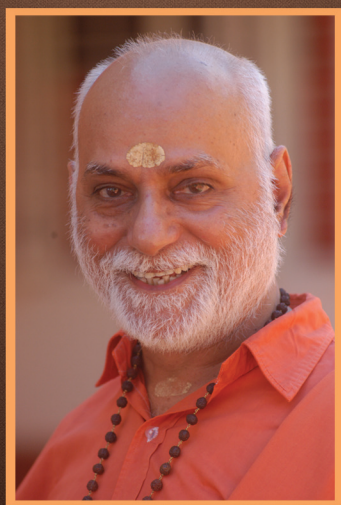


Song of the Soul



Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha

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Song of the Soul

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

You and I are humans of this world, living upon this wide earth. There are a number of things in common for us. I shall not speak on all of them now. There is something distinct, however, which strikes me as paramount. It is the one sure urge of mankind to think and to increase their knowledge. Let me try here to speak of it at some length.

To take to thinking and acquire knowledge is a special power given to man alone by Nature. Generally this power asserts itself in all, either more or less, all of a sudden or in stages. Often many fail to take note of it in time and pursue its trend. By that they incur a great loss to themselves.

If you do not fail but instead decide to pursue this trend with all faith and fervour, countless will be the benefits and limitless your glory. The mind of man is mystic and mighty. It can enrich man with all that is best. It can bestow upon him even the rarest of gifts. Blessed indeed are those who can pursue the path of knowledge and succeed in reaching its zenith. The entire world has to stand in obeisance to them.

Dear reader, Somehow I am one who has always been inspired by the power of thinking and knowing. Moved by it, guided by it, I have often thought and introspected a great deal for a long time. The one subject which has interested me always and to which I have dedicated myself wholeheartedly is 'life and living'. To me both life and living are a mighty and complex theme. It is one which should constitute a distinct subject of study for one and all alike.

How did life make its beginning? What exactly is its ultimate content? What is the constituent of understanding? Upon what is right understanding based? What is the strongest power in the world? Where can one find it? These and a host of allied questions amused and occupied me long back. All of them together became the most beloved subject for my study and analysis.

Song of the Soul

By the grace of the Creator, by the blessing of Nature, by the help and assistance of all the different factors and persons who have enabled, in one way or another, my life to thrive in the world, I pursued the course of my mind with all the zeal I could command. I could progress in the path steadily and at last could also find the abode of joy and fulfillment. It happened years back.

There are countless treasures which man can acquire in this world. All of them but one has their power to grow only less when used and spent. Wisdom and peace are the only ones which always grow but more, when ‘spent’ more. As the celebrated saying goes:

Vyaye krite vardhata eva nityam

Vidyaadhanam sarvadhanat pradhaanam

The wealth of knowledge is the best of all acquisitions. The more it is spent the better it grows.

To be ‘rational’ is the call of the day. In every walk of our life this call for reason has become strong and prominent. But to me, reason was the call of the thinking man not only of today but of even the earliest of times.

The literature on religion is the oldest literature of this country, Bharat. Open the ancient religious compositions, the Vedas and the Upanishads. In them you will find an abundant display of reason and logic. Their thinkers were perhaps, in the initial phase, not so much rational and bold in their thoughts and approach. But very soon came the change. They rose up from the mere promptings of the mind and began to trace the line of reason and follow its demands. In the end they took reason and logic to the best of heights. Only then came the most beautiful and everlasting findings. Even today these are sought and honoured by the best of rational men and women, not only of this country but of the world as a whole. They are what they are not by the grace of anything second, but by the merit of their own truth and worth. To find the most ancient men given thus to the pursuit and display of the zenith of reason in a sphere, which even today is held by

Song of the Soul

most to be devoid of it is a great wonder. Where are they of the past and we of the present!

Never hold then 'rationality' as anything new to the present day man. It was always a trait persistent in him. At best one may say the sense of reason is by and large more prominent now than before. I agree and also disagree. For, even today we find some of the most educated and scientific men stoop suddenly to superstition in not one but several walks of life. They do so more when they enter the field of religion and its actual pursuit. It is a grave conflict in their mental make-up and behaviour, a basic disharmony. The earlier it is realized the better. Reason or refined thinking is, no doubt, a great gift of man. There is no sphere of our life which sound wisdom cannot penetrate and illumine. To live and move with wisdom in this world is the best of all blessings. No one can think of anything greater or more useful.

But we should know how to use our reason and acquire the best of wisdom. The real ability of man is in achieving for his soul ample peace and freedom. Of what use will our life be on earth if we do not score the peacefulness of mind? What meaning can all our efforts claim if they fail to gain for us the inevitable freedom of our soul?

The mission, called life, of man upon this earth will be complete only when he succeeds in gaining the needs of his inner being.

Let us begin our thoughts by taking a look at the world around us and the endless creation thriving upon it.

The visible creation can be divided into two kinds. The animate or mobile is the one; the inanimate or immobile the other. Of these, the former alone reveals life, growth and individuality.

Observe now the living creatures in general. None, as a rule, wants to live a lonely life, isolated from the rest. An isolated individual life does not seem to be in the very scheme of Nature. To enable life to persist and to bring

Song of the Soul

about reproduction, every single life has to seek another or a company. The collective or community life is thus inevitable.

We the humans are no exception to this rule. In our case the need for group and community is even more and deeper. It has made us organize the society and community for centuries now. The connection between the individual life and the society is very strong and inseparable now. Today if any one has to think of his life and its pursuit, the society and the nation are the first to be thought of, not himself.

But the basic truth about our life and living still prevails. None can deny it any time.

Life here has to be lived for every one by himself. Whatever be the society or nation, the lonely nature of life, the 'individual ness' of living prevails for all. No one can think of altering or invalidating it.

This is no wonder. For every living person carries with him an individuality. What we call a 'person' is this individuality. Birth into the world, which marks the beginning of life, gives every one a body which remains exclusively his. Within this body are situated the mind and heart. Both the body and the mind have their respective needs. And they are distinct for each person. This distinctness exists at all times and is seen to preserve and support itself.

I do not contend the existence of the society or the nation. The society is there, so too are the nation and the world. Just as one thinks of himself, he has perforce to think of the others too. But closely viewed, both the individual and the society are the individual mind's thoughts and concern. The entire life and living thus have their basis upon the individual and his mind. Everything is the thought and concern proceeding from them, not from outside.

So life and living are a subject matter of oneself. To begin with and also to end with, this is so. The thoughts of the society, of the nation and the world, can only become yet another problem in the single man's mind. He,

Song of the Soul

the individual, has to tackle and resolve it. Everything of life then proceeds from you. It has also to end with you. Your mind, dwelling within the body, is the source of inherence for everything at all times.

Here then comes the sublime truth, the well-proved fact. For no one his life is perfectly smooth and easy. To begin to 'live' in this world is verily to rise up for a hard task, to take up and pursue an endless problem, to involve oneself in a tiring and complicated endeavour. If any one does think that life is a pleasant process, it is sheer delusion. Seldom is our life pleasant. Life confounds us more than it consoles. It empties us more than it fills. Generally this is the rule.

Verily every one's life is to him a square peg in a round hole. However best one may try, he can never make it fit fully in the hole.

Many may wonder why I say this. Are there not strong and prosperous nations in the world, with their people civilized and advanced? With enough of scope to improve their fate and powers, can they not make life a success and pleasure?

The question is relevant. I welcome it. For, to question is to search for truth. Knowledge always follows questioning. Questioning alone can widen and deepen the core of our being.

Our personality does not consist of the body alone and its parts. Within the body is a mighty mind. It is invisible, no doubt. But it is the prime moving force for us. Without the mind and its work, the body can do nothing. The mind's depth is immense. Its vision and insight are too vast. Its powers are endless.

The needs and urges of the mind are far different from those of the body. Never will the mind be content with mere prosperity, the physical health and well-being.

It is true that when bodily health and wealth are lacking, the mind unleashes a strong desire to gain them and to fill the gap. But when the

Song of the Soul

bodily needs are fulfilled and the gap is filled, suddenly you will find the rise of finer needs and greater ideals. No one can stop the mind's course or its aspirations. It is relentless in its ways and pursuits.

It has an innate love for truth and a passion for wisdom. Unless the mind plays fully its notes and fulfils its own aims, it will never stop or rest in peace.

So neither health nor wealth and prosperity can mark the consummation of human life. Like so many other things, these do have a place. But like all else, they too cause problems.

The 'square' nature of our life in the 'round' world will prevail ever and ever. No thinking man can become indifferent to it. When the problem called 'life' begins to assault, what is man to do?

Can he look for any one outside to come to his help? Or will any power from the Heavens above descend before him holding a solution?

As does the problem arise, so must its solution as well. Where man traces his problem, therein alone has he to find its solution. The disease inheres in the body. Its cure too is worked by the same body. Medicines given are at best only aids in the process.

When our mind senses a problem, then it has to work out the solution as well. The need for survival is the mind's. The way to ensure it lies within its own reach. There was no time in man's history when this was not so.

Every question is posed by man's mind. The same mind has then to find the appropriate answer. To question is a process. To answer is a counter-process. Both are of the same single mind. *In both is displayed the same creative power* lying within man.

Look at the atomic science evolved in recent times. The urge to evolve it came from the minds of our men. It is they who pursued it and achieved success. The success, it is now found, is the womb of an impending danger

Song of the Soul

or even complete destruction. Our mind has sensed the outcome, and therefore it is set to discover how best the hazards can be prevented or redressed.

To assert and to re-assert, to make and to un-make, to evolve as well as to dissolve all these are equally the display of the same inward power. The earlier you know it, the better for you and for the others. The true ability of man is to assess every phenomenon which presents itself before him, in time and rightly. He should then proceed to face and resolve it ensuring the welfare of his life, preserving his goodness and integrity.

The creator of all our problems, equally the resolver, is but the same thing. If you call it the mind, it is the mind. If you call it the soul it is the soul. Surely it abides within your body, not outside. This is the supreme truth to be recognized every time without fail.

When a child suddenly gets aggrieved and begins to cry and sob, the mother rushes to console it. She sings or recites something pleasant to the ear. The child listens to the mother's tune and thereby gets consoled.

But when the same child grows into a man or a woman, the fate is seen to be far different. To grow is to acquire greater powers of thought, of knowledge and action. When one grows, his capacities must also grow and expand. He must gain the strength and reliance to stand all by himself. Whenever he falls a prey to grief, he should be able to find his own power to give him relief.

Are all the grown-ups really so? Do they have the power to treat their mind and to redress its afflictions? Has their age brought to them all the wisdom and strength they so much need?

Every one must find his own answer!

Well, here comes the need for wisdom and its tuition. The life and activities of a grown up person will be hollow and futile if he lacks the power to think well and to formulate his wisdom. His powers of thought

Song of the Soul

and reason must be compatible with his age and growth. Or else, it is a grave disharmony, a woeful contradiction.

Never, of course, can mankind be a uniform product. All the individuals do not therefore have the same or equal power to study their life, to assess and resolve its problems and needs from time to time. Some are bound to be weak, deficient. Some may be too intelligent. Yet the need for solving life's problems stands there before all. It makes no difference.

That is how wisdom or Knowledge became a distinct pursuit of a few in every era. The things to be known, or knowledge in general, is always endless and various. Naturally it came to be divided into several parts, branches and fields. We have thus history, physiology, psychology medicine, etc., each a branch of the same huge tree of knowledge. People always opted for the particular branch depending upon their taste or temperament.

Spiritual wisdom, or the knowledge dealing with the peace of mind and the freedom of the soul, has a significant part to play in the scheme of life, the earthly living of man. That is how is sung here aloud, to the listening of all alike, this supreme "Song of the Soul", like the song of the mother to the child. The song thus sung vibrates and resounds strongly making itself audible, assuaging the aggrieved, strengthening the weak and fulfilling the deficient.

Let no one lose heart or sit despondent when his life poses its problems, holds out its challenges. Why fear when the solution is there? Within the problem and the ordeal lie safely their solutions too. You have only to improve your wisdom and deepen your insight: to strengthen your hope and enhance your faith! The wasteful life will then begin to be enriching, the abortive efforts will turn fruitful, and everything meaningless will turn meaningful to the brim. To ensure all this is the Soul's Song, *with its mighty note of wisdom and peace.*

This is the one Song to relieve the cry of the grown-ups, to remove their grief and to resolve their problems. Here it is sung aloud for the aggrieved

Song of the Soul

to find their cherished redress. In this, all can trace the hope and delight they seek. Here can they discover the peace and joy which the human heart so much yearns for but seldom finds. This is the blessed 'tune', which when heard, has the power to lead their hearts and minds to the one abode of life's joy and fulfillment!

To be a victim of grief is almost a must for every one living upon earth. At some time, moved by one thing or another, every born mortal is bound to court grief and agitation in the hands of his own mind. The remedy is evidently to sing a song aloud and find in its tune the relief he looks to.

Suppose he little knows to sing, the success lies in getting the song sung by another fit for the task. The latter, the tutor, must be one who really knows the song well and who can sing it with love and fervour for those who need and seek .

The Wise One, the Knower, alone can sing best. The ignorant, the seeker, is the one who can hear it best. The Knower singing and the seeker hearing, will then serve the whole purpose best.

In finding the true Knower, in imploring Him to sing the *Song of the Soul*, Arjuna gives us the best example. In singing the Song most copiously and well, to relieve and to delight the seeker, Krishna stands out as the best example. Thus in those two, the seeker and the knower, the seeking and the tuition have both made the best of blending. The result became marvellous. All the problems of the seeker disappeared, all his grief dissolved, shortly and well. In the end the seeker is found to shine with the best of courage and wisdom, of peace and freedom.

It is no wonder that the Song became the best known and the most sought, not only by the single Arjuna who fought the War of Mahabharata but by the thousands and millions who fought and who still fight the war of life in this complex world.

The rarity of the Song, its unique worth and charm, made it cross the boundaries of the Kurukshetra battlefield and traverse in all directions

Song of the Soul

through the skies of Bharat, go beyond the sub-continent and in the end reverberate in the entire globe. If there are men and women in the other planets, they too must be singing its lofty tune! Its soothing words are heard and copied by teeming tutors and seekers living the world over.

Scores of centuries have passed and slipped. Even today the Song's worth and charm, its loftiness and depth, remain the most beloved for all those who grieve, sob and seek. It is itself as old as the Soul of man. Its need and scope are as ever, as the mind itself of man.

The world will change. Mankind will rise and fall. The planets may vanish and emerge again. The immortal content of this Song will still survive, as does the soul of everything in the universe which exists and struggles to persist.

O men and women of the world. If you but live with a mind in your body, you have no right to become deaf to this immortal Song of the Soul. If the mind has to thrive and if the body has to live, if the odds and trials of the world are to be faced and overcome, this Song and its hearing is a must. Listen then to its tune wholeheartedly, tune your being to its note to find your rest and peace in its soothing embrace.

Variety of Creation

We are, we exist, we have our life upon the earth. Like us, the humans, the earth creates and supports many other creatures, besides other animate things. The beings other than the humans are much more in number. Their variety is marvellous. Every individual species embodies a kind and order of tendencies and skills.

The jackal excels in its tact and shrewdness. The dog is gifted with the best of fidelity. The tiger is cruel and unyielding. He knows only to kill. The squirrel is a vegetarian being, given to nimbleness and agility. The rabbit's fear is as pronounced as its loveliness of form. Though a vegetarian in its habits, it causes harm and havoc to the agriculturists.

Song of the Soul

In food, in sleep, in habits, in mating and reproduction, in everything in short, each species has its special features. The whole of these creatures possibly cover the whole of tendencies and habits one can think of, find and comprehend on this wide earth.

Now about man, mankind in general. Man too is a creature. Like any other, he has his needs, also habits, in food, in sleep, in activities, in everything in general. But mankind is not just one kind or order in their mental composition, as the creature kingdom invariably is.

The humans of any time, of any place, are infinitely assorted. Taken together, they embody an amazing variety of tastes, tendencies, wills and choices. In this they possibly represent the entire rest of creation with their respective natures. Mankind as a whole is the animal-kind in full.

But he is different too, fully so. He has his unique distinction. By that he rises greatly above all the others in creation. His real power is the one which springs from within him, from the mind and intelligence of his. His mind and intelligence coupled with his heart can join together to become verily anything he wants. They can work to be the best, also to be the worst. In practice they also do so.

You can find the best and most noble individuals among mankind. People with the worst temperaments will also be. Every kind of people *in between* is also there.

In man one can find the cunningness of the jackal. In shrewdness and patience some are like the graceful elephants. Like the lion, some are proud and uncompromising in their ways. The cruelty of the tiger is equally in display among humans. Like the mongoose before the snake, some are relentless in their enmity.

Some men and women resemble the deer in their innocence and harmlessness. Like the rabbits, there are those dominated unduly by fright. Their minds go on trembling in fear, without purpose, like the leaves of the

Song of the Soul

Peepul tree. Some are strong, consistent and faithful in their character like the dog.

Verily mankind taken as a whole will be the entire creatures and animals put together. Yes, the humans are a curious mixture of the whole rest of creation. They represent an amusing assortment in which will be found a place for practically every kind, order make and form.

The seeker thus stands tempted to seek why this is so, and what has he to do with it. The intelligent human finds his compulsion to think and discover the why of this great plurality, of what purpose is it all. What is the exact position of an individual? Where and how has it to be raised or elevated?

All are living in the same world. They breathe the single air. The food they eat is afforded by the same earth. How do then thoughts arise so variably in people? The source of all thoughts - the world and the mind together - is the same for all men and women. But the thing produced is so divergent. Why is it? What for? And how?

If one is noble, he alone is so. Many he sees around him are not. If one loves nobility, he has to love it everywhere, in all. He will want to see it displayed by as many, if not all. But is that to be?

Every one is an individual. As such he is exclusive. He stands with his freedom, with his own specific distinctions. He claims a right to exercise his choice, his want, his will, every time. For him his choice is pleasing, perhaps also fulfilling. He cares little for what another likes or feels. His fate is under him, within his making. He decides to make it the way he wishes. Who is any one to interfere, to intercept his course?

For the noble man, this is an aching sight. He suffers under its thought, by its confrontation. Naturally he wonders what made him noble, and what makes another not so.

Song of the Soul

Does the same world sing in many voices? Does it reserve some of its tunes for a selected few? Does it carry any compulsion in its voice? Is there any particular order pronounced by the world?

What is the world after all? It is the endless sky, the shining luminaries, the hot sun, the cool moon. It is then the air, the earth below, the water upon it. It is the immobile and mobile creation which emerged and evolved which grew and multiplied in huge proportions covering the earth and filling the waters. Can all these sing? Does the song have literacy? Does it hold meaning and ideas? Finally is there any ideal suggested?

Besides this external world of existence, what can be the teacher for man? It can only be *his own within*. But what is this within? It is much less distinct than the visible outside world. It is thinner than the thinnest air. It is more colourless than the colourless water. It is hazier than the hazy sky. Is that then anything at all? What can be its power? Where does it lurk? How does it work?

Who is its custodian? Is it man or any one else? Where is that another to be found? Within the world such an another is not perceived! What is then the meaning of this all? Where is the right clue to rip open the mystery of this amazing variety? Yet it has to be ripped, unravelled, by none else but the thinker, the seeker, the enquirer, by the one who yearns for wisdom, for truth, for redemption from his own mental torture!

The same indistinct mind, the same imperceptible intelligence, the same invisible heart, remaining within the body of every man and woman give rise to the startling variety called mankind, the humans. Is there any rule governing this plural creation by the single source, reigning within man himself? What can be such a law?

Does man have an option to improve or to degrade? Has he to make and exercise that option? Does he have the power for it? Is he given the freedom unhindered to empty that power and win his ideal? Or are there factors to control or curb his efforts at any stage?

Song of the Soul

This is the real civilization of man, man the mental, not man the physical; of man the human, not man the animal.

With its assortment, its unique power of thought and knowledge, of will and execution, the human kingdom tops the entire list of creatures in the world, the whole of creation itself. Creation stands thus crowned with man at its top. Its purpose stands complete, fulfilled.

With mankind placed in front, on top, the *voice of Creation* reverberates: 'I have completed my task. Before you is displayed the full variety. It reigns outside you as well as inside. The power to observe it, to study and know it, is given to you. The will to decide your way, your fate and choice is also there with you. Exercise this power generate your will and execute it whither you aim to reach.

My part is over. The rest is yours, to make or to mar. I stand aside mute and inactive. Get me to whatever you desire. Prosper or perish. I shall be the same in your prosperity and decline. The question is only whether you, the creation, can also be'.

Who, the Arya

That man or woman who begins to think gravely in these lines is the real human, the elevated soul. He is called the 'Arya', the noble-souled human. The Arya is not satisfied with what he sees. He also wants to think of them. He feels for them. He has an urge to determine his position, his goal, his efforts, their manner and meaning. His mind and heart want to express and radiate love, fellow-feeling. It is not a show or semblance, but a vital sentiment flowing out like the air he breathes. It begins to load him, ache his heart, make him pant and heave under its spell.

