

'FLESHING THE BONES': CONDUCTING INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE IN FICTION

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A minister of the Tamil Nadu Government, keen on reform, faced a dilemma when he visited his favourite temple. The temple stank from bat-droppings; yet the minister could not eliminate the bats because he shared the local belief that the bats were temple officials of the past who had squandered the temple's wealth and were now serving their time as re-incarnated temple bats. *How can we chase them out?* So the minister wavered.

The subject of *karma* is impressively covered in scholarly works such as Professor Wendy O'Flaherty's *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, and its sequel edited by Ronald Neufeldt. Yet these tomes would have been of little help to the minister confronting his problem-bats. His faith in *karma* trapped him in a web of guilt and leniency, more troubling to him than any scholar in his study could ever imagine. What does it *feel* like to be a believer in *karma* or *advaita* or in any of the key concepts of Hinduism? What pain, suffering or hope is involved in living by any of them? Such questions cover that dimension of a living faith which discursive writing, however valuable in itself, has not the means or scope to handle. No doubt, a well-conducted, rational discourse can deal with concepts, principles, even myths and symbols, with admirable clarity and precision; but the process of abstraction removes them from where they are rooted, in human experience. The scholar can present the bare bones; it is the privilege of the novelist to flesh out the bones and sensitise the reader to the hidden human cost of any belief-system, by highlighting ambivalent and often painful insights that might otherwise get glossed over.

A story can communicate succinctly growth, change, conflict and unresolved tension, all of which figure in any serious religious search. It is not an accident that parables have been a favourite mode of religious communication. A story, unlike an argument, can convey the life that feeds belief; it is ideally suited to carry out what the American theologian John S. Dunne describes as essential to true dialogue, a *passing over* and *coming back*. To quote:

'Passing over' is a shifting of standpoint, a going over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another religion. It is followed by an equal and opposite

process we might call 'coming back' with new insight into one's own culture, one's own way of life, one's own religion.¹

In this paper I propose to offer a comparative critique of inter-faith dialogue in two Indian novels, Raja Rao's *The Serpent And the Rope* and my own, *The Firewalkers*. Three decades separate the books; but Rao and I have much in common. Though we live in the West, trained and attuned to Western intellectual and religious traditions, we both can claim to be still rooted in the distinctive cultural and religious background we hail from, that of the South Indian brahmin steeped in Sankara's *advaita-vedānta*. Our novels offer contrasting responses to this dominant philosophical-religious outlook and test its strength by 'passing over' into other belief-systems and cultures and 'coming back' home. Rao's hero, Rama, a wandering intellectual, literally travels back and forth between India and Europe as he jousts with Catholicism, Catharism, Communism, Buddhism and many more belief systems, old and new. Even allowing for the subtle irony that tints *The Serpent And the Rope*, it is by and large a lyrical panegyric on *advaita*. In *The Firewalkers*, though I depict the exultation to be experienced in *advaita*, I am more concerned with testing it as a liveable creed in the society that gave it birth and sustains it.

Rama, the hero of *The Serpent And the Rope*, describes himself as a 'holy vagabond'. Embracing Sankara's notion of *advaita* with the zest of a romantic adventurer, Rama attempts to conquer or, rather, dissolve his recurrent sense of *absence* which is triggered by what any traditional Hindu would designate as *samsāra*, a word that encapsulates all the burdensome woes of the world. *Samsāra* represents the problems of being trapped in duality: joy, loss, grief, failure to grieve, celebration of marriage and failure in marriage, the consolation of rituals and their hollowness, and, above all, the tantalising possibility of a spiritual home and an acute sense of spiritual homelessness. Rama sees Sankara's *advaita* as the surest way to dissolve the bonds of *samsāra*.

