes Romain Rolland who wrote to J.C Bose in 1927, "you have wrested from plants and stones, the key to their enigma... you made us hear their incessant monologue, that perpetual stream of soul, which flows through all beings from the humblest to the highest." (cited in Sen Gupta, Engineer and Shepherd 2009:107) Sociologists never attend to the truth-value of sentiments, as much as they do to the fact of representation. Do plants really hear the people who foster them and eat them? The scientists of the Krishi Bhavan, insomuch, as they pushed forward populist agriculture, programmed their trainees to talk to their plants daily, to water the plants every alternate day, and provide amino acids on one day a week (1 kg sardines in 1 kg jaggery, soaked for three weeks produced an effective distillation, which was to be watered down in a 1/10 of a litre mix). The farmers say that the pleasure they get from the every day tasks are huge. A woman with a vegetable patch among her roses and jasmines ran out to her yard, while I was talking with her, and said, "I'm going to check on my children." (Jyan ende kunjukallue nokkan pogua.) What more can one say about the inter-relatedness of the world, or the nurturing ethic? In Allapuzha district, fisher women have now started vegetable gardening, wild spinach and beans are the most successful, they report, growing on sandy banks. They come into town, to see what the price for a kilogramme of beans is, because if they have surplus, after the household needs are completed, and friendly exchange of produce between neighbours and friends and kin is over, they may sell it in town. The success of the experiment depends on the time and ardour that people put into this venture. At Alathur, in Palakkad district, there is a complex interrelationship between state agriculture scientists and those who have been chosen to grow seeds for distribution among farmers. The best farmers are chosen and they are monitored by rural officers to see that they are growing these seeds without chemical interference from nearby fields. The seeds are hybrid, but not GMT, and are the outcome of the work of laboratory scientists who then link up with farmers to proliferate good quality seeds. The basic assumption is that Malayalees should not be compulsorily tied up as thoughtless consumers, with chemical produce coming in from Tamil Nadu in truckloads, through the Coimbatore pass. An award winning vegetable gardener in Palakkad, Swapna

James, says in an interview with me on 6th January 2016, that for three years they have not bought any vegetables, and that they receive an income of Rs 2000 a week, from the excess which they sell to a school in Palakkad. It is these successes that allow one to believe that work as a vocation is indeed a religious experience itself. The intensity of love that people feel for their work is tied up with the sense that their labour is accounted for, and that they are wholly absorbed in it. This is the Marxist theme of “work, which is not work”.

Feminists of course, while being hugely influenced by Marx and Engels, will not support the idea that love by itself is enough, or that love and responsibility are values, which go beyond recognition. This is one of the most difficult mazes in the right to wages debate, and whether it is housewifization or any other form of service, women do look for accountability in terms of the relation between giver and receiver. The gift is the paramount symbol of that which cannot be subsumed within reciprocal exchange, but at it's outset, as Marcel Mauss would argue, needs to be distinguished from loot and tax. Anmol Mongia, an M.A first semester student at JNU has argued in her tutorial submission in monsoon semester 2015 that the compulsoriness of the return is what makes pilgrimage possible. Let me now close the argument by saying that for Simone Weil, the concept of dhyana or concentration was both religious and secular, absorbing both prayer and work.

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