The sentiments in him blend with his quest, yearning. His curiosity stands allied with his emotional facet. This is the marked fusion which will make man greater, higher, abler and happier, later if not sooner. A mere thought or quest is not sufficient to make man better or higher. It should be aligned with the strength of sentiments, the power of feeling.

Song of the Soul

The Arya is always sober. He detests rebellion. To rebel, he knows, is to hate. He hates but hatred. The true Arya is given to patience, to forbearance. He never negates or derides. He can only accept and compliment. The world is curious he knows, even inexplicable at times. But what can he do!

The world is not *his* creation. He is its. So he can only accept it as his mother, his father, his grandparents, the one Supreme God, the Infinite Father. He goes to God from the world and not come to the world from God. Through the steps of the ladder does he reach the top, not from the top to the bottom. Bottom first, and then alone the top. This is the rule, the law, the truth everywhere. He, a seeker of truth, honours it, loves it, and accepts it wholeheartedly.

When the mind feels the load, the heart is made to bleed unseen, when the intelligence begins to wonder in reality, then the seeking verily germinates and grows. Until then it is just a show of words, of oratory, the skill of experience, the ability to dupe the others standing in front.

The Arya is our example, the model man, the ideal human.

The people of this land struggle to become Aryas. The child in good families is told now and then of this goal, this ideal, and this sure need. The grown up is asked to think of him. Through the books of religion, through epics and mythology, the thoughts and deeds of the Arya alone are taught, exemplified, adored and sought as a blessing.

Harishchandra was an Arya. Rama was one, Krishna another. Vasishta was yet another. Through them all, through several others like them, the lesson of goodness, of wisdom, of truth, of life made noble, great and immortal, is the one story, the unique subject, discussed, debated upon and concluded without doubt.

Arya is not a race or community, a sect or a group born of specific lineage. He or she is an Arya who has his sentiments, knowledge and deeds given to goodness, love and purity: who looks to peace, wisdom and immortality

Song of the Soul

beyond everything else as the fruition and fulfillment of life, in contrast to anything external or material.

The path before the Arya may not be easy. He will have his risks, his ordeals, his persecutions. But all of them he meets in his own hands, in the hands of the object and ideal he cherishes, clings to firmly. None he blames any time, not even the Creator.

If at all, he has only appreciation, love, a sense of accommodation and acceptance for anything, for all. With every moment, incident or accident, he is determined to grow and he succeeds also. His failure can never be due to another. When his beloved pursuit dies, then alone can he fail. And that he finds is improbable.

This is the *Arya* Sri Krishna places before Arjuna to evaluate the standard of his (Arjuna's) conduct, of his thoughts and decision either to fight or to abandon it and retreat. The *Aryatwa* (Aryahood), Arjuna is told, must inspire him like every other fighter, guide his thoughts, instil in him strength, resolve his will and ideal. But for *Aryatwa*, Arjuna's life would be worth nothing great. It will be fully hollow, empty in virtues, in loftiness, in anything beyond the animal and bird.

Weakness is inborn in man. *It is a sure symptom of growing life.* It has to be recognized no doubt, but only to be overcome, gradually though not suddenly. Weakness is to give man its caution! It should sound the need, bestow inspiration to work for its redress, to gain ample strength and resolve.

Yes, the presence of an opposite helps one to gain its opposite. It should be precisely so. Success of human life depends upon the discovery of this unique mystery, this basic truth, this fundamental lesson! Weakness is the opposite of strength. To find oneself weak is surely to work against it, to eliminate it and gain abiding strength.

Death must give the caution to win immortality. The mortal is one who needs immortality. He alone can indeed work for it. Mortality first

Song of the Soul

perceived is what paves the way for gaining immortality later. If mortality were not to be with us, immortality too cannot be thought of. One of them alone cannot exist, it does not.

To exist, the one must be allied with the other. The other should be equally so with the one. But the allied ones are not friends, but enemies. They stand against each other, not with one another. To be against is, therefore, *really to be*. It is to be the grand One, to be the Supreme, to be the Real, the Transcendental. The two are really one. To be known, to be dealt with, the two came to be. But what became the two is really the One. *To become*, the one gives rise to the other.

The difference is visible no doubt, but is only apparent. It is just on the surface, never in depth, never in the field of reality or the sphere of truth. The surface is only superficial. At best it can denote and imply, it points to, the depth beneath. Without the beneath, the depth, can surface be at all? Is there any?

The bad is then to suggest its opposite, the good. To be bad oneself is to be constantly at work for being good, to need and desire the good. The bad is the sure signal for its renunciation. It gives the call for its own transcendence. Bad teaches man, compels him to replace it, to overcome it, to be the master of it, to work his way above and free of it.

Then will come the role of good. He who has risen above bad alone gets to the good. He becomes the noble, the august man. But his task does not terminate there. It brings in another need, a new ideal, a fresh object to seek, gain and establish himself in firmly.

Like bad, the good too is not to be clung to in the end. The good should also be transcended. It has to be clearly risen above while reaching the goal. Then will come the grand victory, the most decisive fruition, the ultimate fulfillment of human life. The crowning of humanhood, the zenith earmarked for sound thinking, the pinnacle of the mind's civilization, the reward for the great morality of man on earth, will be then and then alone.

Song of the Soul

To be above good as above bad, to be free of the involvement and concern for both, to behold and contain the allotted redemption of man - the intelligent mortal of the world - is the life lived face to face with the supreme reality, the Ultimate Truth, the invisible yet realizable metaphysical presence called god. The grand mystery of the entire creation, the unseen but not unheard grand magic of the Creator, the mystic delusion enfolding and conquering the human mind right before it begins its existence in the world, all this becomes clear and precise then. And that marks the final release of man, the dawning of his supreme gracefulness which never waxes or wanes but remains, and remains eternally to be the same as long as life, experience and knowledge prevail for him.

The *Arya* is the evolving human, the man or woman standing on the path of progress, committed to it wholeheartedly.

He eats drinks, sleeps and acts no doubt, but what he wants and cherishes to gain by all these is to think and feel, to grow rich and richer in understanding. He has the body, like others, but *his strength is not in the body but in what dwells within it*.

The spirit within the body is the vital for him. The body is its servant, a useful appendage produced and preserved by nature. He thinks and tries earnestly to follow his thoughts. He dissects the thoughts, sifts them clearly, then tries to select and distinguish the good from the bad amongst them. He acts, but his aim is to do so in strict pursuance of his thoughts. If at all, *he yearns to be wiser before the events*, not after them. He is determined to narrow the gap between thoughts and deeds, between ideals and actuals, beliefs and behaviour, and if possible make it nil.

By this very nature of his the *Arya* is destined to evolve steadily and successfully, either fated by accident or led forcefully by incident. 'Chance' may have a role in his life but he never stops to worry if it will turn favourable or not. By the very law of Nature and the force of Truth, chance cannot but befriend him at every stage.

Song of the Soul

The Geeta of Sri Krishna presents this *Arya* with his characteristic goodness, but not without his typical problems, the initial conflicts of his moral mind. The steps by which the *Arya* is led towards his destination, the virtues and skills he has to learn and equip himself with, these and a lot more are laid down and taught effectively throughout the contents of the dialogue. One who reads it or hears it read not merely learns the true qualities of life but is also simultaneously stimulated to practise his knowledge. The approach to knowledge by learning as well as by a constant practice of it in life's daily happenings is the unique compulsion one finds in the Geeta. In this does the text become a *living book of practice* as much as a *Scripture of wisdom*.

VISION AND INSIGHT OF EPICS

RAMAYANA and MAHABHARATA are the two ancient poetic works of this land. Except perhaps the Vedas, all literary compositions of the country have followed them. Their place and worth are great, inestimable.

The books are read by hundreds in public and in private. They are debated hotly by scholars, but also emulated fondly by the ignorant. Heard by thousands, reaching yet a lot more in other ways, they are lived by generation after generation. Fused into the minds and hearts of teeming millions, imbibed strongly by their flesh and blood, they have remained the active pulse of the nation every time, the unfailing source of its strength and endurance!

How did the Sages of such remote past learn to live so perpetually? How could their oldest minds gain, in the few decades of their bodily life upon earth, the power and vision to think and live for hundreds of generations? By what merit did they succeed in finding out the values and ideals which even today stand the test defying death or degeneration? The only answer is that this land is great, its air is pure its waters are holy. They have the unique power and grace to produce minds as lofty as the Himalayas, as deep and vast as the air and waters!

Time is eternal. When we also know that the mind of man is eternal as well as sentient, then the mystery of our thinkers will unveil itself. Thoughts, a product of the mind, also have the intrinsic power to live eternally, through generations, asking mankind every time to appreciate its worth and emulate its contribution.

Epic is not so much mythology as it is a record of facts. To relate and render facts, the epics did embody a measure of fiction. The fiction in them stands behind. The facts shine strongly in the forefront. But in practice, *most readers get lost in the fiction*. They ignore the facts, the truths from life, of life and for life, which are the supreme.

Song of the Soul

This is not a demerit of their authors or a defect of what they wrote. It is a sheer travesty of the reader's role! The true reader is he who looks to the facts, relates them to the world and his life, keeping aside the fiction, using it merely as a prop to support his memory and aid his imagination.

To effect narration is a 'great art'. It is much more so than it looks even to experts. In everything of man there is a science, a basic truth, a purpose and a sequence. The more one is aware of them; the better will be his sense and ability to create. The genesis of our Epics has to be thought over in this light.

What is the content narrated? How effective it has to be? For what length of time should it live and serve mankind? To what purpose has it to lead the readers? How large a people does it seek to encompass and bring within its orbit? These are the basic questions a thoughtful poet or a great author has to take up in his mind for clarity and decision. The role of his poetry or narration will depend upon the precision of the answers they bring to his mind. The theme and trend of his writing too will depend upon the kind and quality of these answers.

The nature of thoughts his mind produces, the phrases and terms he uses in his writing, the known and sometimes unknown areas his powerful pen will take him to, all these, like many other things, will be governed by the author's own basic stand and motives.

To write may be easy *but not* to write something useful, fruitful and purposeful, everlastingly so. Time is the only power to be eternally present. Everything Time brings in its wake lives and goes, but it does not make Time wither and disappear. If one can sink into the depths beneath the fleeting surface of Time, discover its unfleeting bottom within, then will he derive the power to make his epic pen eternal in what it produces for mankind.

True writing cannot be a flair or pastime. It has to be a deliberate but natural fruition of a long process of growth and fulfillment. In writing,

Song of the Soul

one's personality, his personal life with all that belongs to it, will stand revealed in truth, though hidden at times.

Yes, in it should be reflected everything of the writer - his heart, mind as also wisdom. When thus a fusion of the writer's being with what he writes and portrays takes place naturally, then will his writing rise above the mere display of words or the indulgence of leisure to become something great, valuable and holy. The character and intrinsic worth of a writer is the ultimate factor which determines the merit and length of life of his writing.

The Epics we have before us belong to such a lofty category. The first of them, Ramayana, emerged forth from the mind of the 'first poet' of this ancient land. It flowed out like a fountain when his loving heart was moved irresistibly by the sight of a hunter who shot down one of a wedded pair of *Krauncha* (heron) birds perching fondly upon the tall branch of a lovely blooming tree. The fate threw the surviving partner in utter affliction.

But alas, what could the innocent creature do before its wicked adversary? It had power to fly aloft freely with mastery, teasing man and making him feel jealous of that glory. But that meant nothing before the cruel sport of the hunter. Hit hard, shaken to the very depths, the poor bird began to wail and lament helplessly in utter dejection. Though audible, the cry was by no means *literal*. However, to the lonely ascetic, Valmiki, for whom birds of the forest gave much more company than did the humans of the plains, the tragic scene meant a terrible blow of cruelty, throwing him into a deep sense of remorse and compassion.

The willed outcome, its unwilling acceptance, both pierced his mind like two sharp arrows making it bleed and ache uncontrollably. A host of feelings and sentiments pillaged his heart. What the innocent but helpless bird wished but miserably failed to pour forth and relate, what the mute Creator of beings would have intended to be relayed at the time before the articulate mankind, the afflicted recluse began to render eloquently with untold pathos and arresting literacy. That marked the amazing commencement of his monumental poetry, the first of its kind to be born in this land. That gave rise to the Ramayana we speak of now, ages and ages

Song of the Soul

after the memorable event came to pass suddenly that day in the dark forest.

The Epic is then as deep and touching as the heart of its author. Valmiki has, no doubt, done the task with all the art and skill one can imagine. Yes, it is when the heart really melts that the mind and intelligence verily blow, like the strong wind before the blazing fire.

Feelings of the heart are the first and last creators for mankind, as for Providence. When one fails in his feelings, he fails in his life too. If the noblest of feelings are besought and nourished with vigour, then indeed will life grow rich and immortal.

The Epic has reached the pinnacle in the art and science of effective narration. By that it has also derived the power and scope to become everlasting in its charm and appeal.

A literature lives for long when built upon a stable and singular foundation. The pillars to support it must be carefully designed. The depths and heights of the writer's imagination must shine clearly, be supreme in every way. His success lies in forging a conspicuous alliance between his thoughts and mankind's needs the needs of the minds and hearts of both men and women living upon the earth at any time, in every era. Seeing the static needs and rearing the deepest thoughts, his mind must be able to fuse them together to bring about the most fruitful imagination. It is such imagination which then descends suddenly from the sky and heavens to set foot on this wide and complex earth, to live there not just for centuries alone but for millennia and yet more.

The life lived in the past; being lived in the present, to be lived yet in the future, all upon this vast earth when discussed in its sovereign essence and value becomes the matchless content of an unfailing epic. Through actual history, in imagined legends, by examples, with illustrations, displaying timely reason, revealing relevant truths, thus in several ways arresting the readers' minds, evoking their deeper response offering rich food to many

Song of the Soul

alike at every stage, the writing stands stimulating the elite, informing the ignorant and arousing the curious.

The author's ability lies in presenting his theme in a manner which will enable the reader to absorb at every stage of the narration what is conveyed. From absorption he must be led to comprehend the principles and truths more deeply, in detail. By that he must be tempted to relate them to the rest with a force and inspiration that will be clearly his.

Yes all this is what a true author also does himself. He first thinks and reflects. Then he absorbs what is reflected. From there he formulates his knowledge, in its depth and elegance. The outcome is then laid open before the readers.

The knowledge born out of purity of purpose, sublimity of love and genuineness of need alone creates a wholesome influence in mankind, revealing a strength and realism to live in them eternally.

The art of dividing the Eternal Time into four distinct quarters, called yugas, is a masterly device which the Epic author has evolved in his mind with great insight. The first Yuga (krita), says the author, was the best and most rewarding. In it goodness reigned supreme and succeeded too without much opposition and fight. But the other yugas meant a steady decline from the high pedestal of virtue and merit. The downward trend was on and on and it is to reach its acme, the anti-climax, in this quarter, the last Kaliyuga. And we of the present, concludes the Sage, have our life in such a deplorable quarter.

Is not this pronouncement radical, the verdict aching to a noble heart? What choice does the reader have before him then? Instantly he stands ready, attentive to the perils and pitfalls that surround his present life. He also rushes to search for the further prophecies and hopes in his urge to escape the grave danger, to find a way out of the impending moral crisis.

In the calculation of Time, in describing its course, there is a great mathematics displayed. But ultimately everything is said to be revolving,

Song of the Soul

repeating periodically. Is this not what every minute, hour and day do before us already? The seasons of the year do it. The year itself, the aggregate of the seasons, also does the same process, revolving. The whole evolutes in the Epic are then fully logical, meant with purpose. They have their marked sequence.

Persons, Places and Events, these are the main props which render any narration memorable and effective.

A person lived, says the author. That was the time it happened. This is the act he performed. Such was the nature of his mind. The consequence which followed was this. He had to struggle in this way to meet it. In such a manner did he find his escape and relief. That problem has this solution. This path has that destiny. Those lives bear evidence to this.

The same revolving Time which brought that past is at work in the present. It is the same which will be centuries hence. The old is then not old. The present is not fully new. The future will never be a surprise. The one grand wheel of infinite spokes is revolving. Each spoke thus rises up and then comes down. It is vertical at times, horizontal at other times, at acute and obtuse angles in between. The story of the past is then the alive solution to the present. This present is likewise a full offer to the future. The sequence between the three-the past present and future-is strong, deep and wholesome. The reading thus becomes imperative.

In using the names too the Sages have exhibited a unique skill. Every word they coined had its specific meaning, purpose and relevance. Whom was it to denote? If a person good or thing dear, or even an act noble, then it was evolved after that purpose. In the same way, the things opposite, the persons with opposite natures, gave rise to words and phrases to denote the contrasts implied. In the words and phrases used, as in the themes discussed, the force of the narration became manifest.

Rama and Ravana, Krishna and Kamsa, Krita and Kali, all are such contrasting names, words immensely suggestive. They are pregnant with a

Song of the Soul

lot more of ideas and meaning than they just look to be. The unique quality of the Sanskrit language is thus made prominent.

The Epics are thus so drastic, so touching and comprehensive in their narration and progress. In making them superb like this, in empowering them to live and re-live for countless centuries and multiples of generations, their Sage authors have displayed a worth, an insight and mastery abundant in every way. All these stand covetable and amazing before the best as well as the worst critics.

To the people of this land Bharat, the sweetness and magnificence of the narratives lie in everything of them. As have the stories so too have the characters, events and examples, nay even the words, phrases and proverbs used, made their marked influence on people. After the names in the Epics have been named the children of the land. The words and phrases, with their explicit import, have forged a strong place for themselves in their culture as well as conversation.

Naming was an art with the ancient thinkers. The first priority went to the Gods and Goddesses. Natural indeed. Next stood the gentle and fragrant flowers like lotus, jasmine and their comrades. The choice was then given to the holy perennial rivers and similar creations of Nature. The list was topped by the superhumans. It then descended to the sentient gifts of Nature on the earth and finally even the insentient but beneficial entities found a proper place. A grand rhythm, an intelligent order, a hidden sequence, thus dwelt in everything they built through their imagination.

When the Epics were first written, all this remained perhaps in the mere imagination of Valmiki and Vyasa. But ere long their imagination left its internal abode in a grand holy pilgrimage. Reaching the ears of people it entered instantly their hearts and then permeated into their blood streams to work the magic of realism and permanence. Remaining inseparably in them their imagination forced itself to be bequeathed by the law of heredity to the descendants everywhere in the country, the coming generations, to become a magnificent force, an unobliterable influence. Individuals first, their groups next, society later, a whole nation afterwards, still later a

Song of the Soul

whole range of people, all became full heirs, most of whom took pride sooner or later in preserving what they got, in furthering it as much as they could.

Perhaps with the startling explosion in the number of our people, the tempo of good education lagged behind. The rich heredity seems to suffer a setback. But soon this phase is bound to change. The trend of education and the effort at instilling cultural standards and values will surely pick up pace. And the same blood of the Epics will begin to flow vigorously in even more bodies fired with greater weight and strength. This is the big magic the oldest but ever living thoughts of the Epic authors can work even in our remotest times.

The force which works in them is not truly of themselves. It is the grandeur of the truths of life, truths which neither industry nor technology can dismiss from the orbit of human life, both individual and social.

Epic is not so much mythology as it is a record of facts. It records the display of human nature, at its best and its worst, and at everything ranging in between. It is an open book which has been written for mankind of all times, their display and attainments. The mind of man is the supreme thing portrayed by the author. He speaks lucidly about its sound as well as unsound pulsations, the witchcraft it is capable of and subjected to in the hands of its own possessor or those of another, the noble direction it can imbibe from an illumined intelligence, these and a lot more are dealt with through instances, examples, imaginations, but nevertheless with realism and reality.

The innocent man is sure to stand inspired and compelled by the content and narration. The thinker will find his thoughts deepened, feelings widened, intellect baffled and properly illumined. It holds before him the ideal, challenge, risk, awe, hope and finally the sure lot of survival and victory.

There is a lot for every kind of men and women to learn, to get enriched by, both in the world of the world and in the world of the spirit. By the

Song of the Soul

study of the Epic's contents, the ignorant will turn wise, the wise will become full, and the seeker will shine a *siddha* (a fulfilled soul), the bound will realize his freedom, all to be equally blessed with peace and befriended greatly by fortitude and hope.

What then is the effectiveness of such a narration? Epic is a faithful account of facts and truths to inform every man and woman on what they should know and be led by. It is a Scripture to forge faith in the doubting minds. It is an authentic treatise to educate the intelligent and illumine the more studious. Through the same contents it fulfils several roles at the same time. Depending upon the reader's needs and power, it will reveal its worth, depth and values.

This huge world before us, in which we all are compelled to live, is unique in its strangeness. It was so right from the first days after its origin. In continuing to be strange lies its hidden sovereignty, the matchless supremacy it holds over one and all of its creations. Many have been frightened by it. Some though bold stood perplexed. Some had been so much unnerved by it that they got utterly lost without help and succour. However a few always lived in every era who did not fail in finding a superb meaning in its mystic structure, an unfailing rhythm in all its purposes. It was they who triumphed in their lives, fetching joy to themselves and to many others around them. By their life did come to light the hidden glory of the unhidden world, the wholesome usefulness it holds in and through everything existing within its ken.