Sankara's *advaita* (literally non-dualism) is a rigorous metaphysical discipline that holds out the hope of transcendental bliss by a process of what he calls *bādha* or subration. *Bādha* is

the mental process whereby one disvalues some previously appraised object or content of consciousness because of being contradicted by a new experience.²

Practising *bādha* involves a psychological dislocation that Rama readily espouses. He is fully appreciative of the riches of the world that are

experienced through the sensory self; but drowning in a mood of romantic melancholy, he seeks the lofty eminence of a metaphysical self that lies beyond the turbulent domain of the psychological. Espousing *advaita* seems to disengage him from emotional and ethical obligations. So he performs the funerary rites for his father; but can neither grieve, nor feel guilty over his failure to grieve:

I cannot repent, as I do not know what repentance is. For I must first believe there is death. And that is the central fact. - I do not believe that death is. So, for whom shall I repent?³

Rama follows Sankara in consigning the world to the realm of the unreal, *māya*. Significantly, the analogy for *māya* that he adopts from Sankara is also extended to his French wife:

Seeing oneself is what we always seek; the world, as the great sage Sankara said, is like a city seen in a mirror. Madeleine was like the Palace of Amber seen in moonlight.⁴

For Rama, woman represents the world. Much as he needs them and cares about them, one by one he distances himself from the women in his life - Little Mother, Madeleine, sister Saroja, and even Savitri; for all of them, like the Ganges, carry the burden of the world; whereas truth, declares Rama, with characteristic nonchalance, is embodied in the 'deep sleep' of the Himalaya.

What makes Rama's stance plausible is Raja Rao's ability to transmute into a living and sensuous religious reality what is generally perceived to be a cerebral philosophical concept. By creating a fictional world resonant with a lofty, brahminical spirituality, nurtured and sustained by the cadences of Sanskrit hymns, Raja Rao's novel invests the doctrine of *advaita* with a romantic glow that mesmerises the reader into accepting his hero's interior exultations. Sankara's original analogy of the serpent and the rope, by which he expounds non-dualism, undergoes strange, one might say suspect mutations. In Sankara's version:

A man may, in the dark, mistake a rope lying on the ground for a snake, and run away from it, frightened and trembling; then another may tell him, Do not be afraid, it is only a rope, not a snake; and he may then dismiss the fear caused by the imagined snake, and stop running. But all the while the presence and subsequent absence of his erroneous notion, as to the rope being a snake makes no difference whatever in the rope itself. Exactly analogous is the case of the individual soul which is in reality one with the highest soul, although Nescience makes it appear different.⁵

In Rama's account, the serpent of the analogy is not just an instance of illusion, but seems to come alive like some mythical beast that needs to be quashed:

And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradise, saints, avatars, gods, heroes, universes. For wherever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes. Whether you call it duality or modified duality, you invent a belvedere to heaven, you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent, you feel you are the serpent—you are—the rope is.⁶

Rama's confusing *excursus* which acts as an apologetic for *advaita* is driven by a compulsive need to demote those religious systems that take the world as objective and real. Somewhat condescendingly, he consigns Christianity and Buddhism to the realm of *poetry*:

The world is either unreal or real - the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the-two - and all that is in-between is poetry, is sainthood.⁷

Rama admires, and is even tempted by the saintly Catholicism of his Russian friend, Georges; but finally he rejects saintliness as a palliative fiction.

Madeleine and Georges challenge Rama often enough, but Rama always wins. Troubled as he is by his failing marriage, he shies away from the question of personal responsibility because, to his way of thinking, there is no *person* to be blamed; neither he nor Madeleine but *India* is said to be the barrier between them—and *India*, for Rama, stands for that spiritual dimension which he equates with non-dualism. Madeleine may try hard to be a good Hindu wife, cook vegetarian food, anticipate every brahminical whim, even do penance to cure his sick lungs, albeit by concocting a curious blend of Tantric Buddhism and folk-Catholicism; but for all this, Madeleine is bound to fail because she is still a Westerner, committed too much to the world of becoming. Only Savitri, the scatty Rajput princess who contains in herself the secret of Rama's *India*, of simple being, of silence, can lead him back to his true self, like some Upanishadic mentor.

