



EPILOGUE

THIRD MILLENNIUM EQUIPOISE EPILOGUE

I sit in my garden with my little son. We are thinking of planting a tree in our backyard. He wants me to plant a jacaranda. He has seen these trees elsewhere and likes the mauve clusters when the tree is in bloom. I want to plant a peepul. It is slow growing but it is ageless. It attracts a variety of birds. It is the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. It is still venerated by the people. They will spare it when there is fuel scarcity in this drought-prone region. There is great poverty around these parts. I see women and children gathering twigs all day long to cook their evening meal in their mud adobes.

I try to explain all this to my son. He listens patiently but I don't think he understands. He sees that I have become pensive. He wants to know what I am thinking about. What should I tell him? That I am suddenly beset by doubts. Can I really plan that far ahead? Will there be anybody around to enjoy the shade of the peepul and listen to birdsong when the tree has grown. I am no longer sure. I envy my ancestors all the way back to the mists of antiquity. Each successive generation must have had its share of joys and sorrows; they must have faced many kinds of problems but they could not have had my kind of doubt. The fruits of their labours would be enjoyed by their sons and their son's sons. Generations to come would sing of their deeds. Somebody somewhere would keep the hearths from growing cold. Can I pass on that certitude to my little boy who now looks at me in a wonderment that saddens rather than gladdens my heart?

I see a purple sunbird alighting on a slender stalk. Its plumage glistens in the sun. Butterflies and dragonflies hover about in the balmy air. I start wondering about the thousands of species that share the planet with Man. When we disappear how many of these will we take along with us. Have we arrogated to ourselves the right to be the arbiters of their fate or have we simply stopped caring. Sentience must be extending to trillions or zillions of creatures who have slowly evolved over billions of years. How much time will we take to snuff out a great majority of them?

A stray dog has come into the garden. My son and I pick up a stone. It is a reflex action. It has become ingrained in my child at a very tender age. My arm becomes arrested in mid-air. The child completes the motion. He has found his mark. The animal gives a yelp of pain and slinks away. I have seen the dog before. My own dogs set up a furious barking whenever he enters our compound. They are well-fed. They would not even sniff at anything not to their liking. The stray dog comes to the rubbish can to rummage for some morsels -- any morsel -- of leftovers. His canine brethren would begrudge him that morsel. So, it seems, would I. I wonder how that stray animal survives after being hounded all day long. What about the strays and waifs of our society? How many millions or hundreds of millions are there? On a different plane is my reaction as instinctive when one of them wanders into my circle of light and warmth. Do I feel threatened or does their presence give rise to doubts I would rather keep the lid on?

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How did I happen to acquire the ability to think? If happiness or self-satisfaction is all that I am looking for then would I not be better off without an intelligence that keeps leading me into labyrinths when I already possess all the ingredients that should confer this state on me. On the face of it the reverse proposition is truer: the lower the state of intelligence the greater the pleasure that can be derived from the satisfaction of basic urges. A cow is in a state of near bliss when chewing the cud. A constant supply would perpetuate that state. A simple, unlettered peasant who tills his fields is satisfied if the rain is on time and he has a square meal at the end of the day. Both these categories would be content to leave well alone. Who then disturbs the natural harmony of existence?

It could not be the result of the simple urge to aggress. The tiger stalks his prey only when he is hungry. When that hunger is assuaged and he has slaked his thirst at the spring he will slumber peacefully in the dappled shade. Till his next pang of hunger he is at peace with himself and his surroundings. He will not disturb the tranquillity of the jungle. The woodcutter lived in the forest. His donkey load of wood which he sold in the city met the needs of his family. They did not have many cares. They were attuned to the rhythm of the forest. Whence the urge to destroy the forest?

In the stages of man's evolution he first tried to understand his environment; then he tried to live with it; and finally he attempted to overcome it. This is the stage that we are in; dominance. Domination can be achieved by a gross process (destruction) or by the subtle process (harnessing). The urge to dominate disturbs the equilibrium and the ferment thus created releases tremendous bursts of energy in the form of physical forces (gross process) and mental forces which on the higher plane become a subtle and on the lower plane a gross process. In the intellectual sphere the struggle between the gross and fine determines the path which will be followed by mankind. In the fine state as it applies to an individual, the appeasement of the basic urges does not, in itself, lead to contentment.

The realization that the satisfaction of wants cannot be the end that we are really looking for impels man to look beyond: within himself (the microcosm) and without (the macrocosm). It is the urge to excel which inheres in every man. It is the condition that can make man into superman.

In the twentieth century after the birth of Christ, in the fifteenth century after the birth of the Prophet, in the fifth or sixth millennia of the older orders that attempted to define the basis of our existence mankind is at a watershed. It is the first time since our race began that we have a conscious choice before us: to realize our destiny which will take us beyond the stars to fill the Universe or to sink back into oblivion -- without a beginning and without an end.

It is approaching the hour of twilight. In this serene place which is still steeped in the past I can hear the tinkling of the cow bells as the herds return for the night. The lowing of a stray calf can be heard in the distance. I can see that my son has run out of the gate. Shall I go after him or wait for him there to come back on his own. I am worried. Times have changed. There are undercurrents that reach me in my remoteness. What evil pervades the hearts of men that even in this haven of peace I feel a disquiet?

Violence and unrest are on the increase. It is the same wherever you look. From East to West and from North to South; suicide, homicide, genocide, rape, arson, pillage; urban unrest, rural unrest, popular discontent; amongst the high income groups, low income groups and no-income groups. They call it a law and order problem. Youth is on the rampage. We refuse to recognize it for what it is: UNCERTAINTY. Uncertainty that whatever we attempt is futile in the face of that constant, lurking fear that it can all go up in smoke in a few cataclysmic hours. That how can you hope for rational behaviour when you live in the most irrational of environments?

Remove the irrationality and the unguent will flow to soothe the frazzled nerves of a despairing generation.

I do not know whether there is life after death. I do not know if that thing we call the atman (soul) perishes along with our mortal remains when we die. I do not know whether the mystical experience (enlightenment) is simply a perception on a different plane or if it is actually a realization of the Infinite. There are many things I do not know. What I do know is that "I am part of mankind" and till the time there is one man drawing breath, now or a billion years hence, I can never really die. I am part of the life force. I am the continuum before and after. Through some strange process I inherited a quality, a thought, a racial memory from my earliest ancestor. Subconsciously I may still be influenced by a footprint left in the sands of time a million years ago and, in turn, I may yet bequeath a gene which by complex mutations will become the key to unlock some door a million years hence.

I do not know whether there is God. Like most of my fellow beings I desperately hope there is one. In a way it frees me from the responsibility for my actions or inaction. Deep in our hearts are we not all hoping that someone will lead us back before it is too late? What if there is no someone. Or if there is a someone He has left us to decide for ourselves. Will man measure up to his ascent or will four billion "little" men walk helplessly to their oblivion?

Editor's note: Authored by Maj Gen Vinod Saigal. The book can be accessed from the author's site www.vinodsaihal.com