Variety - world's best gift

Whatever any one may be tempted to complain, the world is 'full' in one way, in the stupendous variety it displays and still reserves inexhaustibly within it. Yes, the variety it bestows upon us is verily endless. 'Infinity' is often an imagination to aid our mind's efforts at mathematical calculations. The 'finite' alone stands as real giving meaning and clarity. But in reckoning the world in which our forefathers lived and we have been living, in trying to determine the extent of its variety, infinitude becomes

Song of the Soul

more meaningful and real than its opposite. Yes, the manifestations caused by the world are innumerable, countless.

Naturally by its amazing variety the world extends before us manifold potentials. That is how a multitude of influences, a host of tendencies and natures and finally an assortment of visions and insights emerged from the world to find their way into the creatures, more so into mankind, the topmost of all its creations. No doubt the world has the power to do so, to accomplish this great wonder and perpetuate it.

Nothing so much as the mind of man was affected by the strong touch of the world's variety. Enmeshed in such a hard plight it always had the chance to drift this way or that. To emerge in the world and then to evolve successfully within its fold was by no means easy for it.

Men and women have thus been obliged by the world to promote their life and likewise to demote it. Some were able to rise up to great heights, while some others were pulled strongly down. Without question or even helplessly, they followed the fate their own minds chiselled for them by the force of what they saw in front and did in consequence.

The singular august heredity of the first mankind on earth thus began its steady drift to become variant, be divergent. This led some to be born as heirs of *good*, to be promoters and vindicators of its cause; some others to inherit bad, to try relentlessly to enhance it at every stage. With that rose up groups and kinds. Each group stood and vouchsafed by its birthright and privileges. Before both of them reigned equally the freedom and decision to follow their respective ways and meet the destined ends. If questioned by another, neither of them was prepared to yield or change. Each stood resolved to persist in what it was given to by reason of its birth and also by its option. This is the infallible outcome caused by the world through the magic of its plurality, ramified further by Time's eternal march.

The notoriety of man thus made him gradually array his kind as a strong group against the other kind. He did so not always by wise option but by

Song of the Soul

the law and fact of his mental structure, a compulsion the world's plural forces wrought in him before and after he entered our globe.

Any one born any time anywhere in the world will therefore have to find himself inevitably in this group or that, an heir to nobility and goodness or to vice and meanness. If he is given to bad, his problems are none or at most few. If on the other hand he finds himself resigned to the altar of good, his hurdle is first himself and the rest next. Within himself will rage the undeniable call of preserving his good and promoting it with vigour. Outside of him will stand facing, not alone from one quarter but from many, a host of challenges from those resolved in the other way. Their pet desire, the inborn fondness in them, the strong urge determined to promote itself and demote the rest, all these face him threatening to crush his nature or compelling him to mortgage his allegiance.

But has any one his option in the matter of his birth? To every one is denied the chance to nominate his parents. It does not also occur that one is born all alone. Every couple is more likely to become parents of more than just one or even two. Each of the few so born has his right to live and grow in the same way as have the others beside him. None can have the power to mould another with authority. The life they together live for a period under the same parents is more outlived in time than furthered beyond sentiments. The individual nature is bound to shine with its own distinct choices, freedom and will. That is the law of human life's growth prevailing upon the strong fact of its birth and parentage. Those unified by their birth and parentage always then stand the woeful chance of falling apart by their gradual growth. The oneness compelled by the thought of birth may not influence the fact of a long and divergent growth.

The birth of one into the world which obliges him to live his life with a set of brothers is then much more complex than it suddenly looks. It imposes upon him and the rest the hard task of aligning themselves on several accounts, in many ways. Avoiding differences and conflicts in actions as in thoughts and ideals. They must be firmly resolved to evolve harmony and preserve it at any cost. But in the actual course of the world this may be, may also not be.

Song of the Soul

To inherit the same heredity alike and then to feel inspired to enhance it, overcoming all hindrances with determination and love, is no doubt a boon given to the human world, but availed in fact too seldom.

Nevertheless our life on earth is not designed at any time to be lived singly. It has the crying need always for company, for sharing, for alliance and union. With his dear ones near him, man naturally enjoys his life more, is able to do more, and has also the chance to share with and from and gain liberally in the end. If no one is around, he will begin to shrink. His nature gets constricted. True expansion and growth will stand refused. The greater beauty, the loftier fruition, the higher joys, all stand to desert him much to his own dislike and dismay. From the level of a healthy human, his life will droop to be that of a mere puppet.

Ramayana sweet and sublime

Ramayana portrays before us a life of ‘loving brotherhood’ with amity, harmony and sharing fostered by all the brothers right from the start till the end. The brothers were blessed with a rich heredity to which they added further strength and beauty by their own timely wisdom and choices. They did struggle and strain a great deal but for defeating each other in their love and goodness, the unfailing sense of brotherhood each fostered in front of the other.

It all happened when Dasharatha and the three princesses he married became parents of four children in all, after many years of expectation and disappointment. (The story will be told in more detail later when the character of Rama is dealt with more comprehensively.) All the children were strong, cultured and great as the father strongly cherished and the mothers ardently loved to see. The event was delightful, as were its first successors.

But Nature is queer as She is ever. Yes, She is intricate and invincible. Nature’s intentions are not always patent. The eldest of the princes, Rama, was to inherit the throne. The father strongly desired it. Rama was the cherished hope of his fond heart. His elderliness also shone justifying the

Song of the Soul

crown. The citizens, one and all alike, applauded the king's decision. The coronation was fixed. Arrangements were afoot. The eve of the great event came. Then suddenly Destiny turned cruel, harsh, painful, unyieldingly so. Like a shower of fire it burnt away all sweet hopes, too instantly.

Kaikeyi, the most beautiful and beloved of the three queens, had held a special charm before Dasharatha. Her words had the power to sway the powerful king, make his commitment shatter and crumble. Kaikeyi's colour turned altogether. She stretched and raised her mind like an angry cobra its deadly hood. Hissing and heaving she lay prostrate on the floor waiting for the king. Dasharatha went to her room, as expected, in the evening to share the joy of his heart with the lady whom he loved most. He had no doubt that Kaikeyi had more love for Rama than she had for Bharata, her son.

But an old servant maid, Manthara, an ugly hunchback, had cast a totally different spell. She coaxed the queen, her mistress, on whom she had a personal claim. Yes, Manthara provoked Kaikeyi, induced and compelled her. She succeeded in pulling the queen's mind hither and thither by arguments, by appeals and portends, with thoughts of selfishness, of greed and jealousy undreamt of by the queen till that accursed hour. Smitten by Manthara's words the innocence of the queen gave place to intolerance, her beauty fell into ugliness. In place of love and rejoicing, she began to breathe out hate and affliction. Yes, her great heart bent grievously before the small counsel in front.

She emitted heat, her mind generated evil. She torpedoed mercilessly her lord, pierced his loving heart, made him fall under her feet begging and pleading.

An instant made all this change. A timely counsel coming from one, not an equal but one much inferior, given not to nobility but to utter stealth, to win an undue seat of honour in her mistress's heart, worked the whole witchcraft.

Song of the Soul

The unwary mind of the queen, like that of any other, was duped. It was filled with poison in place of nectar. Human nature displayed its worst when the best was due. Like a cradle it swung from this end to the extreme other. Kaikeyi did not know to remain firm and sober. Or she preferred not to. The lower nature of the human is the first to prevail every time. The higher shines, but concealed, often delayed. Its rays are more often dimmed by the thicker clouds hovering below.

The wind of true wisdom, of sound discrimination, *viveka*, has to be invoked to blow ceaselessly. Here comes the great duty of a thinking human, the role of a strong will, his timely ingenuity, the merit and worth of his ideal, the unique glory of his nature. He can perish in an instant. His lot is to turn the corner wisely, with care. The intense fervour of right feeling must be there. The heart must bubble with it; the mind should be made to float in its current. The intelligence should sharpen and exert itself brightly in time, not a moment late.

The son comes later. The husband is the first to come. Love for the husband must always precede. When the husband is, then alone can the son ever be. The arrival of the son cannot mean the departure of the husband. The son's growth is not to be, any time, the decline and fall of his father.

The real mother is a wife first, then alone a mother. When a mother, can she cease to be the wife? The wife and the mother should blend. Yes, the mother should fuse into the wife; the wife must dissolve into the mother, not to make either of them lose but to gain and preserve both joyfully.

Growth is expansion. It is the widening of what is. It implies the ability to contain more, accept more, to be in harmony with more, and more, ever so. To disclaim and dispossess, to refuse and dishearten is never its call, its aim or ideal. The true human's role is the search for this goal. His or her real effort is to know this, to accomplish this in truth. Life lived, however well and strongly, devoid of this call, bereft of this goal, is stale, anaemic, ugly and blameful!

Song of the Soul

Good has always to come from good. Love must be promoting love, not its opposite. If genuine, love will look to the comfort of the lover and the loved alike, in equal measure. In the preference of one, that of the other should not be lost. If loss befalls, then surely the preference becomes guilty. Preference, its quality, is judged by what it means, it causes in its wake.

To marry is not merely to live together. Alliance of a couple is sacred. It is fully sublime. Its notes are deep, impenetrable, always to be heard and preserved, never to be refused. Heard well they are sweet. Preserved strictly they are greatly rewarding. The best of its reward is love's own immortality. That is the celestial crowning of the earthly life, the ascent of humanhood to its divine dimension.

A noble couple will have to be in tune with each other even at all odds. Like a plug socket and the pin, like a nut and the bolt, each has to fit into the other's thoughts and decisions ably and well. The animals are unable to do this. They have no knowledge, no power to attempt it. But men and women have and they must also.

Kaikeyi, the marked queen of Dasharatha, had attempted it. She had succeeded too, but not till the last. The old Kaikeyi somehow changed the stand. The thought of her son, born of her own blood, suckled from her breasts, forged a cleave in her heart. In that cleave the father was made to sink and disappear. He was suddenly forgotten. The son alone was thought of, remembered. One half of his parentage died out in her vision. The other half alone shone lustrously. The moon's brilliance was overvalued and honoured. The source and cause of that brilliance, the brilliance-giver, the bigger Sun, was safely pushed aside!

The guileless mind of the queen lost its precious gift. It got instead its ugly opposite. Love must be followed by its own sweet friends. But here now it was served by its enemies, the dirty creations of a tempestuous mind. She begged of her lord. Her begging turned into insistence. Finally it grew in to a strong demand, an undeniable behest, not to be ignored even in part.

Song of the Soul

It was that “Rama should be sent to the forest for a long 14 years. Bharata, my dear son, should be made the king”, just these two. But to Dasaratha who could not bear to be separate from his dear Rama even for 14 hours, these two boons were verily like the blood in his body. To grant them was to give off his very life.

But Kaikeyi would hear no argument in reply. Total consent was her only object. Whom was she asking of? In front of her husband, what can stand in the way? Is not the wife ever the dearest to the husband? Must not he always give what the wife earnestly asks for? Thus thought her insistent mind, in one straight line.

The father in Dasharatha was called upon by Kaikeyi to crush his “fatherhood” all of a sudden. Yes, he had to crush his love, to quell his independence, to plug strongly the gentle ceaseless fountain of parental feelings of his heart preserved so long with fondness and hope, *all just in one single stroke*. He now tuned a mere husband, before whom lay the ‘pressing’ wife, the queen he loved and honoured most.

The stroke was eventful, even fatal. Dasharatha had no option.¹ He succumbed. But sentiments are always short-living. Their nature is erratic; their effects can only be unstable. They did not bring joy and elation as Kaikeyi perhaps thought. What they brought was gloom and destruction. The great event of rejoicing, of exhilaration, turned to be one of supreme torture and affliction. The fate swept not merely the palace and its inmates but the whole kingdom and its multitudes.

Young excels the old

Rama, still young, shone with his marked fidelity, his princely elegance and glow. His step-mother found in him perhaps a step-son. But Rama did not the least find in her a step-mother. To him, the mother was half the father. The father was the mother’s half, may be the lordly half. Yet both

¹ Dasharatha had earlier, when she saved him heroically in a crucial war, given Kaikeyi two boons to be sought by her any time.

Song of the Soul

were equal before him. For him joy reigned in the forest as much as in the palace. The promise of his father was equally his resolve. The demand of his step-mother was no less his full desire. His mission was to fulfill both at the same time. Dressed in barks, with locks matted, eating mere fruits and roots, he was determined to live in the woods as long as it was sought. No doubt rose in his mind. No sentiment could intercept his resolve!

The noble and elegant Sita, the soft and supple princess, his wife, took no time or deliberation to cast her lot with Rama, her lord. Lakshmana, the son of another queen of Dasharatha, had no two minds at all. He was determined as ever to follow the elder brother like a shadow wherever he went. The three together made a very good team, strong and resolved.

On the one side thus stood the wife of the father, much elder in age, experience and maturity, but ranged utterly against her lord's deep wishes. Just on the other waited another couple, their own son and daughter-in-law, tender in age, younger by experience but nevertheless full with harmony and wisdom to stand together despite any odds and ordeals. The young wife was fighting with her lord to follow him to the painful hazardous woods for a prolonged exile. One delighted in joining the husband and sharing his risky adventure, while the other gloated in disregarding the husband and crushing his rightful ambition. What a striking contrast!

The human is not born to eat and grow. That is the lot of animals. His greater goal is *to think and feel*. Yes, to grow in mind, in heart, in timely wisdom. The true growth is the growth of virtues, the real blessing for the mind and heart within the body. The growth of the body is only to help this inner growth. The cover of the football is designed to hold firmly the air inside and enable the player to play his game by beating it and earn his joy and victory.

Alas, the sky to be lit with splendour and rejoicing became suddenly overcast with the thick clouds of dismay and dejection. The whole palace and the kingdom were swept by gloom instead of being lit with revelry.

Song of the Soul

Kaikeyi won her aim, but only to find soon that she had really lost it. An action is done in a moment. A thought rises and dies very fast but its consequences do not. They will at times last too long, to be costly, strong and eventful. The men and women of earth, young as well as old, all have therefore to be very careful. If not, every one will be forced to repent, some times irretrievably.

Care and caution, kindness and consideration, love and fraternity can never be an excess. They only edify our mind and ennoble our heart, lead them higher and higher to peace and wisdom, to eternity and joy.

The mind's moment of orgasm passed off in Kaikeyi. Her fond wish was granted, nay snatched in a hurry mercilessly. But the next morning brought agony and gloom, not cheer and lustre as she expected. The whole palace and its inmates crumbled and yelled under the spell. It was so first with them, but surely last with Kaikeyi herself.

Beneath the temptation of evil surely lurks in every one the genial inspiration of good. The note of virtue must certainly override the greed for vice. The thief and the debaucher are under this law, as any other one nobler on earth. The unchaste or the immoral woman does host this note, as do their opposites among women. They may refuse to listen to it, but that cannot be for ever. Like the rains strongly prevented falling in torrents, their hearts too will be pierced and softened.

Loyal son, belying mother

Bharata, for whose sake his fond mother played the stealth was not in the palace. He at the time had gone to his uncle's palace along with Shatrughna, another brother. When he returned he was told of the news. He wept, sobbed, lamented and cursed his fate. His agony grew stronger the more he thought of what happened, what exactly was pressed for and demanded.

What, he thought, his beloved brother, the honoured noble prince of Ayodhya, to be dressed in barks like an ascetic, trekking in the thorny

Song of the Soul

woods? His graceful sister-in-law (Sita), a mother to him, is following her lord in the same manner and resolve? Lakshmana, another brother, also to follow them in full love and loyalty, determined to make their destiny also his? His heart nearly stopped. What was all this? He could not believe anything for some time. Divested of his most lovable brother, Sri Rama, the eldest son of his father, dearest to one and all, the palace of Ayodhya was for him verily a crematorium. Refused the company of his sister-in-law and brothers, life would be merely a stretch of dreariness and sorrow.

To add fuel to the fire was the thought of his mother, who he was told was the sole cause of this grave crisis. Could his mother be really so cruel and punishing? Will the thought of oneself be so much as to forget the existence of another altogether? Can the thought of the mother's blood in the son suppress the thought of the father's in him? Will human nature vie with one another to this notorious extreme? Can a mother think and design a gain for her son, to the dislike and pain of the son himself?

Is the mother of a noble son so ignoble? Was the thought of the moment so strong, so blinding, so invincible that the memory of the entire past and the concern for the long future, both were made to sink and dissolve? Where lies human goodness then? What conceals and controls it?

Bharata rushed to his mother almost mad and lost like a hunted bull. Was he, he wondered, born of her? Could Kaikeyi all of a sudden be so different from what she was earlier? Was she the one he knew, was bred by, till then from childhood? He was able to think no more, rely no more upon himself or the surroundings.

Kaikeyi also turned blue. Her heart, which had belied her earlier in front of her husband, belied her now also in front of her son. She wept and reeled, heaved and sobbed. But it was all late, too late. The error had been done, the slip had occurred. The fall was precipitated forever.

She snatched the kingdom from her powerful lord to enthrone her beloved son. But with that, the lord too was lost for her. Yes, she made him 'lost' for everybody. The kingdom snatched was snatched, but not given. Her son

Song of the Soul

did not want it, he would not take it. He wanted the throne, but to be seen adorned by his revered brother, who was to him like pupil to the eye. He found infinite joy in seeing Rama on the throne. In this all the rest he knew of in the palace, nay the whole kingdom shared his joy. And now he found his mother was the single, lonely exception to this fond wish, long cherished hope.

Like the food held in the beak of a crow snatched by another but which also dropped out of its hold, the graceful throne stood deserted. It was forced away from its owner, but was not yet possessed by the other. The one who stole it could not possess it. The one for whose sake it was taken did not want it too. From fullness it slipped into emptiness, an utter void. Lordless, it instantly became a full orphan.

The *mother* in Kaikeyi could go thus far, no further. She was a mother of Bharata, truly so. But she could show her motherhood only when he was young, too young to think, understand and decide for himself. With the milk suckled from her, eating the food given by her tender hands he grew, no doubt. Once he grew up like this, the real inner growth, the flowering of his personality began. His thoughts were not always akin to the mother's. The good of the mother he borrowed, invested in himself. He made it grow better, richer greater in every way. The bad, however, he was unable to borrow, he shunned it. In bad, his heredity suddenly stopped. He was determined to see it cease.

The mother gives birth to a son. Born of the mother, he does not 'always' remain the son. First he is, he should be. But gradually in time he must grow, become better and higher. Growing from sonhood, he must really become the 'mother'. Well, is not one born of the mother to rise to the status of a 'mother'? That is the true meaning of birth, its purpose and fruition. The 'mother' is the ideal everywhere, the mother who can *mother* one and all, alike, without being smitten by lowness or selfishness.

Bharata was till now a son, mostly so. But here now he suddenly grew himself up further. He had become the mother, not just a son. He had grown not from the bad to the good, but from good to its further heights,

Song of the Soul

greater magnitudes. The true mother in Kaikeyi should only be happy over it. Here was the moment to rejoice heartily, to feel immensely fulfilled, at the thought of having given birth to such a noble son. That hour alone can say whether she did so or not.

The great Bharata disclaimed the throne gained for him by his aspiring mother. The design and appeal of the mother was heard by his ears, it remained just in his blood. He did not take it to his heart. The folly of blood remained with the blood. The thought of the 'blood son' vitiated Kaikeyi, the mother. The 'blood mother' (thought of it) did not however contaminate Bharata, her son.

Is Nature ever shy? Does She really know to be shy? If she knows, She must have blushed bitterly then, getting the ugly touch of Kaikeyi, the most beautiful queen of Ayodhya! Has nature anything like prestige? If She has, she must have been lured by its thrill in the guileless but stubborn heart of Bharata!

A greedy selfish mother of this earth stood facing the graceful unselfish son of hers, each snaring at the other; unable to embrace one another, nevertheless incapacitated to break each other's shackles of fondness. The speechless exchange and communication that followed was to the utter dismay and bewilderment of both, but it was certainly to the supreme delight and fulfillment of the Creator, the Mysterious Grace which lurks in the biggest creation of earth as in the smallest. Who is to blame whom? Who can really praise and whom? Is not that which lurks in praise also the cause of that which courts the blame? Differences are there on the surface, but when you go deep to the core they die, become extinct, disabling you from differentiating and showing your preference and abhorrence.

The cosmic sequence

A river flows with its gentle and wide current spreading fertility to the soil, drenching the withering crops of the tiller. It is a grace and blessing no doubt. But the river does not only this, all the time. At times it swells. The current grows stronger. Its width and depth increase causing the banks to

Song of the Soul

break. Drowning the fruitful lands by flood. The gentle river turning suddenly powerful and cruel, its fruitful flow resulting in futility causes grief to many, and surely wonder to a few.