That the novel is a first-person narrative creates an interesting conundrum: the psychological self, the pronoun *I*, dominates the narrative, yet the *advaita* which the narrator champions depends on a total transcendence of the *I*. Much of the appeal of the novel lies in how the author deals with the gap between what the protagonist is and what he reaches for, between *samsāra* and *shivoham*. Rama's failures, as a son, as a brother, as a husband, are faithfully recorded; yet Rao never allows them to

be taken seriously. In this he remains faithful to Sankara's vision. According to Sankara, once 'the doctrine of the independent existence of the individual soul' is set aside, then 'the opinion of the entire phenomenal world, which is based on the individual soul having an independent existence, is likewise to be set aside.'⁸

I was indoctrinated in *advaita* and, even intoxicated by it, like Rao's hero; yet as I tried to live by it, I began to get disaffected from some of its assumptions. As Stephen Neill (erstwhile bishop in South India) puts it,

It is almost always assumed by the Hindu that the impersonal is by its very nature superior to the personal, and that the personal is a stage of religious experience which is, if possible, to be surmounted. But is there any evidence for this? Personality is the highest thing we know.⁹

I began to wonder if the so-called 'poetic' religions were nearer the mark, and *advaita* an escapist fantasy or, worse still, ossified egoism.

Somewhat needled by what I perceived to be the philosophical imperialism of *advaita* which Raja Rao's novel exemplifies, I set out to explore the human cost of *advaita* in *The Firewalkers*, a novel set in a South Indian town, Kuchchipuram, which is steeped in traditional Hinduism. The story centres round Aparna, who has recently become a widow and so finds her life and vocation as a *bharatanatyam* dancer arrested. She is stifled by guilt-inflicting taboos that come in the wake of belief in *karma* and *dharma*. She attempts to sublimate her need for love and creativity by espousing *advaita*ic detachment as taught by her father, advocate Vedam Iyer.

Through Vedam Iyer, I wanted to convey something of the intoxication that the doctrine of *advaita* can create. On the festival-night of *Mahasivaratri* (Great-Night-of-Shiva) Vedam Iyer visits the temple, his mind troubled by the realisation that his daughter might fall in love with the young man he has befriended, Collector Raghavan. Further wearied by the flesh of the jostling crowd seeking worldly rewards, he focuses on the object of worship, a crystal lingam which is being showered with flower-petals:

Cool crystal, clear crystal, luminous crystal.

Vedam Iyer felt a shaft of radiance bathe his forehead as he meditated on the crystal lingam. Suddenly all became clear: colours showered upon the colourless, yet the colourless was the source of colour. Why didn't he see this before? Beyond the deity with attributes lay One without attribute. Beyond all this clamour and colour of pujas and priests was the Lord of the secret sanctum, colourless, formless, silent as the surrounding ether. And He, the Lord of exalted spaces, his formless splendour encased

in the interlocking discs of golden mandalas, was beckoning him from the sanctuary, here and now, to join him at his heavenly abode, the cool Mount Kailasa.

Vedam Iyer closed his eyes again. 'O Lord in Crystal! Cleanse my mind, that I may be even as you are: crystal bright, crystal clean, crystal strong. Take me away from this world of woes, of giving and taking, of writs and counter-writs, of marrying and begetting, of photographs and horoscopes...'¹⁰

Obeying the call, Vedam Iyer undertakes a pilgrimage that culminates in the Himalayas, where he experiences *pure advaitam: serene, dispassionate oneness, where neither subject nor object exists*. Reluctant to return to the *murk below*, he becomes a *sanyasi*, a monk who severs family-bonds. Though Aparna feels unhinged by father's abandonment of her, it is the only option left for Vedam Iyer to release her from the life-denying shackles he has imposed on her.

Aparna too espouses the advaitic goal as a means of coping with her personal tragedy, but for her it becomes a dangerously negative experience. She rejects Raghavan's offer of love, and represses her creativity, only to find that

For all her struggles, she had scaled no heights of transcendence, seen no vision of glory; her smothered spirit lay on a hollow, rocky shelf encrusted with hard resolutions and inundated by tides of depression.¹¹

Even when she is prepared to accept Raghavan, love still eludes her, because the self that is needed for love to take root is undermined by her belief in *māya*. Her experience of Benares, where 'the dead and the living jostle in holy traffic,' where 'Mother Ganga bears witness to so seamless a flow of being that it is indistinguishable from nothingness', seems to confirm the view that the phenomenal world is illusion:

Benares could not be wished away. It would always be there, deep down inside her, with its pyres that burn forever, and its waters that wash over and dissolve the sandbanks of self.¹²

In Raghavan I created an agnostic Hindu. As Collector and as a man-in-love, he attempts to rectify injustices perpetrated by what he perceives to be brahminical tyranny. When Aparna initially rejects his love, extolling the virtues of a metaphoric firewalking, Raghavan realises that what he is wrestling with involves more than a social evil. Hence Raghavan's response to the dancing god who inspires Aparna's longing for spiritual oblivion:

He was no doubt a suave artist, this dancing God, Raghavan had to admit. He glittered in gold, diamonds and emeralds - and there was a daring grace about that much-adored posture of his, the left leg swung across and over the right in such elegant abandon, and that suave smile - 'an enigma to be experienced not solved', as the advocate might say. - No, rather the smile of an artist, of a supreme magician. Why shouldn't he, this ascetic-erotic, wild play-boy of the heavens, smile when he could bewitch so many? Look at them! How their faces glowed, not just from the light of lamps and camphor-flame but from hunger for his divine provender, for that radiation of holiness which their souls craved! He had them all enthralled, with his promise of bliss, this dancing god - why shouldn't he smile?

He had trapped her too.

And who was he, a mere mortal, resolved to wrest her free from the bronze-grip of this arch-conjuror, come what may - but how?¹³

As the excitement of the puja mounts, so does Raghavan's anger.

Oh, to sweep aside all this holy paraphernalia in one fell blow, as Mirza Ghazi should have done when he swooped down on Kuchchipuram!

Shiva, the destroyer—did he ever destroy his own holy clutter? Or does he wait for an alien Mirza?¹⁴

In my life-long struggle with *advaita-vedanta*, I found its mode of dealing with the problem of suffering least satisfactory. In *The Firewalkers* I articulate in varying ways the disastrous human consequences of a religious outlook that devalues the problem of evil. While Raghavan and Aparna register their disaffection in self-questioning, the padre, as an outsider and a Christian, is allowed to voice an open protest. He not only dismisses Hindu theories of *karma* and *māya*, but suggests that Hindu religiosity is concerned more often than not with false guilt and false placcation. When Raghavan is puzzled by the padre's curious comfort that, for Aparna, hope lies in suffering, he explains:

You'll forgive me for being blunt. You Hindus prefer to bypass suffering; you postpone the problem with theories of karma, ignore it altogether, write it off as illusion - whereas we... our faith insists that we face it. Only through suffering can we discover ourselves. Aparna has to suffer - real suffering, not false guilts. So must Muniya. So long as he seeks to placate false guilt, as he is doing today with this firewalking, he'll never find real deliverance.¹⁵

The padre is allowed to preach, but he also has to learn. He knows that the firewalking ritual is a threat to his own belief. The potency of the village-goddess who apparently protects the cobbler's feet from burning is a puzzle he cannot solve. He concludes that it is the work of *Shaitan*, yet he has to admit that he cannot dismiss the spirituality of Shiva-worship as a Satanic delusion. His desire to help Aparna is as much motivated by his need to come to terms with the Hindu religious ethos as by pity.

It defeats the very purpose of writing fiction if its form is shrunk to the simplistic mould of a message-bearer. My hope is that the reader will get sufficiently 'hooked' by the human story as to imperceptibly acquire that spiritual empathy which is vital for 'passing over' into another religion, another culture, another set of problems and answers, and then 'coming back' to his or her own faith, enriched by the experience.

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- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-06.