Is the river to be blamed? Ask yourselves. Is it the cause of its own flow which results in flood? The river is made by the drops which the clouds above cause and shed. River is an effect. Its cause are the clouds. The clouds alone decide whether the drops will be gentle and small or powerful and big, whether they will wet the dry land or flood the wet. Upon the earth both come to pass. The river is helpless. Its intentions are noble. Yet the opposite takes place, it is bound to.

The event occurs here, below. But its cause reigns clearly above. That occurring below has no voice over the one reigning above.

Ask the clouds of the sky. Their story is also similar. But the truth there is the reverse. What are they, they will say, but the drops the oceans below send high. Go to the ocean. Listen to its voice, its singular reply. 'I do nothing', it will say, 'I wish nothing. Neither is my role the cause nor the effect.' The ocean just remains where it is, in itself, by itself, for whose sake it does not know itself! Then do the rays of the sun fall on its surface. They heat its content into vapour. True the sun's rays do their part, but only heating. The heated water rises up not for its own reason, but for that of the sky, because of the air present above the water.

Go to air. And it will instantly relate its ignorance in the whole design and purpose. Its reign is there no doubt above the earth, but not everywhere. Go higher into the sky, it will say, and its sovereignty will be found to terminate. There in the yonder heights reigns *something*.

That is neither air, nor water, much less this earth we tread upon. It makes every one wonder with *its presence*, which resembles more the opposite (absence). The same mystic nothing, the one huge womb of everything, extends and permeates everything we see, hear and know.

Song of the Soul

It rises above the sun, beyond the moon and stars, above everything and all, visible as well as invisible, leaving man to his insatiable quest and supreme bewilderment.

The one result, the big fruition, the inevitable outcome found on this earth is only apparent, though strongly patent. This as well as that occurs here. The beautiful as does the ugly. The graceful as alike the graceless. The weak aside the strong, the thoughtful behind the thoughtless, the awakened against the ignorant, all have their place and display. This is so to provide *variety*, the much needed opposites for man to observe, to compare, thereby to conclude in the end, and then ultimately transcend his conclusion and seek entry into the truth Supreme, the Reality that is mysterious finding in it his unfailing anchor, the refuge of immortality, the wisdom that is matchless and unassailable.

As is the river so is *mankind*. It is this at times, that at other times. It is gentle now, grows powerful then. It can choose to be graceful, also become ugly and cruel. Yet each has its place, its purpose, which is sometimes evident, sometimes hidden. But fulfilling everything in the manner right and best for itself, though not in the manner one here or one there wishes or looks for.

The initial encounter of the mother and the son raged and died. In the speechless communication which followed, each spoke to the other even more, strongly too. One consoled oneself. The other confessed. One sought pardon. The other also. Giving and taking pardon, the hearts of both clasped each other in love but also in sorrow, blaming destiny, cursing for having come within its fold, nevertheless seeking correction and asking for redemption, looking fondly to the Creator with affection and sorrow, burdening His lot with the task of condoning and crowning His competing creation.

Bharata suppressed his upsurge. He checked his mind's struggle in pity and wrath. Turning to his mother, he said:

Song of the Soul

“The throne denied to my revered brother is denied to me also. Left by him, it is left by me too. That which deserts him stands deserted in my hands. His choice is at once mine as well. If woods are what he opted for, the same are my own abode. What is not there, I will not have here either.

“He is the one to walk first and lead. I am to follow him. He and I are to be together. Separation is not our lot. Dislike is not in our nature. We live to love and find joy in that love. Love denied is also life denied. With my brother away, my spirit in life is also away. He is dearer to me than my *prana*.

“Rama gone, our father’s life forces also went. Shall I allow mine too to follow my father’s? Or shall I myself follow my living brother? Surely death is not the answer for life, its agony. Life must find its answer within life itself, in living!

“Let me then trek to the woods. Let me tread the same thorny path my brother stepped and blessed by his holy feet.”

The alluring pen of Sage Valmiki flows abundantly, arresting and deluging the grateful reader at every stage. It describes the beauty of goodness, the charm of love, also the fight of both in the hands of their accursed opposites, but all to tell the reader and the listener the strong and commendable fetters of *brotherhood* and the brothers’ resolve to preserve it, strengthening it at every step. Here lies the sweetness of Ramayana.

To make the sweetness rich, to compel and induce man to seek and drink deep its elixir, the once afflicted poet who began his poetry as a redress for his distress, also provides the hunger of bitterness several times. Once the hunger is generated, the nectar will be found to trickle to appease it to profusion. First with the burning hunger, then with its rich appeasement, the human heart will stand graced, his soul filled to the core, to be radiant, shedding its cool light, revealing its own splendour and illumining those who seek and yearn for its grace.

Song of the Soul

Genesis of real history

The world (*Samsaara*) just exists and continues to be. It owes nothing to any one. It has no obligation to fulfill. No duty to honour. No calling to abide by. It obeys no command either from below or from above. The below and above are its parts, by comparison, like the legs and hands in our body. The parts are to listen to the body, not the body to their voice.

None within the world has a sway over it. No one can hope for it. The world stands free, sovereign to turn to the left and to the right, upside down and also the reverse. One born in it is to look to the front and back, to remember the past and to look for the future, but certainly by *facing the present* at all times. He has no choice but to be in the present patiently, become a full part of it, flow along its current wherever it will take, holding on to it fast every time ceaselessly.

With ‘acceptance’ placed at the back, he must look squarely to the ‘reception’ waiting in the front. With facts before him duly recognized, he should proceed with all faith to resolve them, to live with them, to make his way ahead and be crowned with whatever will be in the end.

No recorded ‘*history*’ is complete in portraying the world of the entire past, in depicting the moderations and excesses which the *active life* on earth has brought into vogue. Many events and outcomes have been contrived by the elements of Nature like wind, fire and water, as by the massive earth itself. But the consequence has not always limited itself to them. The drastic changes wrought by Time have often had their queer connections with the sentient creations who have struggled to exist and aspired to flourish on earth.

Many species have, allured by the Natural laws of instincts and the need for self-preservation, multiplied beyond the measure of sustenance and consequently perished at a time. Even in the ken of mankind, notoriety similar and worse have trampled their fates. They were perpetrated by will as had also resulted from chance. Unchecked tendencies to compete and fight have climaxed in the perpetuation of even severer cruelties.

Song of the Soul

When mankind swelled in number, a hierarchy of leaders were ushered in. It then extended by the law of birth and heredity. The place and worth of rulership, which must always depend upon the intrinsic moral and royal merits of the ruler, lost their influence and command in actual practice. The earth and its water combined with the social climate raging above them, turned the kings into despots. Their untold leisure and indulgence, inflamed often by the poisonous counsels of pet insidious advisers, literally gambled with the fortunes of the palace as of the people, who neither approved of what their ruler did nor had any voice to register their protests and rights. This has caused powerful dynasties to perish. Herds of people were massacred, not uncommonly, huge populations have been liquidated by the mere whims of despots, as by the singular vagaries of Nature.

Look around and think, look further and reflect, learn more and then judge patiently. You will find many many trends within this heterogeneous world by which the most edifying phenomena have been brought, equally the most demeaning atrocities perpetrated. At the same time there are instances of vying kings resolving suddenly at the end of a heroic fight to lay down their sword forever, in a life-long vow of gentleness and non-harming. Bound strongly by it like a docile dog by the chord of supreme fidelity before its master, they stood committed to the innocent call of truth, determined to preserve peace and promote love and fraternity. This too is there among the calculable contributions of this ageless world.

With the march of time the graceful kings too returned, as did their adverse predecessors, to the inner chambers of the earth they ruled and lived on, to be stepped over by posterity with a memory fond as well as hateful. The power of hereditary rulers then became at one point a helpless prey to the strength of the once-weak-subjects. The ruler was disarmed in friendship or overthrown by a strong army, was dispossessed of his right and fortunes by those whom he ruled once by his singular will and whims. All this happened not because the rulers wished for it or the ruled subjects cast a heavenly magic on their lords!

There is history to record the seen events leading to such drastic turns and their apparent order. But at the back of everything, there reigns clearly the

Song of the Soul

invisible trends designed and derived by the inexorable laws of Nature, the laws which make the huge planets look stationary but revolve steadily, equally so the still subtler laws which operate and govern the invisible yet individual minds of the intelligent vertebrates.

Yes, man thinks and works. Many like him do so. Some think in this direction. Some others do so in another direction. One first agrees with the others. He then argues the cause on their behalf. That makes him their great leader. The others start following him. Yet some others choose to remain apart. From indifference they sometimes shoot up in strong resistance. The feeble disagreement turns fierce and stands in full revolt, inducing both parties to win and crush one another. Like the teams in the game, single and plural lives are played with as is the football on the grounds. Societies are staked. Even countries are sometimes thrown as baits. And all this takes place through individual moves, aspirations, even despotic designs. Now and then also by common poll and the option of majority.

Whatever be the mode of development, it takes place clearly due to the self-denying as well as self-preserving gross and subtle laws of Nature, the laws which govern the mute and sentient creations whether they want them or not. In these creations are included their superb specimen, the rational mankind, who have the power and choice to live and move elegantly with impartial prudence but who by habit are more given to improper ambitions, misplaced partisanship than otherwise.

Yes, this is how the world reigns supreme and sovereign before us and we become submissive before it, now as ever before our times.

The 'full' history of the world is not what the usual historians will record as instances infused by Time into the manifest Earth, its own inseparable ally. It is the full portrayal of the ugly and beautiful probabilities which the insentient and sentient Nature, with the potential mankind placed on top, holds within its large womb, to be revealed gradually with the unfailing help of time, it's only contemporary. The history compiled on the basis of the visible developments the mute Elements and their magnificent Evolutes have undergone in the past, as reported by the *external observation* made

Song of the Soul

sitting in any given present, searching for the purpose the mere array of facts, avoiding any deeper search for the subtle dictates which compelled them, can at best only be a faithful imagery of the prudent and impudent mankind as related to a certain length of their life in the world. A mere study of the past will be sufficient to provide the key to open this reservoir of Time.

But the picturesque history of the multi-sharp human nature displayed and displayable in the world afforded by the planet we live on has to be born from the unfailing imagination of a comprehensive seer, the Epic type of writer. He alone is equipped with the power not merely to see what is seen but also to observe *keenly the unseen*. Yes, he has the ability to remain in the centre and with the help of the radius draw a full big circle, the expanse of the centre.

In drawing the circle, the centre will not move the least or slip. When the circle stands complete, the radius may further revolve but only to pass through the same course over and over again, ascending to make the first half of the figure and then declining to result in the second half. Yes, the whole process is thus one of ascent and descent alternately taking place as many times as it is attempted.

This is what the mystic Nature also accomplishes with the help of time not just in this world of earth, but in the universe of millions of similar planets and bodies. The true Seer therefore becomes a successful historian, one who renders the history of human efforts and experiences in the ceaseless world of Nature. He is led to success partly by Nature's own revelation before him, but more so by the role of *truthful imagination enacted within him*, possible to be witnessed not only by himself, but by many others like him when efficiently recorded.

That is what the celebrated thinker does when he is inspired to write at the sublime zenith of his observant and thoughtful life, motivated by a genuine love for mankind. Yes, he is also driven by an irresistible urge to help them in their moral and sentimental crises by awakening them to the great

Song of the Soul

strength lying hidden within themselves in order to withstand the plight and take them to their cherished destinations.

Mahabharata the great contrast

The world is not new any time. Every one finds it old, older, still older, nay the oldest thing he has known, can think of ever. Many before him have lived in it. Many have survived in their lives. Life was ever as it is now. The sun and moon are the same. The earth and water the least different.

The 'problems' life meant and found itself in, were always complex. Their complexity was broad like the sky, deep like oceans, mysterious like the space. It contained then, far earlier, what it still consists of now before us.

The bond of graceful brotherhood, enduring affection is the unique but rare gift given to mankind. The epic of life, of its fate in the world, must no doubt speak of it in all elegance and strength. But the world has provided also a lot more. It means many other fates, some dismal and woeful, sometimes too strongly so.

The woeful plight, the adverse fate, the hard task of meeting it and leading oneself safely to where its opposite (the graceful fate) also will, to win the same blessing and fruition which the lucky and fortunate lot attains, this is the complex but august theme Sage Vyasa, the author, has chosen for Mahabharata. The lasting lessons, the ones to console and redeem mankind, will not be complete without the message of this Great Poet and Sage.

Man is seldom blessed with the fortunes he always aspires for. He often confronts what he detests and likes to avoid. Many of mankind is made to face adversaries not friends, adversity not so much prosperity. By this, man is more baffled than consoled.

His friends become no problem, no challenge, no great task or ordeal. But the enemies make his life hard, sometimes hazardous and painful. Their challenge is at times chronic. In the hands of friendship growth is easy but

Song of the Soul

not much. Against the enemies it is hard, can be harder, variously so. But the mind is then made to think, bring forth its best. Patience will get tried, fortitude tested, wisdom challenged, the soul contended worst. All together it is a great mountaineering. The inner qualities, the deeper and the higher ones, alone can face such a task, take it ahead, seek and gain success.

The true spiritual struggle consists in this: in living hard, in meeting and dissolving the chronic deterrents, in accepting the perpetual disharmony, in making it successfully the opposite, to become one with it and triumph gloriously in the end.

The 'hard' is not really so. It is the one to make man's mind soft, and softer. The world when smooth and beautiful looks so and remains so for ever. Man just observes it with his eyes and enjoys what he finds in it effortlessly, in that he is effortless, though not idle. But he does no more than get lost in appearances, the mere surface of life. He remains the man, not man at his best, but at his worst. He is on a par with the animals and beasts, not the least more though not less.

To make him something more, higher, to compel him to grow, a plight and fate different are needed. In place of beauty and ease must rein their opposites. That world found ugly and hard is the one to stimulate thought, to cause abiding introspection, to demand and warrant growth. When appearances defy, then alone the reality will be sought earnestly, when the surface stinks, its bottom is searched. The stinking layers are agitated, cleared; the fragrant bottom stirred and brought up with struggle.

The process is not easy. It calls for endurance and skill, tenacity and keen discrimination. What is any intelligent man's mission, his object in life, except to express these with resolve and purpose? Of all the *loves* of man the one for wisdom, strength, for the unique joy which emerges from both these is the best, most covetable. That is the beautiful ornament to deck him enviably, making him worthy of emulation even by the enemies.

Blessed with 'the Ramayana way' are few in the world. Contended with "the Mahabharata one" are the many, in all ages.

Song of the Soul

Sage Vyasa's pen thus grew profound, elaborate, inspiring and also convincing, spelling caution alike hope, displaying deep sorrow but promising great joy, arraying fears but showing clearly their redress. On the whole his magic pen, its amazing celebrity, paints graphically with elegance, elevation, the complex but comprehensive picture of the confounding yet alluring world, in its midst the life of man, a unique mixture of ignorance and wisdom, of blessing and curse, of creatures below as well as creations above himself.

There is no sentiment or emotion, no height of wisdom or stroke of ignorance, no latitude, and no magnitude either inner or outer of the human which the poetic Sage has failed to encompass in his mystic but truthful and appealing lyrics. Love for lovers, hate for haters, jealousy for those sporting in it valour to stimulate the valorous, seeking for those who mean to seek, wisdom for its lovers and votaries, in short everything for one and all; in the end the promise and guidance for attaining salvation and winning immortality for those who yearn ardently for them, these are what the *greatest Epic of the world*, Mahabharata, contains and contemplates. Pregnant fully with these, it is ready to give birth to children in time for any individual seeker left childless in his dreary life, but wishing fervently to be delighted by one, if not more.

The ancient Kuru dynasty, the once-rulers of Bharat, India, is the central theme and story of Mahabharata. Their history and greatness, exploits and excesses, ventures and vicissitudes, benevolence as well as malevolence, in short their best and worst are the delighting production of the poet. He has delved deep and also soared high, struggled worst and also delighted most, nevertheless keeping his balance and harmony all through intact, blessed by the loftiness of his insight, inspired as well by his supreme love for the people who lived before him, who would live yet after him, who were also living with him at the time. Looking at those who were living, he found out the needs of those that lived and also envisaged the ones of those that would live afterwards. In the pointed present stood revealed, as in a point, the whole expanse of the circle, consisting of the two halves, past and future. That was the keenness of his perception, insight and inference. Before such a penetrating vision the mysterious world shed its mystery,

Song of the Soul

stood naked exposing its beauty in some parts and ugliness in some others, until its wholeness, transcending both attraction and repulsion, was rightly revealed and properly sensed.

Yes the poet first lived his long and undulating life. Constantly he thought. Gradually he knew and finally he became what he was, to deserve rightly the role he chose and exulted in. The Sage has spoken of himself. He is ugly to look, he says, like a dirty pond. But he shone like the lotus in its waters. Asceticism was his merit. He gained it by nature as by choice. Knowledge was his only occupation. He did everything for wisdom, to enhance and fulfill it, he will speak only the *truth*, he says. But his method was fiction. That fiction is then fact concealed, truth personified. By that he wished to serve the erudite as also the novice. Fiction was the sugar he added to the pudding of truth to make it sweet and delicious, to be licked and sipped with taste slowly.

The thoughts and content of his works filled his heart. His mind grew heavy. His imagination became pregnant. The foetus swelled and was ready to come out. But the Sage could not do the delivery alone. He wished for one to assist him. The right assistant came (Lord Ganesha). The writer sat in front. Hearing the thoughts from the mouth, he rendered them efficiently to leaf.² The large ears of the writer together with his able hands, then the great mouth of the poet with the pregnant imagination behind it, both excelled in unison, flourished and progressed. Thus emerged the great Epic we hear and speak of.

² In those days writing was done on dry leaves, like the palm, with a stout steel pencil.

Song of the Soul

Ascent and descent of the Kurus

The Kuru dynasty was great. In it lived many men holy and ascetic, wise and heroic; also many women meek and pious, loyal and fervent. They graced their family, blessed their race, making them strong and sublime, revered and reputed.

But Time is a higher force, a greater power. In its current anything will come, anything will go. Itself alone remains eternal, conquering but not conquered, making but never made, questioned often but only to be accepted and honoured. Time worked its myth and magic on the Kurus, as on any other. The descendants yielded. Their decline began, but not all really fell.

Any greatness to endure has to be preserved with vigour. An example is strong if strongly followed. It can *live* only when lived with fidelity and fervour. It is a constant prey to slackness. Like a stone thrown up by our hand, when the momentum given dies it will stop and fall. If not preserved with perseverance, it will perish. Like any other power strength also gets corrupted.

The task of the strong is thus great, sublime and ceaseless. *Virtue does not grow like moth and weeds*. It has to be nourished and reared with care, like the costly fruitful plants, like the valuable human babes.

Many of the Kurus ignored this basic truth, neglected this law. In place of goodness and its strength, they bred vice and its venom. Many around them liked their ways. Honouring and complimenting liberally they shared and followed their thought. The vicious gloated in their *number*. To them number was the symbol of power and achievement.

The history started to change. The glorious fate of heavens was displaced. That of hell loomed large instead. Yet the vicious persisted in their activities. Selfishness and greed reigned in them, ruled their hearts and minds. Courtiers and counsellors flocked to them to administer vigour and

Song of the Soul

fillip. They revived the spirits whenever they threatened to sink or wane. Yes, is this not the way of mankind today and ever?

But all were not of the same kind. The strongest law also has its exception. That is why the world survives at all times. Nature has always provided for wonders as well as freaks. Some in the Kurus preferred to be good. For them their heredity was hallowed. They loved it beyond themselves. They found strength and joy in preserving it till the last at any cost.

As they inherited, so they wished to bequeath also. Yes, any place in the length of the river does that. It receives the flow from the top and transmits it down. To receive must be to give. Receipt is wrong unless it is followed by disbursement as well. He alone who receives and then gives also equally can hold himself strong. In him alone is found a constant balance, the real harmony. He incorporates the hidden strength to shield him against the world's challenges, against all it creates and thrusts upon. He is the wise man who changes his mortality to its opposite, transiting cleverly from the transient to anchor himself in transcendence for ever.

Bhishma was the one noble grandfather under whom grew both the sets of brothers right from birth—one group consisting of the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra, the blind king, the other comprising the five sons of Pandu, the blind king's step-brother, the first group to be dimmed pitifully and the other to shine enviably, both nonetheless to be the living examples for mankind of all times. The greatness of Bhishma found it a great trial and hazard to remain *impartial* in himself, letting each group do what they were determined to and meet what inevitably followed as a result, however advising both constantly as to the merit and demerit of what they thought, did and were destined for. It was an unusual role for any great man to play. But ours is a land whose culture and wisdom know neither fear nor fall, holding within them the power to preserve greatness unalloyed even when placed in the most adverse circumstances. This is the lesson we are going to see and learn in the Gospel Sri Krishna preached to Arjuna, when Arjuna faced the hardest moral and mental crisis of his life. Sage Vyasa has excelled in providing a fitting prelude to enact the most *crucial scene* in the drama recorded by his marvellous writer in front.

Song of the Soul

To play the transcendental role, to be present constantly in the middle without swinging to this side or that, the Grandfather had to be really 'grand'. Yes, he was grand in his grandeur, great in his greatness. His insight was penetrating, his inspiration taintless. His love supreme, vision widest and faultless, there is no wonder his strength remained unshakeable. With honesty coupled with prowess, loyalty anchored in truth, affection untouched by stealth or partiality he held to himself firmly, his wisdom and vision helping and guiding him when depressed or assaulted. Naturally pain got transmuted in him to pleasure, the apparent wrong became the supreme truth, baffling the thinkers no doubt, but beckoning surely the better of them to the unfailing supreme abode hidden right within the human mortal, as within the centre of the universe.

As is Krishna adored, so is Bhishma celebrated. Krishna too had the best of regard for Bhishma. Sri Krishna set a promise before Arjuna 'I will not wield any weapon in the war, nor fight'. Apparently it reached the Grandfather's ears, and he instantly retorted "I will make him break his promise". And it did happen!

Sri Krishna was one who took pleasure in getting defeated in the hands of his devotee or admirer. To the real devotee, the one to whom he is devoted is the greatest, most adorable. But to that One, the devotee is equally great, even greater than Himself. To honour those who honour is the sure call of the honoured. In its absence, the honoured loses all his honour the honouring and stands to gain, to shine with greater glory.

The virtue that makes man virtuous is the real *master and lord*. The virtuous has to be constantly awake to this truth. One moment of neglect, of forgetfulness, can bring to him grave loss, sometimes irretrievable. He may even slip to become a full opposite of what he eagerly aims at. Yes, from elevation the slip is often easy, very fast. To elevation the climb is ever hard, also long.

The seed of greatness sprouted in Bhishma quite early in life. Its first symptom was visible at the best of his youth. It came up when it was most

Song of the Soul

unexpected. Even the bitterest of his enemies would not have wished him what happened then.

The cause was none but his own beloved father, Santanu. For any father his son is beloved to the core, often more so than his own wife. The belovedness takes root in the son much later than it does in the father. Between the two, the father and son, the father should excel, outshine the son. In practice also this is the truth in the history of the humans.

But with Santhanu and Bhishma, the reverse became true. It caused dismay to the father, disheartened him bitterly. But he could not find a way out. He had even wondered if he really wished to find out a way at all. It was a situation which plundered his heart, dislodged him from all his sound mooring. The elderliness in him stood displaced by a rush of impulses that sprouted suddenly.

What is this mystery, this stealthy stroke undreamt till then, he thought and rethought, yet it brought him pleasantness, held out beams of love which basked him in warmth and delight. He could not afford to be dishonest with himself. He failed in avoiding the detestable, in containing what was to be contained strictly. Yet the failure held out a fond promise, which he wished to strengthen and pursue at any cost, although it meant inflicting humiliation upon himself and torture on his dear ones, giving joy if at all only to one or at best two.

Hunting king trapped in love

Santanu went hunting. He saw many things, birds, animals, reptiles, a host of other lovely creatures, all the grand gift of creation. Many he did not notice. Some he killed mercilessly. He had gone to kill. He did the killings to his content and fullness. He walked on with his retinue gallantly, gloating over his success.

Suddenly thrust a sight upon his eyes. A *human beast* quite young in age, graced with the best work of Nature in her face and looks, telling him by her gait ‘ I am the proud girl of my father, an object to be wooed by the hot

Song of the Soul

human blood, but hard, if not hardly, won by any'. The king's heart throbbed fast sending waves of pleasant agitation from head to foot. The heat of his body heated the air around passing a clear message to those around, making them feel its strong magnetic potency.

From success to defeat he crumbled instantly. From poise to pain he passed. It was a fall and a pain, but which still held the hope of something thrilling and joyous within them. He rejoiced over it but not without despondency. He loved it, but surely with fear. He honoured it but with apprehension and resistance. The fate was not sure in its approach. It even looked denied, stagnant and stultified.

A gift given in reward pleases the giver as it does the taker. But if sought in leisure or in duress, it becomes suddenly a load. It will turn a tax, a burden, aching the seeker and priding the giver. Its fate and colour will change in an instant.

Santanu sought the girl's hand shedding his shyness, seeking fruition of his fondness. The girl's father, a grey-haired fisherman, heard the royal appeal. He alone was the judge for him. He had looked earlier to the king, thought of his supreme power and glory with fear, seeking their grace upon him. But all that was until this hour. But now the man in front was not the emperor but a weak beggar. A beggar of alms has his own right of freedom. He can freely go to the next door if refused in this. That makes him strong and selective even in front of those before whom he puts out his arms.

But the lot of a beggar of love is far different. It is deplorable. Weak and uncertain, it lies as a mere plaything to be kicked, shuffled or scorned, if necessary refused altogether by the giver or even by any of his elders. Until the prize is won, its guardians are its lords. The father heard the king's solemn appeal. He felt proud of the prospective alliance, for he had wished for something like this for his daughter as an astrologer once predicted and the girl's own mettle rightly deserved. Yes, Santanu was the right choice to bless his daughter as also to pamper his own ego. But when the moment really sprang up he did not readily agree. There was hesitation in his earthy

Song of the Soul

mind, though it was not without strong reason. With a confidence steeped in forethought, a courage anchored in timely insight, he consented in a way, but adding just one condition for the king to fulfill.

It was ‘the son born to you, O king, of this alliance should inherit your throne. Without this wish granted, her fate raised now to the heavens by your grace will be forced to fall to the deepest hells later. O noble king, neither I her father nor your noble self her husband may be there to redeem her plight then. If fortune blesses unduly in a moment but only to be cursed bitterly after a while, what wisdom is there in courting it at all? From the lofty position of a queen, this lovely daughter of mine will be pushed to that of a servant maid in the same palace!’

Santanu’s mind was struck down, as if by a sudden light. He was swept by strong love and passion no doubt, but had not been wiped off a fatherly heart.³ Passion grips man in place and out of place at times. But it cannot still make his mind die to his loving children. No it cannot happen. True, he was enslaved by his love for the beautiful girl. But he was equally powerless to fight against the fatherly feelings for Devavrata. But what of that to the man in front, the determined father of a promising daughter? As the king had his parental ties, he too has his, perhaps stronger than the king’s. In that they were equal. Both had equal claim. In the choice of matrimony the king and the fisherman both stood delighted. But in preserving their parenthood they utterly crossed with each other. Yet each had his rightful claim. The pleasure of the moment was immense, but now the pain it created was also acute. The king’s mouth did not open. His mind could not think for some time. Saddened and speechless, Santanu began to trek back the way he came.

He reached the palace. But everything suddenly changed gloomy and cheerless. His love was burning him. It scorched his heart. He concealed its flames. But the fumes however escaped and many in the palace noticed them too. He had left the fisherman’s hut and its inmates. But his spirits

³ Santanu, now a widower, had a son Devavrata born of his alliance with Ganga.

Song of the Soul

had not. They were still where that sweet maiden lived and moved. Yes, while yet living the king had verily become a ghost, to be haunting himself and many others around!

Yes, Santanu (*the bestower of peace to all*) was no more the king he so much was till then. In place of peace he began to dispense gloom and despondency. The grace of his looks disappeared. His grandeur looked mortgaged elsewhere. What was this, the ministers and the others wondered. They discussed and debated amongst themselves, but to no avail. At last the eldest of them approached the king in solitude to gain an entry into his inmost chambers. He was given the entry and the king confided to him with disappointment and a sense of shame but however not without a distinct hope, the hidden cause of his untold misery. With that his plight suddenly became the others' as well. But what was any one to do? What could the king himself do? It was a problem he created but the solution for which lay in someone else.

Devavrata noticed his father's plight. He went to him in all filial affection enquiring about its genuine cause. Santanu blushed before his loyal son. He tried hard to be reticent but he failed. As much as he wanted his affectionate son not to know about it, so much also did he feel compelled to acquaint him of it. Such was his pitiable urge, despite all the shame and pain it brought. So the powerful king turned powerless. In his desperate bid to be truthful, he was obliged to become dishonest. Yes, it was really so.

For, the honoured father said: "My dear son, how can I tell you my heart? My sorrow is about yourself, my son. You are powerful, heroic and matchless. You love sport and valour. In your insatiable heroism, what if you face an equal or stronger adversary and in his hands lose your life? Your valour will no doubt yet stand glorious, but by that our long lineage will stand suddenly terminated. Will not the Kuru dynasty turn a destitute, with you the only descendant dropping from the earth too soon? Ah, the Scriptures have said that a king with one son is denied religious merit besides full royal glory. I now seem to sense more worth in this statement of the wise. This, my dear son, is the thought which has led me to distress."

Song of the Soul

Devavrata heard Santanu but was not fully satisfied. There is something more, he thought, than what his father had just said. Surely the great king cannot suddenly become so low and dispirited. He felt unhappy that a loving father should reserve a delicate corner of his heart from the dear son. He went to the ministers, to the eldest among them at last. By pressing and persuading him, Devavrata came to sense the powerful orb of love which had risen in his father's inner horizon shedding both lustre and heat in full.

‘Only this much’, he exclaimed. ‘Too small a cause to drive my great father to such a pitiable plight. All right. The solution lies clearly with me and so I am relieved.’

He then started with the elders of the palace straightaway to the fisherman's hut, in which lived the proud father of the young girl who ruled the king's heart at the palace. The old man glowed a little more at the sight of the son standing in front for the same cause for which the father had come earlier. It held greater hope for him. What the father would still fail to give, here now the son could if he but wanted and had the timely wits and will to.

A brief and calculating talk followed. But the son's resolve defeated the expectations of the fisherman. Determined to win the girl's hand for his father, Santanu's son promised without doubt or reservation: ‘Yes, be it as you wish. The son born of your daughter to my father will be crowned as the king on the Kuru throne. Is your heart relieved? Does your fatherly ambition stand honoured?’

But the expected reply did not come. *The elder is always wiser, if not stronger.* The old father of the girl did not still nod his head in approbation. He looked heavy with something still bubbling in his mind. Devavrata persisted in his stand and questioned him further. At this the fisherman first complimented the prince. Praising sky-high his loyalty and devotion to his father, the sacrifice he so readily made for his cause, he added:

Song of the Soul

“Your resolve, O respected prince, is firm like rock. I have no cause for fear or doubt about it. The son of Santanu born of Ganga is capable of promising this and even more. But my fatherly heart is yet ruled by the sentiments of flesh. It is smitten by the powerful love for my daughter and the anxiety to safeguard her children’s welfare as well as her own.

“The scene now enacted between us here will not be ‘alive’ for those yet to be born in your family. What if they take up their own cause above that of my daughter’s children? If the sons born to you raise their claim to the throne, where shall my grandchildren and this daughter be? From the rising fortune of today, will she not be thrown to the mounting misfortunes of the day after? I am sorry to be so selfish and greedy in this. Even then before you, the great son of a great king, I have no cause for shame. Venerable sir, you alone can relieve me of the burden of my heart.”

Myopic vision of the mind

Alas, this is what the ‘wise’ fisherman had to say and demand as the full price for his daughter when the great king, the ruler of all people as of himself (the fisherman) went to him seeking the hand of his daughter and by that giving him a position and prestige which no father of his kind can hope to gain otherwise! In the myopia of his mind, the obstinate father could see only this far, no farther. Yes, the undue greed which thrust upon his heart obstructed him from seeing the long and distant, nay endless, futurity looming ahead of his daughter when married. For the myopic disorder of the eyes the opticians hold a remedy in glasses. But alas, what and who can cure the *selfish vision of a myopic* mind? Who can make the lenses for the mind’s defect? Where? How can the remedy be gained and the vision set right?

Is this the price, the right reward, a graceful father given to the thought of welfare of his loving daughter should seek to win while deciding so sweet and serene an event, her marriage? How can any parent ensure ample safeguard for his daughter’s future by wrenching so gruesome a prize which stands to split the generous heart of her own husband and make it

Song of the Soul

bleed? Where lies *the great humanhood* in comparison to this distressing plight so callously driven to by man's much professed thoughtfulness!

In the hurried thought of one's life, man's greed compels him to overlook the rewarding thoughts he owes to the lives of the others around him. With all these safeguards so cleverly sought, could the fisherman still make sure that his daughter and her progenies to come would be safe, prosperous and immortal?⁴

Alas, the ignorance of man is at times too deplorable, even murderous in the havoc it sometimes creates! It may or may not be *excused* in the unseen heavens above up, but it will surely not be here upon this seen earth where our own causes bring the effects we experience and the sufferings any time of mankind are traceable solely to themselves-yes, to man as an individual, to his predecessors and contemporaries, and by the same law to his successors as well.

When the royal heart innocently confessed its genuine love and sought a friendly fruition, shedding all prestige and courting full humiliation, it failed to evoke a rightful response. Yes, the right course for Satyavati's father (the fisherman) was to accept it and reciprocate with even greater honour and readiness, asking for neither promise nor stake. Where does greed or apprehension come in such a vital and valuable occasion? Is not his daughter of today going to be the queen of the palace tomorrow? And will not the queen and her loving lord decide between themselves what is best for them and their heirs?

The demand for promises and the urge for stakes succeeded, but only to make the sweet mission of pure love a bitter transaction in merchandise, as it takes place between a proud and stingy seller and the poor buyer before him. The notorious exploitation which rules rampantly the fate of industry and commerce was brought suddenly to ravage the gentle domain of an

⁴ Chitrangada and Vichitravirya were the two sons born to Shantanu of Satyavati. Both of them died childless making Shantanu's as well as Satyavati's lineage terminate for ever.

Song of the Soul

innocent heart, its natural compulsion for love and its fulfillment, a product which can neither be sold by the seller for a price nor bought by the buyer with his money. Whether he who makes a trade of it will prosper by his greedy sale, or he who buys it paying the high price stipulated will flourish in reality, the open book of the world and the valued history man's mind has written on it from generation to generation will alone reveal, today as have they done ever before.

However there is one supreme fact which remains infallible. A great heart must always be matched in a befitting manner with compatible and kindred souls. Whenever one's greatness seeks to be adorned in the hands of lowness, of those given to meanness of outlook, out of an unjust compulsion, a natural disharmony is bound to result. It is as much an undeniable law of Nature as are the other laws ruling mankind any time.

That alone is the best pursuit for a loving heart in which its love is not merely recognized for its worth but is also honoured and served to fulfill its needs with no undue thought or reservations. It is always wiser to search for a bond of full affinity and honour than fall a helpless victim to one which will fetch dissension and demands. The grand solemn journey of love is pleasant and promoting not alone when its destination is reached but also earlier, right from the time it is begun and pursued.

Matrimony in the human world is more protracted than what the animals and birds display. It should not be dictated by the mere accident of impulses or even by the detached and disconnected thoughts of one or two persons. The intelligent and emotional mankind has much more to think, understand and harness through their venture at marital alliance. *To make the marital fate the result of a sudden turn in a hurried sport of instincts is more to destroy its role and essence than to preserve it.* Much less should it be made a heavy load irksome to the affectionate minds of those rightly concerned with the welfare of their son and daughter.

In a sweet matrimony what must truly count are the hearts and minds, not the bodies. The event can be a meaningful choice made and shared equally by many around with approval, confidence and hope. Or rarely it may also

Song of the Soul

be a merited fruition coming after a long waiting of mutual love and agreement. A beautiful alliance holds in it the power to lift mankind from its pestered life on earth to the cherished sweetness promised to lurk in the heavens above.

Only when two loyal hearts meet lovingly without hindrance to begin a life of living union, fostering neither fear nor reservation, it promotes the new life by enriching it with the lingering sweetness born of love's own hidden nectar, by which their mortal spirits rise up and shine as immortal. By its very serenity and charm such a life fulfils all hopes, ruling out all expectations and fears.

To bring all the skill and craft and make the whole sublime mission a mere trade of bargain is to lower the basic human dignity. From a close alliance of two loving hearts, as of their relatives, it will suddenly become a mere trifling turnover of a common commodity made rare and then costly before some pressing buyers raged in greed or in severe distress.

But more often than not, these cherished ideals of mankind *stand disowned* and deserted by them. Turned into mere orphans they are obliged to ramble unseen underground. Given no other option they delight in haunting their votaries when they are in distress. Too bad, alas, but even then better than *full extinction*.

Also, the open life of man stands to shine more as a thorough negation of ideals than their healthy affirmation. He chooses more to serve himself than to serve them. Yet he gives them a proud place in his leisure. When hunger is appeased and time waits at his door unasked, ideals become the best occupation for any one. Tall claims are the richest food for an unjust leisure. But in actual life man writes the reverse story. When confronted by the needs of the hour, he begins to plead his helplessness, in full contrast than to struggle hard to maintain his ideal with zeal. It is bad, he knows. But he does not refrain from it.

This is hypocrisy, a common curse on humanhood. Yet it has always reigned a good friend of man and woman. It helps them when many other

Song of the Soul

helps fail. By the grace of this one quality man is empowered to hide with dignity verily anything he wants. It has the subtle ability to protect him in his moral treachery, his ethical murder and even the worst of *mental suicides*. True, the cry of moral conscience is strongly present. But still stronger are the defence and offence collected and arrayed by the sharp intelligence. If conscience can only be felt, intelligence is loudly heard. None therefore lacks in worldly sense and practical philosophy to defend his selfish and conceited motives.

If ever a person is defeated by propriety, he rescues himself with the greater power of traditional authority derived on the strength of age and longer experience. Yes, the old always cling to their undying fashion of frightening the young before them. It may be in place, not so also. It is an art with the old to take out from their soiled bag the frowning cat of elderliness, the advantage of having lived longer than their younger ones whenever their pet ideas are rightly questioned. It may be correct, but surely not at the cost of more vital thoughts wherever they are necessary.

Marriage, a cultured outlook

Matrimony is always a delicate subject before the cultured. The young do not discuss and debate it, especially in front of the elders. It is a fact that they lack the benefit of experience, which brings forth the right insight in any field of knowledge. The shy girl of our land therefore stands behind the door when the subject is brought home. Shyness is no doubt an ornament to a graceful woman. It contributes much to her feminine beauty. The sensible boy also prefers to leave the matrimonial arena to the elders without participating in the fight. By that he wants to preserve his instincts, adding to them more strength and charm.

Yes, in the lessons of propriety written by the sober mankind on sound human behavior, *respect for elders* runs into a long full chapter. By respect shown to the others does one derive it for himself. A quality you express freely alone will come back to you in its multiplied measure, from the others. The mind's unfailing law dictates man *to give* in order to be full. Give, lavishly, again and again, and then will you also be given,

Song of the Soul

extravagantly, more and more, for ever. Like the force of gravity the *mind attracts*, but by its worthy and deeper virtues, qualities. It is so in every sphere of human life and conduct.

By timely respect displayed before the elders, the minds of the young learn to bend, be more flexible. It is a quality which they need very badly but which they, by habit, lack and their young blood refuses to permit. By imbibing it, a basic virtue, many crimes can be averted, dangers warded off. A large measure of greatness and honour will no doubt be won *if the young strength is coupled with elderly grace*.

But this does not exempt the elders from their basic obligations to the young. The views of the young, their personal sentiments have always to be sought, heard and echoed in time by their elders. As for mental harmony it helps also in building up all lives. The need is more in the decisions of matrimony, a fateful event which concerns more the matrimonial delegates than their presidential leaders. If the elders are not wise and considerate in their discussions, enslaved by pride and embittered by selfish greed, the loss incurred will be colossal, the havoc caused long lasting.

Not all the elders are, in practice, wise enough to vindicate their role and fulfill the lives of the younger ones. Many girls of intelligence and integrity have turned helpless victims to the misplaced authority of their elders. Boys also are sometimes driven to suffer the ignominy which delights and prides their parents. Before the crimes *of bargain* inflicted by the elders are known clearly, the whole drama stands enacted. When the boy and girl, after their ceremonial alliance, meet and share the bitter precedents which led to the now-sweet fruition, their angry memory is forced to disappear in its graceful successor. Yes, the haste of the new sweetness rules over the recollection of the bitter past. By this usual concession in the hands of romance, these notorious social habits enjoy a liberal shade to breed unchecked.

With a host of contrasting trends closely at work, the society taken in general continues to be *a gloomy paradox*. In its scheme rarely is a sweet girl blessed with a lovely marriage to an affectionate husband by prudent

Song of the Soul

parents. Yes, *a graceful marriage is more a heavenly flower than an earthly tree*. Yet that does not rule out the unfailing law, the deeper moral, by which ‘deserving’ rewards are won by the devoted humans. To trace that hidden law, to fall in line with its unfailing moral sequence is the constant attempt we make here through every discussion and analysis.

Satyavati the sweet tender girl, perhaps had her distinct feelings, but she remained a witness. The crisis her father was obsessed with dwelt more in her mind than it did in her father’s. Yet, the cultural and domestic decorum demanded her determined silence. The whole game was played by the father alone, and he had made himself the only umpire. With his exuberant concern professed above his fearful greed, Satyavati stood lowered as a mere plaything as in actual play. But physical facts *do not always voice* the feelings of the heart. The heart’s pulsations are deeper, intricate. Unless expressed clearly by the heart’s own lord, they cannot be known or conveyed.

Thus even behind the most immoral social events sometimes is found to lurk a great moral elegance. Equally so the much professed moral excellences of people breed underneath the worst type of turpitude and treachery. The ‘confusion’ is worthy in itself, especially in the background of the corrupt and complex world which hosts and even compels it.

The young girl’s mind must surely have reflected the realities of her marriage and the life to follow as the Kuru Queen with even greater personal touch and loyalties. In her better sense therefore there was no room to debate whether Bhishma would stand to protect her interests like a son or not. But *prudence always demands patience*. And it did for the young Satyavati at that critical juncture.

Every father has his claim and right. The son or daughter *owes him his due* in the field of matrimony as in any other. The father’s steps may be improper by youthful standards. Yet they have their intrinsic moral stand. Morality cannot question to invalidate the basic human sentiments born even of attachment and affection. We become empowered to think of morality and ethics only after our birth and a certain growth. And that gives

Song of the Soul

enough place for the elders to have their basic human emotions and their rule, sometimes too strong, in every aspect of life. Are not the power and drive of emotions a vital part of the same Nature which encircles mankind, as any other being, everywhere we move and live?

Satyavati's loyalty to her affectionate father compelled her to remain silent. But Bhishma's to his tottering father impelled him to become 'eloquent'. The surrounding air got tense. It portended something grave to come. The heart of many who were around bet faster. They knew well that the demand before the prince was *nothing small*. Its consequences were tragic, long lasting, could even be eternal.

Had the fisherman the deep sense to comprehend them in their full gravity? If he had, his fatherly heart would have bent at least in some favour to Devavrata, *a son no doubt*, though of King Santanu, as it did in favour of Satyavati, his own daughter! Yes, this is the deeper direction which should beckon a nobler fatherly heart.

The wiser ones standing around did not fail to see where the powerful arrow was going to hit. And they shuddered at the sight. But none of them was able to speak, being fried between the strong sentiments for their king and the loving concern for the king's own son. Yes, it happens so when the mind is pulled hither and also thither all at the same time. The son's undaunted heroism in winning the object his mind set itself on firmly, also stood in the way of their reproach.

Yes, it was an unprecedented scene where the *old stood mute before the young*. The greed of a father stood humbled before the magnanimous heart of a son. The prosperity of the future stood uprooted by the anxiety of the present. The excessive intrusion of a father in his daughter's life with demands which were to become relevant only after years to come destroyed the very purpose he had so proudly attempted.

Yes, all this happened when a *ruled citizen* suddenly rose up with undue dignity to rule over the king and through him his powerful throne. He did so not on the strength of might but on the ground of *a right* he came to

Song of the Soul

possess when his young daughter by her looks unleashed a revolt of passions in the mind of the king. It was a notorious instance where the bodily desire, the sensory allurements, of a great king turned to be a strong weakness squeezing him to yield concessions against his own will thereby causing mortgages which the wide world will not at any time uphold.

A Grand vow of an young Prince

The sweet episode of love thus suddenly stood bitter bellowing an altogether foul air of suspense and tremour. Yes, it was a startling transition by all standards, defying both reason and sentiments alike. From the sporadic urge aroused by passion it swerved cleverly, to emerge ultimately as a *threatening resolve of a resolute will*. Lit thoughtlessly in haste by the king and blown carefully with tact by the fisherman, the fire rose up in flames spreading to where the strong-willed prince stood, to be brought down and finally extinguished by the water he poured single-handedly.

Yes, it was no doubt a perilous development. The king rushed to it in no time. The fisherman also led it shrewdly with forethought. But defying them both, here now it stood sternly in front of another, the young Kuru prince, challenging his wit and also will. Yes, it was Devavrata, the only royal son of the King, in whom lay the power to face and further its insidious trend. The question before him was clear, though deadening. Either he must rise up to appease the fisherman's unrest and fulfill his own father's need of love, or he should get down to terminate the complex task eagerly begun by both but deplorably left in the middle, burying it in its own haunting grave. Verily it made the faithful son come right in between his own anxious father and the persistent fisherman, to be kept there suppressed within himself but resigned gloriously to his own unremitting neutrality. Is it not too unenviable a role for any son of the world!

To *contain within him* two strong elders, ranged in joyful agreement about their common cause but landed in painful disagreement about the manner of furthering it, to *serve them alike* and complete the irksome task which

Song of the Soul

they both proudly began but are now made powerless to pursue, this is what the determined prince had to accomplish by his heroic heredity.

Ah, what a perplexing scene, rewarding though no doubt! Can there be anything more tragic, more nerve-breaking? Is there a worse cruelty a more imposing penalty which Nature can design above and drop below upon Her resentful creation, through the swinging and swerving human mind? Yes, the answer, as is the question, must lie with every one!

One assurance Devavrata had already given to the fisherman. By that it was clear that the son born to his father in the new alliance would be crowned as the king of the Kurus. It is no small sacrifice on the part of the prince who was the righteous heir to the throne. But to the fisherman, his greedy fearful mind, it looked too inadequate. If the girl's father prided in his parental claim, the prince glowed all the more with his unstinted filial love and loyalty. Who of the two was then greater? Perhaps some in the intelligent assembly murmured an answer to themselves. Sage Vyasa certainly makes his answer clear throughout the narrative. It is an answer which he desires every sober human to uphold for himself throughout his life. That is how the legend of the past teaches the generation of the present.

The spirit of sacrifice which made Devavrata speak earlier made him speak now also before the fisherman, the father of the girl whose hand the King so earnestly sought. Dazzling all the more with his characteristic heroism coupled with filial concern, the son of Santanu opened his mouth in full eloquence throwing aboard the minds and feelings of all those present before him, to the wonderment of the apprehensive fisherman father. His words, as they came out of the mouth, shook the earth but to the applause of the heavens above, to be adored by the whole mankind, to be remembered with exclamation by the endless generations to come. Yes, the loving and valorous son *declared thunderously* for the sake of his loving but enfeebled father the following words:

“Here, standing before this august assembly of elders, do I, the son born to Santanu, the illustrious noble king of the Kurus, of Ganga, the great and

Song of the Soul

holy, declare to the listening of one and all as also of myself, that *I shall not marry till the last*. I will not have a child born to me in this life. Here now I take the vow of ENDLESS BRAHMACHARYA.”

The dream of the fisherman instantly came down as a shocking reality. His wits were strong when he stipulated his demands. But now in this startling moment he realized something more, too deep and stupefying. He felt *moved* beyond all limits. Yes, he thought, it is no more a whim of romance or an auctioneering on female youth but a flood of Truth that fell fiercely upon him. In its gush and glitter the fisherman’s mind stood blinded. The grey-haired body literally drooped with mixed feelings burning his inside. His inner spirit almost sank to a depth unfelt by him earlier.

Alas, the prince standing before him till that moment was a stranger, to be spoken to sternly in terms of full bargain. But suddenly he now stands fully different! With his vow declared and heard he has made himself a glorious *grandson of the fisherman*. Yes, he became the son of his son-in-law, the step-son of his beloved daughter. Ah, he is no more a rival, nor a beggar, but a benefactor and descendant of the royal family to which the fisher-girl now stands married, of which she at one stroke has become the proud, unrivalled Queen. Yes, that was what the prince had made her with his terrible oath. This sight in front of his mind made the girl’s father weaker, tremble with untold emotions working against one another. His mind began to whirl, his heart palpitating with the magic touch of a new note of affection. His mouth driven dry in shyness and repentance, the old fisherman’s imagination crossed with that of the youthful prince, muttering to itself loudly, though unheard by all:

“HERE STAND I, struggling pitiously to safeguard my daughter and her progeny to come. But there in front stands a son, not a father, determined equally but to fulfill his father’s life, to quench a strong thirst of his weak mind. Who of us is the dutiful? Whose, of the two, is the *real human concern* rewardable here upon this perishing earth and there in the imperishable heavens?

Song of the Soul

Anyway, I sought a promise and pressed heavily for it. What I sought is also now given ungrudgingly. Let now come what will its way, or as a sure consequence. I am but a mortal. And I have behaved like one. Here in my front is another, equally a mortal, but behaving *not like one*, but as one much higher and nobler.

His is perhaps *the other way*, an ideal one; the real human must love supreme and struggle hard to live.

The born will die. The merited will be rewarded. The demerited cannot be. Each shall surely get that which he rightly deserves.

Let me be where I deserve to be. May this noble young one be where he is rightly due. We shall no doubt meet again, though unknown, if not here surely there, in the yonder unseen heights, in the interminable futurity which awaits all when the life on this planet terminates; where distinctions suddenly cease and no promise need therefore be sought or given, nor any stakes made or won; where all will alike remain lost in their pristine oneness, filled with true glory, lulled into full silence; emptied by nothing, to be vied with by none; if at all only to be wooed by one and all”

Yes, it was an *eventful moment* in the history of the earth, in the grandeur of its mankind. The fateful promise, at which even the unseen heavens had to come out of their hiding to acclaim loudly the glorious prince, shook everyone present. It was a momentous promise, an astonishing resolve, by which Devavrata made *a life-long denial of romance as also royalty*. It made him known from that time as Bhishma, signifying the magnificence and depth of the vow he undertook.

The blooming prince, like any other of his age, was standing ready in the enchanting lake of youth to enjoy the delights of swimming, diving and sport in its waters. But now by a single resolve made in an instant he refused to swim, dive and sport but decided to remain gently afloat, preventing himself however from sinking. Yes, by one full stroke he refused all his youthful romance only to afford it in full to his ageing but young-blooded father.

Song of the Soul

Yes, it really happened. Love denied love⁵ Love protected love⁶. It refused itself mercilessly in one to afford itself richly in another. It deserted one fully to favour another liberally. No wonder. For that is how it plays its deceitful game, pleasing itself but not pleasing any one in the world.

When the rule of the world, of mankind in general, was crippled to protect and preserve its own purpose, Nature suddenly devised a singular exception by which the crisis could be met. Yes, without the exceptional Bhishma, neither would Santanu have succeeded in his *stakeful ambition* nor could the fisherman have won his *ghastly assurance*. An unnerving question was met with a baffling answer. A strong sentiment (fear) of one which caused a great havoc to another's (love) was appeased by a greater emotion of the same human blood. A perplexing match, a rewarding contrast!

In the strange war of love that was waged, the young Bhishma stood to gain the most. To pronounce the healthy human life as fit only for gaining the thrills of romance is to condemn it and lower its potential status. Remember, this is a land where the wisest and noblest people, old as also the young, lived holding before them, right from the earliest of times, a value and ideal much loftier and enriching. The nectar afforded by the inward soul is for them far superior to the tickling delights presented by the flesh. Many in every generation have demonstrated this sublime truth, as do some now also. Before us is present the standing call that man's real promotion in his life here is when he is able to rise from the mere temptations of flesh to the serenity and joy pointed to by the soul. For this, even a curse is welcome if the blessings fail. The earlier he makes the decision the better, if not through a life at home, even by the pursuit of asceticism.

Viewed in the background of such an honoured vision, Bhishma was the only soul blessed by this memorable episode. To the others it was a kind of

⁵ Santanu's love for Satyavati denied the son his right for a similar cause.

⁶ Devavrata's love to his father enabled Santanu to gain Satyavati.

Song of the Soul

fall. Yes, this is how passion's greed sucks in stealth its strong upholder and love's grace patiently blesses its noble votaries.

Bhishma turned back to the palace with the royal followers accompanied by the fisherman's daughter, who had now been pronounced the *Queen of the Kuru palace* by the King's son. He went straight to his father with a lit face and a bubbling heart having gained for him what he (the father) had himself failed to win. Yes, Satyawati had been made by Bhishma his adored stepmother even before his father, the king, had himself known her as his wife and queen. No wonder. It happens so often between the supreme Truth and its sublime votary. If an ardent seeker suddenly faces a dire need but compelled by his noble mind starts debating upon it, the object sought is meanwhile brought easily before him by the unseen laws of Goodness Gracious. The Knower of Truth or the Great Devotee of God is the only seen replica of the Unseen Almighty. Yes, Bhishma the loftiest devotee of Truth, the upholder of Wisdom, naturally behaved like Truth itself personified.

Santanu's awkward position can be imagined. He blushed deeply when he was rightly to rejoice. He had now before him the one whom his heart so much missed till then, but alas, with that he had also to lose what he would never have willed to part with.⁷ Ah the whole event is then already over! So the debate of his mind was put aside. Delightful gratitude overwhelmed him. The father, thrilled and overcome by the timely heroism and compassion of his son, however blessed him heartily with a boon as great and unsurpassable as the vow the son had undertaken an hour earlier. 'My dear son' the king said, 'I give you the power of willful death, of choice in departing from the world. Death shall not touch you except when you want it and allow it to come near'.

Bhishma thus became even greater by the Grace of his father. It was this boon of the father that came to him gloriously when he lay in the battlefield flirting with death in the bed of arrows, withholding his sanction to the

⁷ Santanu had no thought or strength to deny his dear son Bhishma and his further descendants the throne he held as the Kuru king.

Song of the Soul

God of Destruction to take away his life. Yes, the Grandfather would not have fallen in the war if he himself had not willed it so and then advised the grandson how the fate was to be brought.

Cruelty hissing at gentleness

Duryodhana was the eldest of the one hundred sons of Dhritarashtra. Yudhishtira topped the five sons of Pandu.

The hundred as well as the five, descendants of the one Kuru family, lived in the same palace. They were brought up well, trained well, taught all the royal skills and also the religious lore. Bhishma, the grandfather held their care. In time he got Drona, a Brahmin by birth but skilled in archery by learning and profession, an expert in this art, to teach the budding princes. Under Drona they learnt, flourished and began to shine.

True, the mother bears and shapes the children in her womb. But once they come out the influence changes. Birth marks *individuality*. It is the marked beginning of the life to be led upon earth, the life which is single, is exclusive in itself, which remains distinct from the rest. Any newborn will be different from the others. One can be alike another. But side by side he must be different also. To be alike does not mean to rule out all differences. Along with 'likeness', beneath and within it will lurk some difference, sometimes strong also.

The brothers, those born of the same blood and source, are no exception to this basic law. Though born of the same loins, suckling the same breasts, fed and reared by the same hands, they will still have their *heritage of difference*. The differences may remain minor. With their natures broadly falling in the same group, some may yet be higher and some lower in their ideals and pursuits. Like runners and jumpers in sports, some excelling the others in their performance and skill and the others closely following behind, they can still be *similar* in their basic group, but hold greater or lower positions.

Song of the Soul

But here, in the grandchildren of the great Bhishma, it was a case of thorough contrast. Pandu's sons made Yudhishtira, the eldest of them, their leader and guide. The younger four obeyed him *implicitly*. Yudhishtira was held in high esteem by all. His voice became theirs as well. His choice, their only decision. Among them there was no cause for dispute.

Their views were always good, their intentions noble, their ways commendable to all around. Each was ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of their common pursuit. If anyone was wrong or excessive in his behaviour, the others would correct him. With respect given and taken, they had no problem in containing their minds in times of test and torture. First and last, the *eldest* of them counted the most in determining all their affairs. Yudhishtira's wishes became their standard, the only yardstick, always. Thus amity and agreement were made easy to preserve.

Their only problem was the problem brought by their own virtue, mutual love and loyalty, the bond they had forged with righteousness, *dharma*, and the goal it pointed to constantly. Yes, to adhere to an ideal and be determined to preserve it at all times is never easy.

Duryodhana and the rest, the sons of Dhritarashtra differed from the Pandavas basically. Duryodhana was strong as a prince. In him with the *Kshatriya* valour also twinkled the power of greed, of marked jealousy, of unjust intolerance and hatred towards the Pandavas. His mind courted these traits right from the start. Like an angry cobra ranged before its enemy, Duryodhana could not sleep, could not rest. Day and night his mind was pestered by thoughts of hatred and intolerance aimed at the five brothers.

The Pandavas, growing under the same roof of the palace, fostered by the same guardians, were equal descendants entitled to the royal life, throne and property in the same manner as Duryodhana and his blood brothers.

Nature is quite soft when She is benevolent. But She can be too hard and obstinate when She turns unfriendly and teasing. Once Nature turns hard,

Song of the Soul

She delights in being so more and more, sometimes till the last. Who is there to stop Her from being so?

Duryodhana's jealousy and wickedness being his nature, the marked traits of his vicious mind, he relished sporting in them. He was determined to cling on to this behaviour and pursue it with all vigour and stealth every time.

How to ruin and destroy the Pandavas, his enemies, was the one thought and design that ruled him all the time. He wanted to be let free to rule *alone* and enjoy lavishly his life of power. He preached his gospel of enmity to his brothers and friends. He infected them all with his pet designs, sometimes pleading, sometimes thrusting, but always winning his stand somehow. The blind father enslaved by affection, followed him mostly. He did admonish his son at times; advise him to mend his ways. All that went in vain before the well-resolved Duryodhana. At last the father, not the son, had to yield out of affection.

Years and decades passed. The Pandava brothers excelled the Kauravas in all fields of learning and arts. Duryodhana also grew through the years. His wrath and enmity increased in magnitude. He designed plots, engaged counsellors, made friendship, all to destroy the five brothers or make them at least destitute by snatching their share of kingdom. His own prosperity, he felt, was inadequate to make him happy. Along with it he also wanted to see and hear the Pandavas live homeless and *wander* in earthly hells.

Yudhishtira as their head, the sons of Pandu remained patient and sober. They too had made a resolve. It was *to endure* whatever came their way and survive boldly, but with truth and righteousness. They were ready to make all sacrifices in their venture. Many times they would reach the limits. At least they felt so. Sometimes their pursuit of *dharma* looked very hopeless, almost dying. Were they to yield to the pressure, they would then wonder. But one of them would surely come forward to sound caution. And that brought them instantly to their own avowed stand, strong commitment. Their spirits would stand revived, their insights corrected and strengthened, their ideals pushed even further! And Yudhishtira was

Song of the Soul

always exemplarily great and reputed for his goodness, kindness and righteousness.

There was one person who always stood with Yudhishtira and his brothers as the Lord, friend, guide and protector. It was Sri Krishna. He was a God for the Pandavas, though they sought his presence, as from a human, for all their earthly purposes.

Every time when faced with bitter confrontation, Yudhishtira, committed to goodness, longed to yield to the opponents in order to escape hatred and fight. His brothers would often resent it. For them the *love for their elder* was great. But they feared his innocence which knew no limits. To foster the brother's love, at the same time to suffer the consequences of his excellent goodness and charity, both together proved an aching conflict before them. They struggled harder every time without admitting defeat.

The eventful wedding

Then came the 'decisive' event, which proved momentous, more and more so as the years rolled by. It was the winning of Draupadi's hand. She was a princess whom her father considered a great prize to be won by a *Kshatriya* of matchless valour. In a skillful bid to find the 'choicest' bridegroom, he announced the wedding and invited all who deserved to win with merit or witness with approbation, his daughter's *teasing* wedding. The father had dexterously designed a baffling target (a fish) kept revolving at lightning speed in a wheel fixed above the ceremonial platform. The eye of the fish was to be hit by a sharp arrow aimed from below but seeing the target by looking at its reflection on the elusive water in a pool below. It was an amazing feat no doubt. Look down but hit above. That too a revolving target spinning at dead speed!

What even then? A challenge designed by man's ingenuity has also to be met by a similar power, mostly of a greater standard. If great is a designer, greater still is the competitor he evokes. It is the same Hands that produce the one as well as the other. And so there came one to hit the mark precisely. It was Arjuna, the *hero* among the five brothers, who attended

Song of the Soul

the wedding ceremony at the bidding of a Saint who appeared timely to bless them. Yes, this was the *Kshatriya* whom the father of the girl had looked for secretly in his heart. And he was also the same charming prince; the glorious princess had already set her mind on. Thus destiny worked in superb collaboration! Or was it an enviable conspiracy of Hers? For Arjuna and the brothers were sitting disguised as simple Brahmins and it was impossible to detect them in the Assembly. So finally it turned out to be a thrilling offer, greatly held and grandly won, bringing joy to the offerer and the receiver alike.

But it was not an enchanting affair for ‘all’. The event proved depressive and painful to Duryodhana, for he was unable to rise up to the occasion. Also it was humiliating to Karna, whose hand the princess refused at the very sight, holding him unfit to attempt the feat because he was not a full-fledged *Kshatriya*. Karna thus emerged as Duryodhana’s closest friend and hero. Duryodhana’s jealousy rose up in flames, but it also made him shudder thinking, ‘What, is this the power and skill of those whom I want to liquidate? Will I succeed, or they?’ Karna’s mind too generated a new dimension of utter vengeance to the princess and therefore to Arjuna as well who had become her lord of pride. All this, yet another stroke of the Creator’s conspiracy!

The Pandava brothers were already crushed under it. It raised the question with even greater vigour. “What will one’s fate be, if many, not just one, turn against him pooling all their skill and will together?” This is the same question which any good and glorious man finds before him in every generation, may be with a slight difference in style or standard.

Draupadi was won by the single Arjuna by stint of his personal merit. But his mother Kunti to whom the glad news “a prize has been won by us’ was broken, said suddenly ‘let it be shared equally by all of you’. The daughter of King Drupada, Paanchaali, who was to become the wife of only one, was thus unusually made the *one equal wife* of five brothers. Yes, she was *five wives*, all in one, an astonishing stroke of fate indeed!

Song of the Soul

But it turned to be a great opportunity for the young girl. In the hidden sequence of Nature's contrivances it was quite in place and purpose. The 'woman' in Draupadi grew all the more by this perplexing incident. Equally the five lords of hers stood to be blessed by a single coordinator, one whom their *joint role* so desperately needed and looked for.

As for Draupadi she was strong, determined and sacrificing. Sparing no thought, word or deed to preserve and promote her husbands' welfare, she was ready to give, take and cause anything, fighting for prestige, demanding timely propriety, committed strongly to live and even to die in her resolve. Draupadi's nature increased in dimension by month and year, and later on by day and also hour. The stark enmity of Duryodhana added more form, color and splendor to this role of the great queen.

The same marriage which made Draupadi a full recipient of her husbands' joint love also rendered her a constant prey to the blazing vengeance of her lords' rivals. This was no fault of hers. It was in the sheer nature of things. Duryodhana and Karna excelled in searching her out constantly for retaliation. The memorable garland of her wedding brought fulfillment to her heart no doubt, but evoked untold irritation to the rivals. It was a singular event for her but with most conflicting consequences. Ever since the alliance, it was a complex role that awaited her everywhere. The more she glowed as the delighting partner of the Pandavas the worse she returned as the depressing sight of the Duryodhanas.

She had therefore to play a delicate risky role. In her mind she was called upon to foster with equal vigour two different sentiments opposed to one another but to be pursued concurrently. Yes, she had to nurture her unstinted love for her lords, at the same time safeguard that love against the blazing wrath of their rivals. Her womanhood was teased bitterly every time. Her goodness and nobility were thus compelled to shine in full complexity.

All put together made her role *great* as the wife of the 'powerful five'. Even the studious critics struggle hard to unearth its content and appreciate its worth.

Song of the Soul

It is no wonder. Exquisite beauty if made to align with a troublesome background, is harder to appreciate and baffling to evaluate. Yet it is beauty no doubt, and has its singular claim, though blended with blemish.

In pursuit of her unique goal, at times she provoked and teased her husbands. Now and then she opposed their stand. She often fought for her prestige as their wife, for their welfare as her lords, resenting unjust harmony, preventing excessive goodness and charity. The Pandavas were affront in every act, but the real power and cause behind was their single wife. Physically everything they did, but mentally she was the *prime mover*, the rational, loyal but worldly Draupadi.

Sage Vyasa has struck his best in working out the grand alliance of the great five with the ‘powerful’ one. By this he proved the dictum that *man first was, and then was born of him the woman*. The man and the woman combined alone becomes the ‘full’ human. The legs walk, the hands hold, but for the sake of body, as parts of it, to make the one whole called *body*.

Man and woman are two, but they are really one. Both in faithful alliances, in joint action, blending thought with emotion, alone constitute the *ripe humanhood* the world ever looks to as the ideal.

Draupadi filled the most vital gap for the sons of Pandu. But for her, the powerful brothers would have perished pitifully, abandoning their goal and failing to remove the society’s distress. Just a few feet off the destination their long journey led with vigour would have ended in a whimper. Providence knew it well, Nay, it was all Its own marked creation, well-thought out design, the purpose and the way all Its own and evolved from out of Its own Pure Wisdom, its characteristic spontaneity, that Manifold Potency which gives rise to everything that exists before us and beyond, making one wonder variously, but nonetheless helping and fulfilling every one in one way or other.

If king Drupada had not longed to marry the beautiful Draupadi in all pomp and splendour to one who displayed his prowess in the vying assembly of the valorous, by hitting the elusive mark so elegantly fixed, also if the prize

Song of the Soul

held out was not resolutely won and shared obediently in the manner it was made to, the five great brothers would have at best remained powerful but *not useful*. Their skill and fine mettle would not have shone, but dimmed. Their purpose would have died undernourished for want of one who loved them as strongly as hated their rivals.

The teak trees of the forest grow tall and thick shooting to the skies like rockets, only when planted closely and made to compete with one another to gain survival, finding it hard but imperative. Nature's designs are queer, but patent. At times they strike man as hard, but thought deeply they are not so. They are just one side of the whole. Like the other side this has its place too, sublime and sacred.

Nature wants to rear everything within Her fold. She wants nothing to be outside of Her reach. In the *hard* also is her unique force as in the *soft*. Her smiles are within the cruel as within the kind-hearted. *Opposites are Her cherished display*. By placing them such before a noble human, She disheartens at first, only to revive and delight subsequently. Some she teaches by taking them to beauty first, then leading them to ugliness in due course. This is Her normal way. But with others She shows special readiness to feed in ugliness first, only by that to make them realize the joy of ever-living beauty afterwards.

With these two fated offers held before mankind, Nature stands out to question man's reasoning power, to inspire him to be the best, to instigate him to be his worst, nevertheless in the end to *prove Herself* and disprove every one else, glorify Herself, crediting some and discrediting another few, thereby strengthening and vindicating both of them equally.

It is She who has willed the man's mind to be reasoning and woman's heart to be sentimental, making them toss and sway. Thus She makes them slip and fall, get up and progress. Through this She perpetuates Her call that every one should *realize his vacuum* and struggle hard to fill it as soon as he can afford. The call once heard can only grow stronger. Every act and event, incident as well as accident, should only make it deeper and louder, compelling man to honour it and fulfill himself as well as Nature.

Song of the Soul

Man and woman must then look into themselves and to the others alike. Their eyes should rise from the small to the big. From *oneself* their hearts should grow to contain all-*self*. In place of hate and ill-will should reign in them love and friendship.

The opposites (dwandwaas) are the ones to be met and dissolved for ever. Once met they will remain full, bound together firmly, to be blessed by the real bliss by their own singular embrace, taking the seeker to the *abode of the Real*, the Supreme. This grand meeting is the true promotion for man. This exalted asylum is the faultless gain for him. All else are demotion, more or less so.

Externally Nature compels and internally She draws the human heart. Where? Closely searched, it can only be to one place—*Her own graceful lap!*

To grow in quality man needs opposites. In ignorance he does not know this truth, or knows it distortedly. But truth is truth whether man knows it correctly or otherwise.

The Pandavas were noble, great and forbearing. To be so was their nature, the sure characteristic. They never needed any special tuition to pursue this object in life. They loved and delighted in being what they were. But a mere wish or will is not sufficient by itself. The inner wish requires the outer situation, the external compulsion, to be realized in full. If the compulsion is not there, the inner wish will have to simply wither. With that will be lost the joy it can bring.

Compulsion and competition are *hard* when they are present. But they are necessary, thought deeply. Endurance and elegance become adorable only when they are actually expressed by one and taken note of by the rest. But they cannot be present when their need is absent. When the shafts of competition and hatred are faced, then does endurance grow and flourish, elegance shine in its full glow. Nature knows this too well. That is why She forces the best to pit itself against the worst, the noble against the ignoble.

Song of the Soul

One has to think broadly and deeply to discover the hidden moves of Nature.

The good in Nature's clever hands is made to meet the bad, the great to be surrounded by the low, to make both know each other and value their respective worth. This is so done to compel each to face the other with resolve, not with timidity, to find joy in action, not to sit idle in dejection waiting for the destined reward; making both meet the marked fruition of life, whether it be pleasant or unpleasant without murmur or protest!

How can all this drama be enacted except in various scenes, through many actors and different settings?

The Pandava brothers were not 'full' by themselves. Despite Duryodhana assailing them constantly, their marked role would not have been complete. Duryodhana gave them the needed opposition, backed by hatred and enmity. He made it more and more severe incident after incident. But Yudhishtira's mind given to nobility and friendship backed by his concern of brotherhood knew no bounds. His expanding heart could squeeze in the worst of opposition and contain it.

Duryodhana first posed as unfriendly before Yudhishtira. He then turned inimical. Later on he became a deadly enemy, lastingly so. But still this could not shake Yudhishtira from his basic moorings. This was *yet not adequate* before the son of *Dharma*. Yes, he was a full son of Righteousness. In flesh alone he was Kunti's. In his mind, in his heart, in his emotional drive, both his father and mother were truly *Dharma*, goodness supreme, unalloyed.

In Yudhishtira's *dharmic* heritage, the inspiration and ideal born of it, the worst of enmity stood utterly lost giving place to goodwill and friendship. At every new encounter it was happening, making the devoted son grow and flourish in his devotion to propriety, to *dharmā*. He wished to do everything only remaining rooted to his stand of righteousness. He had the determination and strength to meet any hazard, make any sacrifice, but only when supported by his stand on *dharmā*, moored to and moved by it.

Song of the Soul

He played the hazardous and fateful game of dice. He was asked to play; nay was made to, with conditions and stakes, some wrong, unjust and even heinous. Yet he, the one man of earth who would not step off his path of righteousness, accepted the invitation, succumbed to its evil designs *knowing well his rivals were wrong and himself right*. Who born of human blood, can hope to reach the other extremity of the Universe? Who indeed will pick up the drive within to make a start and ensure substantial progress in the long indefinite journey? (Implicit resignation to the path of *dharma* is a similar venture). *Men of example are too rare in every era!*

The Creator had questioned Himself for millennia. Who can adhere to the path of *dharma* strictly, braving the storms of severest of oppositions? But he found no answer to this question from anywhere! Nature searched and ransacked the length and breath of Her entire creation. Was there any one within Her fold to meet this great challenge to give Her the joy of opposition which She so much yearned for? Many times She had to remain despondent. Her spirits would sink in cheerlessness. But whose was the failure, the cause of dejection?

Hers surely. Yes, Nature's. Verily she was the one that failed in creating what she wished for, the one she searched hard every nook and corner eagerly to see, the one through whom she wanted to delight many and enthrill even herself. Yes, she failed in evolving that rare one looking at whom, drunk deep with whose sweetness She could get totally lost, that dear and beloved one whom She could so tenderly place on Her 'long reserved throne' which was lying vacant, unclaimed by all, undeserved by even a single human!

Here now Nature's grief was coming to end, much to Her own surprise and delight. The agitation of Her heart was subsiding. Her hot heavy breath was growing light and cool. In 'Yudhishtira', she noticed thick clouds looming large. Their impending downpour, she felt, will drench Her hot body and quench Her long, weary thirst. The sight relieved her, the thought of fruition spread delight and hope.

Song of the Soul

Just a moment passed. And with that Her imagination suddenly struck a new note. Nature is as always Her own queer self. Yes, She is ever the hard, the curious mixture, and the quipping assortment.

The Big lady instantly became possessive. Her mind stood jealous of what She saw in front. No doubt She relished the Sight. But Her mind did not get fully ready to part with what She so lovingly possessed, was still possessing as the *richest treasure* of Hers. The exalted throne was all along vacant, it was true. But now all of a sudden it was going to be filled, sat upon. Once given, where will stand She? Whither will Her pride go? She will no more be the *unconquerable*. Her inexorability, She feared, will terminate. It will come to a sudden end. And that will make 'man' supreme before Her! Will not he then become proud. Holding himself greater and the Creator smaller? Can that be to his advantage? Will it also not be against Her own glorious insight, by dint of which alone She is ever what She is, the invincible yet merciful progenitor?

For a while She descended from Her great height to the earth's depth. The lofty Nature lost Her loftiness, got fused into Her creation to beget a contamination. Like the creatures crawling below, She too fell a prey to selfishness and possessiveness!

However She revived Herself, held Herself back from the teasing temptation of pride, but it was not full, wholehearted. The thought of possession, though dismissed from Her mind, still lurked deep in Her being. If She had denied it She would be cheating Herself!

She thought well for sometime trying to bridge the gap. She resolved to award Her martyr, but after a longer trial. By trying, She felt, the sufferer will only be rewarded, though not by the award, certainly by the qualities in the victim which will come up during the trial.

That will also enable the judge to delight in his task. He will see more, listen to more, will be able to find out more, making him keener and wiser in his sense of judgement. True he may be delighted and depressed now and then during the trial, but all that can only improve his merit and honour

Song of the Soul

its worth. The process will bring only growth and fruition, to the judge as well as the hapless victim.

Nature's trial lingered on. With that the stresses and strains also swelled. Yudhishtira felt the pinch at times gravely. His supporters looked unsupporting. His friends also threatened to turn unfriendly. His cause was often assailed. His concessions were bitterly questioned. Generosity has an end, his brothers said repeatedly. Draupadi fought against his idealism tooth and nail.

His body often shuddered, but never did it *lose stability*. His mind was possibly shaken, tensed, but the tremor had to subside quietly. His mind could not be vanquished. When assailed, threatened, admonished and reproached, he shook his head, bit his teeth, screwed up his eyes, once indeed did he press his toe hard on the ground; all to prevent his and his brothers' fall, to redeem themselves from their own failure. There were occasions when even his brothers felt he was falling. But at all such times he revived with greater keenness of perception, thereby adding to their fame and the glory of the cause they held. The worse and worse nature tried him, the better and better She made of him.

Yes, it was a constant head-on collision between himself and the rest. But every time the hurdle in front had to yield and give up. The strongest impediment was reduced to mere straw by the heat of his righteousness, by the powerful wind blowing from within his own heart and mind.

Nature tried several of Her tricks. She began to thwart, to thrust, to arrest. Yudhishtira stood to face, to meet sternly and dissolve, to surge up against the pressure and float above the tossing waves. The encounter went on and on.

Finally the assaulter got tired; Nature felt satisfied that She had reached the destination. Her ambition was fulfilled. The sudden urge which had gripped Her mind subsided. She became shy and weak!

Song of the Soul

Her war with Yudhishtira was called off, to Her own defeat, but no doubt to Her joy. Yes, She was defeated, but in front of Her own pet creation. She waged the war all by Herself, sought by none nor provoked by the rival. She fought Her own designs. She made Her opponent fight, not because he wanted to, but She herself wished for it.

But the creation was none other than Hers. *The fighter before Her was as much Herself as She the seeker of the fight.* In one She remained hidden. In the other She was manifest. And the encounter between them was to bring to light what remained concealed, its might, worth and beauty.

The victor though gained by the visible, really belonged to the hidden. The success of the creation, the defeat in its hands of the Creator, the achievement of the man of earth, the strength coming from the Unseen making it possible; both are more a show than anything grave. They are mere fun for the Creator. The truth lies in between these two. It is the Marvellous Essence and Power, the Supreme One, who arouses the need, throws the stake, then fights for gaining it and in the end fulfills Himself in full.

The sight seen in front, the thoughts on them generated within, one a real fact and the other its imagination, both these should blend successfully like the epic's fact and fiction. It is then that man's understanding ascends to the realm of Supreme Truth, sinking his mind, widening his heart and brightening his intelligence, *to perceive the subtlest essence* as it does the grossest entity.

Man's progress has to come by his voyage through knowledge. It should begin with the best of intentions, the noblest of feelings within him. Those to bid him god-speed are love and its friends. The pushing of pure devotion, the steady wind of humbleness will speed up man's journey towards wisdom.

Whatever they thought, said and did, Yudhishtira and his brothers were 'of earth'. Though they sought divinity in all earnestness they contained and manifested *full humanhood*. The higher their ideal, the greater was the

Song of the Soul

sacrifice called for. Their ideal was chosen. But the choice was of the intellect. Its execution is by the will. But there is the heart which reigns in between the intellect and will. The heart always bubbles with feelings being born of flesh and emotions. It subsists on the body serving the causes of the body.

The spirit is stronger than the flesh, no doubt. But the quest for the spirit is first caused in flesh, by the thoughts of flesh. Yes, it is enabled by the body, can be preserved only as long as the body lasts. At times then the flesh will assert its strength, with its feelings sometimes hard to suppress or eschew, though it may be wrong to honour them. The higher one grows, the greater will become the struggle, the disparity and imposition it brings.

The subtle is stronger than the gross. The hurdles will then increase in magnitude when they turn subtle in nature. The five brothers found their worst confrontation in this basic truth, Duryodhana's enmity they detested. They had no doubts that they should fight it. But Duryodhana the *person* before them in flesh and blood was by no means hatable.

He was not just an individual like several others. Many enemies they had known. Several kings they had defeated. A number of heroic bodies they had conquered and made to fall right in front. But these ones, Duryodhana and the rest struck an exception, pronounced and hard to surmount. In them they saw not merely the enemies of their cause, but also the *brothers* of their bodies. They could hate enmity, but not the humans in them. Hating enmity but loving its custodians, doing both at the same time was a painful pun, a vexing task indeed! But that was what they had to do in spite of themselves.

So the struggle was twin fold and the effort had to be doubled. The resultant pain they could not bear. They many times asked themselves, singly as well as jointly. Is the effort needed? Is it possible to bridge the gap between the ideal and the actual? The answer was not definite, never final! Indecision reigned every time. Decision is clear. Its pursuit is easy and facile but indecision is not so, it is always clouded. Its sequel is complex and tardy. It is hard to bear and also to dismiss.

Song of the Soul

Draupadi's role strong and emotional

It was here that Draupadi's role became significant and strong, if not sweet. For Draupadi the course was straight and clear, not curved. Her sentiments were genuine and realistic. They were 'for' when to be for, equally so 'against' when to be against. Her mind did not swing or sway. Her loyalties did not shake. They were firm even when touched unawares.

She had cast her lot with the five sons of Pandu. They were her only lords. Where the lords stood, there she also was. Those who loved them, she readily respected. Those who hated them definitely evoked her strong displeasure. She did not fail to discern with her *womanly keenness* whom to be friendly with and whom not.

Duryodhana's nature, his greed and hatred, his resolve to liquidate her lords was an open page before her. She did not fail to read it right at the beginning of her life with them. In her there was neither doubt nor reluctance. Her affinity was first and last with the sons of Pandu, her lords. Their relation with others was also her concern, but indirectly, more as a need or expediency than a natural inner compulsion.

Naturally the *welfare* of husbands was her first and last concern. She was safe only when her lords were safe. If they were in peril, she too was.

She sensed the situation like a deer its enemy. She got determined to preserve their welfare, protect it paying any price, speaking any words and making even the worst sacrifices. She coaxed them when coaxing worked. She cajoled where cajoling bore fruit. She insisted when insistence alone was responded to.

Prevailing and provoking, demanding and reminding, no doubt preserving their prestige and redeeming their freedom, the great Draupadi pursued every time her royal role employing every means available to her, to *defend their stand* but *defeat their weakness*, facing pain, suffering torture and courting humiliation, to climax in the end her husbands' cherished success and her own sustained stainless glory.

Song of the Soul

Was not Draupadi correct, loyal and praiseworthy in this? She no doubt behaved in a *womanly* way, but she was a powerful woman. Where her force as the wife and queen of the Pandavas was needed, she gave it skillfully. Where her 'lordship' was called for, she splendidly revealed that as well. Between man and woman wedded in solemnity anything can be exchanged. One can step into the other; the other too can do so equally. The *maximum of right* is claimed and used when other things fail and fall inadequate.

Strong-willed, quick-witted Draupadi encroached this 'last territory' also at a time when everything else stood ineffective. As a wife she resigned totally to her lords' will. Her husbands had made Yudhishtira their leader. His words, his ambition, his object and ideal became equally the others'. All the four *obeyed strictly* their one elder Yudhishtira.

But once indeed their fate turned most cruel, looking unconquerable. It almost became a volcanic eruption threatening to wipe out all of Yudhishtira's ideals. The dark face of death loomed large in the air menacingly. All the four brothers were confounded, swept by grief. Crippled by loyalty, all of them were engulfed by *slavery*. They were made to stand speechless with hands tied up, though their minds and hearts lashed and burned in protest and defence. But none had the right to stir or move from their ground.

Yes, Yudhishtira the eldest one worked it by his own deliberate choice, though he thought and said his *propriety compelled* him to do what he did. When he sought the fate, he was perhaps too grave and confident. The pride of his righteousness, the power of his superior position, both stood before him blinding his vision. The show was enacted with heroism, the resultant bondage brought in haste!⁸

⁸ Duryodhana's uncle, Shakuni was an astute dicer, expert in foul play. He and Duryodhana designed a plot and invited Yudhishtira to play dice with them in their palace. King Yudhishtira had a strong weakness for playing dice. He also held it a solemn duty of the king not to refuse an invitation to play. Weakness coupled with loyalty stood as an advantage before Duryodhana.

Song of the Soul

Weakened totally in the end, bound inescapably in utter servitude before his rivals, Yudhishtira stood like an earthworm, twisting and wriggling but held fast by his pledge, unable to move even one step forward or backward. On the demand of his rivals he removed his upper cloth (his brothers did the same) to prove his slavery before the masters, finding no force to prevent the falsehood of his rivals flooding his mighty truth. His body and those of his brothers were submerged by that flood, but still the *spirit* in them had not yet sunk.

Right then, Draupadi, who was the only one left on the bank, suddenly rushed to the scene with her long rope of rescue. Raising her voice she tossed her rope in front of the great mixed assembly, in which sat alike the greatest as well as the meanest. The pandemonium which was raised gave grief to many but brought jubilation at least to a few.

She rose in rebellion against what her lord, Yudhishtira, wrought for her. She questioned his propriety and also that of his enemies, challenging the order and worth of his action. At one point, the climax of the crisis, she *refused* her fate caused by his haste and thoughtlessness. She accepted his

Duryodhana made his uncle play for him against all conventions in dice. Yet Yudhishtira agreed.

Yudhishtira began with the costliest things under his lordship and lost them all. Shakuni's command over dice was unique and he always won. From things, the stakes moved on to persons. All his brothers one after another, Yudhishtira staked and lost. The dice when thrown defied him every time. He then staked himself, the fifth and the last in the brothers' row. The dice thrown took him too. Himself pledged, a slave of the opponents, he could find nothing more.

But Duryodhana's team teased him further. Draupadi, they said, was still left sovereign and free. They demanded him to stake the queen. Yudhishtira being excited agreed and played. The dice as before, conquered Draupadi too making her the same slave her husbands were. The sequence of the play, the order of stakes and their fates

were thus patent and strong.

Now began the 'right over Draupadi' and the venture of tyranny over her personal life and freedom.

Song of the Soul

slavery but sternly refused and opposed hers. She held her freedom as untouched and unquestionable.

Draupadi's royal words shot like darts, piercing whomever they struck. In them dazzled boldness steeped in confidence, promise generated by genuine love, demand dictated by the critical need of the hour.

Draupadi argued her stand singly, while yet in deluging distress. She proved its place and might before all who sat in front. She asked the assembly, trembling in excitement, to uphold her stand or deny it but with appropriate vision and veracity. The whole assembly *sat mute* in sorrow and sympathy. Some then collected their spirits and spoke 'for' her. Some, her rivals, spoke against. But finally all looked to the grandfather, the great Bhishma. She too did so.

The Grandfather was really great. His ears had heard Draupadi's scream and outcry, defence as well as demand. He equally paid attention to the words of Karna and the rest. His mind, loyal as it was to truth, did not however get to a decision. It failed to come out with a solution - the issue was complex, unheard of, ghastly to sight and deadening to thought! A singular decision on it was *impossible*, thought Bhishma. He held the issue, brought by Yudhishtira on himself and others as valid, but refused a verdict on it. He openly said he was incompetent to judge. Finally, reiterating his inability, Bhishma declared Yudhishtira alone as the right person to pronounce a verdict on Draupadi's independent contention.

This left Draupadi fighting her lonely battle, making it helpless and almost hopeless. She still fought with her womanly bold determination demanding a verdict, making her stand worthier each time she cried out making the assembly shudder and droop. In those moments she shone greater than the greatest known human, wiser than the wisest living, more loyal than the most loyal beings in her front, dearer than the dearest one the Pandavas ever knew. But all this in the midst of *worst torture*, most painful agony!

Her single garment was pulled strongly by Duhshasana, Duryodhana's younger brother; he made her body, unseen in full even by the skies, nearly

Song of the Soul

nude before hundreds of eyes in the open. Her mighty husbands, who held in them the power to destroy even the God of Death, were just looking on helplessly *disarmed by their commitment*. *Their power lay mortgaged*, though their feelings stood inflamed. None came forward to save her, though many were much tempted to, also did struggle frantically.

At last when every one failed, success itself descended from the dumb but tense and vibrant air. The Omnipotent Supreme Entity, witnessing as it is what all the earth below enacts and displays, flooded Draupadi with Its *grace*. Yes, when the creation fails, the Creator succeeds. Nay, His success is seen only then. When the human hands totally desert, then alone the Divine hands will drop down and extend help. Why should they come until all the others stand exhausted? The *real beauty* reigns only in the *rarest*.

The heavenly event is strictly far above all the earthly ones. The *real* accident is the one which precedes and transcends the entire array of incidents the world has seen. The accidents we know and speak of are verily *incidents*, rare or complex. Yet they come within the range of incidents. There is but one real accident, that is the *Genesis* of this visible universe. Before it came nothing ever was. When it came it really made an astounding event, with no comparison or contrast to relate it. Well that alone is then an accident. Yes, it is the *accident*, the only one of its kind, purpose and magnitude.

The complexity of her stand, the moral and logical impasse it brought to light, her persistence for a decisive answer from the assembly of the great, finally resulted in a thorough *gloomy indecision*. That made things worse. Yet, courting humiliation, the further torture drowning her spirits in the deepest agony, Draupadi struggled to prevail in her *one aim of redeeming her lords*, restoring their freedom, empowering them to stand again as equal before the rivals and fight to win their avowed ideal. To achieve this end the noble peerless woman had to undergo the outrage of modesty, that which is to the woman too sacred and grave, that which is dearer than their very life. Yet she withstood that torture screaming and sobbing with her unshakable determination. The eyes wept, the body tremoured, but her

Song of the Soul

heart did not lose its hold. The onlookers crumbled, but not she the object of their mercy. Every one was quivering but she was steeped in surety.

Her *strength* emerged from her *mind and emotions*, not from intelligence and reason.

Philosophy aids and inspires no doubt, but only in leisure and quiet. Emotion is the stronger force, the magical potency. That alone emerges in the crucial time of *need*, from moment to moment, suddenly without notice or memorandum, without any prepared will or choice. Reason may evolve, but only earlier or later. Not certainly right at the 'nick of time'. Reason fails to inspire or instigate, to compel man and induce him to live, when life is greatly needed and to die, when death is the inescapable challenge in front.

Emotion is the strongest force for man as well as woman. It can be sublime or subversive, viable or violent. To make it the better and nobler, to divorce it from its wrong is the one duty of all humans.

If men work with reason, the women do so with emotion. The man's way is often protracted, troublesome and pervious. The woman's is straight, simple and strong. What man tries to attain through a process, shielded by his professed reason, the woman behind is out to win easily in an instant, compelling reason to follow if it seeks to survive with prestige.

Some fight to uphold reason and some to brace up emotion. The fight is really wrong. It has no place when human nature is considered in its fullness. The dispute is kindled due to delusion, by a hidden partiality in the mind.

In truth emotion has to blend with reason. Reason must fuse into proper emotion. True emotion must stimulate right reason. Timely reason should also evoke helpful emotion. Either may precede the other, but both must co-serve if not co-exist. For, emotion and reason working together alone cause the ripe humanhood to manifest.

Song of the Soul

Of the several qualities of the humans, some belong to the emotional ken. Equally some others fall in the purview of reason. Man's life is to be nourished by both emotion and reason equally. Devoid of either, life is incomplete and he will surely be defective and below par. Like his body nourished by food and drink, his mind needs to be fed by timely emotions. His intelligence too has its need to be stimulated and preserved by the pursuit of reason. Each of the constituents has its place, compulsion and fulfillment. To be awake and attentive to all, alike, is the best course to elevate and crown one's life. If one of the allied two, emotion and reason, is denied, to that extent will be denied man his *humanhood* too. The result will be frailty, inequity, imbalance and disharmony. Disharmony of any kind is wrong, can be disastrous too.

What transpired in Draupadi in those terrible moments of trial and tribulation is a unique blending, a *marked fusion*, the ideal one should hope for and gain. It perhaps resulted from her deep emotions, the fondness of her heart, the love it fostered to her husbands and the resentment provoked when unjustly dragged and humiliated in the open assembly. But it did not fail to follow propriety and the path of reason. Reason followed, when she challenged the prudence and sobriety of the greatest as well as the low. Love and loyalty ruled her mind first, but ratiocination and contention followed suit.

This is the august, strong role of the loyal woman for a man. With the woman by his side, he has his timely help, the powerful fillip, the right instigation and the stable anchor. But for the woman, many men would lose their earthly moorings, be tempted to attempt the wrong, would fail to gain the best, be dragged to the worst.

Without Draupadi, the Pandava brothers would have withered in the end before their villainous cousins. With all the hard penance patiently undergone, the long exile longingly completed, all their promises unflinching fulfilled, they would still have *abandoned their 'just cause' in the name of brotherhood* and reconciled poorly to an ignominious defeat. That might have pleased their ungrudging hearts, but it would surely have displeased and pained many a lot, in the end also themselves, making the

Song of the Soul

fate of the society dreadful and obscuring the glory of Dharma in front of its dying votaries.

An ideal of one becomes the lesson of many. A sacrifice made once remains a call for ever. The noble one who makes it dies and goes. But what he leaves behind knows no death. It lives and lives immortally, to be esteemed, emulated and quoted by generation after generation.

Any virtue to become evident and elevated must have first a votary. The more distinguished the votary, the greater becomes the virtue. In place of a *mere idea* it begins to shine as an ideal. From the abstract it passes to the concrete. From the idealistic heavens above it descends to the materialistic earth below, removing doubt, dispelling fear, stimulating several and inspiring always a few.

The culture of the humans is carved by the predecessors. Even if man's origin is held indistinct, surely his culture has its fountainhead in his own numbers. The culture emerges from men of example, from women of worth, who live and die not so much for food and fame as for integrity, fidelity, veracity and incorruptibility. *To contain greatness, one must be really great.* The greatness of the body is at best its weight, its mass and making. To judge a person by his physical features is to lower him down to a beast.

The measuring rod for man lies much inward, within his body. The endowment of the mind, the virtues of the heart, the gifts of his wisdom, the dedication of his spirit, these are what determine his worth, the lasting credits he leaves behind to be remembered more when his body is no more, than when it is walking the earth.

The son or daughter is not the one to immortalize the human. A few generations pass and with them get buried the memory of lineage. We all began from god, were born first of His own loins, though our kind has lived infinitely long. Does any one remember THAT ORIGINAL GRAND BEGINNING, the primary significant link in our long generation chain? Neither our children nor grandchildren can do anything more in the revival

Song of the Soul

of memory of their ancestors! Immortality through them is thus a trifling attempt.

For a worthy man, his own history on earth, the truth of his life, the depth of his mind, the commitment and zeal which adorn his thoughts and the grace of his actions are the ones to immortalize him and his family.

Thus therefore get born, or made, a man here and a woman there, a chosen select few, dotted wisely on the earth's vast surface who are given to a pursuit noble, not just to pastime. In them life becomes worthy and serious, great and purposeful. Their thoughts and emotions *speak more loudly* than do their words. Emotion is their prime force. Wisdom is their unerring guide. They exercise emotion only to build their lives, strengthen their thoughts and draw out those of the others.

They always hope for the good. They listen to the thoughtful and discerning; aim at the best to fruition themselves the most. By their vision and virtue, they try to avoid any fall. Tuned to wisdom they proceed with vivacity, risking and hazarding, facing with fervour whatever comes and resigning with cheer whatever goes. Many they meet, several they bypass, few they accept, but surely all make them better and better. *In them* lie the sublime seeds of mankind's culture, its blessed tradition, the bright future of the human society.

Draupadi was one of this kind and dimension. The purpose of any woman is her life as the wife. First a girl, then a maiden, then she suddenly turns out to be the wife. Cared till then by parents, instantly she is transported to care a man, her husband. The bud of a girl at one singular stroke, blossoming as a mother⁹ before her husband is a stirring event.

⁹ A noble wife has also to 'mother' her husband. That is even more important to be a successful wife.

Song of the Soul

In Draupadi this conversion was quintupled! She had *to mother* five husbands, not alone one. She did not at first know that it was the right fate she deserved, to blow the fire lying smoldering within, to make it blaze forth shedding heat and glow all around. The first blow was the pronouncement by her mother-in-law, Kunti. Though a test to her mind, it turned out to be a hidden promise to her heart. It was a sure signal of the tough future that awaited her, a complex fate she deserved, a strong example she was to make herself in the end.

Draupadi did not slip or stumble. She met the event, heard its call, prepared her mental frame wholeheartedly and resolutely fulfilled all the needs. If any one failed her or at least threatened to at times, it was her goodly and notable husband.¹⁰ In her husbands worked constantly the havoc of the thought of blood. But in her worked the realistic thought backed by matrimony. One met its opposite, like the two inevitable sides of a coin. Both stood together, each empowering the other to balance and co-exist.

Her destiny burst forth at its worst when Duhshasana, the monster, her husbands' cousin, dragged her to the august Kuru assembly against her clamour, bullying for a thing which no married woman will ever give-*her lordship*, and thrusting it upon her unilaterally by sheer brutal force. Yes, it was an instance of wickedness preying upon meekness, ruffianism upon gentleness, brutality upon timidity and perverted heroism upon womanly weakness. Can the world ever think of a more heart-rending encounter?

The only answer is that *a perennial river does not go dry*. Let the hot rays of the sun fall intensely on its surface. Let the content heated go up into the sky in fumes. Let the abundant water grow thin and become deplete. With all this, the ceaseless flow cannot stop. The river may be compelled to grow narrow but it cannot be made extinct.

That which comes will also go. The sun will get dark for days and weeks. Nay, he will look dying for ever. The skies, over which his rays once ruled,

¹⁰ Yudhishtira, when he in the heat of the hour, staked himself and the others including Draupadi, leaving none to rescue them all.

Song of the Soul

will be reigned by thick dark clouds. The clouds will spread. Then the wind will collect them to crowd in a place. They will suddenly begin to shed profusely, drenching the mountains, filling the plains and plateaus, lands and lakes. The river will be in spate once again!

Draupadi was like the perennial river. She refused to dry up and be extinct. She shrieked under Duhshasana's cruelty and insolence yet did not fail to speak aloud and well. She wailed in distress like any afflicted woman, but along with that she also held herself like a bold man when attacked. Virtually Draupadi teased every one of her opponents with distressing questions. She raised a moral dispute which remained unsettled. Vexed by the punch of her words, Duhshasana was knocked down. His hands drooped, tired and shamefully. When the onlookers interfered and took the dispute to themselves, it lingered on. Finally the conflict was *never resolved*. But even that was sufficient for Draupadi to win her heart's object.¹¹

Even the hells broke down in agony seeing Draupadi's distress. But the heavens also burst forth with their sweetest ever smile! Nature stood dazed and depressed but She also felt immensely rewarded. By this She had one more example in Her stock, glorious and unique, to present to the studious but struggling children of Hers.

Time, its swift flight and its mighty current, cannot obliterate this cherished specimen of Nature, the great Draupadi, and "*the paragon of true womanhood.*"

¹¹ The palace echoed with ill omens of all kinds. Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana's blind father got frightened and interfered in the whole dispute. He announced draupadi as his most adorable daughter-in-law. To soothe and console he asked her to choose three boons of her choice. With two of them, Draupadi extricated herself and her lords. The third she did not seek establishing her faith in the strength of her lords.

Song of the Soul

Glory of Bharat

The tormented yet bold Draupadi, like the scrupulously truthful Harishchandra, like the meritorious and chaste Savitri, is remembered and worshipped in the homes of this land, by the civilized as well as the rustic people. Her immortal history is a perpetual lesson and watchword to the children, to the youth, to the old and declining of the entire world.

The people in this country starve perhaps for food and drink. Their problems are several. But surely they do not go abegging for wisdom. They may totter and grieve but only when accursed by their own ignorance of this eternal wisdom, the wisdom which transcends poverty, which takes man above his lowness of birth, insulates him against the curses of fortune and the enmity of the perverted mortals.

Poverty is unjust creation of economy. It can also be a denial in the hands of industry and perhaps technology. The geography of the nation may be gorgeous or not. The resources provided by nature may be plentiful or limited, the rule prevailing in the country fair or foul. It may utilize the wealth of the society to grow regulated or permit it to corrupt the economy. Its distribution may stand even or uneven.

Education may be extended to all equally or favouring the rich few. Opportunities may abound alike or turn scanty and partial. A thousand disparities may be allowed to breed and grow strong under the rule. Complaints may be raised, neglect found, their redress denied, the timely protest met with defeat or apathy. On the whole, the world outside may turn cruel and punishing, accursed, obstinate and arrogant.

Yet, in this land no one need feel hopeless and dejected, melancholic and sad. Yes, here the country is blessed with a unique culture, a grand heritage which every one can avail of *equally* when needed. The legacy is rich and flowing, with its assurance clear and consoling. The hands of heritage are thrown open to clasp lovingly in times of need. Culture with its singular

Song of the Soul

grace stands ready to soothe and relieve. Goddess Lakshmi¹² may turn reticent when approached in distress. But God Narayana, the Lord of Redemption and deliverance is ever one's close friend. He is willing, with smiles, to elevate and edify the afflicted.

This culture has come over the centuries, scores and multiples of them, not just in years and decades. When a section of the primitive man with his *cannibalism* and indiscreet violence lived in one part of the globe, then indeed lived our blessed ancestors, given to cultivate strength but steeped in gentleness and love, to austerity and discipline to gain inner growth and grace. Their body was recognized only to the extent of serving as a useful vehicle in their journey towards the Soul. The body was to support the mind, help in the removal of its dross and impurities and enable to achieve its higher states.

Their insight grew in depth and magnitude. Nursing it, nourished by it, listening to its ceaseless call, they began to transmit the wisdom to the others around. The luminous heritage began to shed its glow. Our people grew rich and became strong. The mortal in them began to speak of immortality. The perishable body held out an imperishable gain. Each of the 'worst' displayed before them became an opportunity to lead them to the 'best'. Adversity was made to adorn them as much as prosperity. They searched the *cause* of both. In that cause they found the real quest, the avowed ideal, and the beloved object of life. The quest became the womb of real strength. It had the unique power to appease their minds, to sustain and console their hearts.

External equalness, they clearly perceived, was not the more desirable goal. It is never probable in the outside world of Nature. The *real equalness* even then does reign in Nature's world, but inside, within the beings, in their hearts and minds, as the supreme treasure, unassailable on all accounts. For the inner sphere to be steeped in equalness, the outside has to remain unequal. That is inevitable in the scheme of this complex

¹² Goddess of fortune

Song of the Soul

Nature. For a force that pushes upward to be, another equal force to push downward is but necessary.

So the mind's sphere of mankind has been left free by Nature to distribute its riches equally to one and all, man as well as woman, the rich as well as the poor. Herein we find equalness triumph over the absolute rule of unequalness. Of what importance is the external disparity of Nature, if in spite of it, man still has a full measure of equipoise available to his mind and heart, to be sought and enjoyed by him as much as he wants? This inner balance is there available always. But it has to be searched and found out, while placed in the different external conditions. The poor and illiterate can look to and find it in the same degree as can the rich and the educated. *But only few have always attempted to gain this goal.* This is the sad plight of our mankind.

The rich are 'strong' in this competitive outside world but their strength grows weak when they begin the inner climb, when they aspire for the subtle gains, the deeper and higher human wealth. To their surprise, the poor are strong in this sphere. The poverty tends their mind, tries it hard making it grow slowly in time. A poor man is stronger mentally than a rich man. The storms and trials of his life strengthen his nerves and heart. The rich has to envy the poor in this aspect.

Nature has certainly been bewildered by a few of this land. Where is the man She once created on earth to enjoy and suffer Her unique *magic of duality*? She had all along revelled seeing the 'poor' man deluded by Her magic and struggling hard in its strangle-hold. Her might and glory was in the ability to keep mankind under Her spell, puzzling them all the time not being able to resolve the mystery before them.

But here now there was a class of original thinkers before Her, *unprovided* in Her own designs, a line of men and equally a line of women who stood facing Her with contentment and joy, not with resentment or dejection. Happy over Her Greatness and feeling grateful for having found the greatness in themselves, they complimented and praised Her unique lot. It was baffling to Her initially but gratifying, was defeating but delightful,

Song of the Soul

was painful perhaps but no doubt promising even then. Collecting Her broken spirits, She tried to smile and did succeed too!

Yes, she pondered after a while, She had sent man and woman to earth not to vegetate and die in the end helplessly. His role was to become what he really IS, be aware of his true nature and in the end shake off his mortal coil with serenity and happiness writ large on his face. Only when he succeeds in *becoming*,¹³ can he be said to have lived truly with a purpose. The rest is mere existence.

The riches a man acquires, the heredity he bequeaths in the form of children, the duties he performs to ensure their welfare, all will perish and vanish. But what he has ‘become’ will remain for ever. This state of the mind is the best attainment, the costliest gain, the invaluable treasure and abode which even the gods of the heavens aspire to attain but do not get. Only the man and woman of this earth can come face to face with this achievement.

Draupadi in flesh lived, or perhaps not, and died long ago. But the Draupadi of Vyasa’s epic, the picture in our minds of a powerful loyal woman, given to vindicate her life and role, to win her just cause of love and prestige, to fill the timely needs of her husbands and herself, drawn by the immortal Sage continues to live for all time to come. Freed from the division of sex, The Spirit of Draupadi is an example to both men and women, instilling courage and endurance, holding out relief and hope to those placed like her, in their lives and fates.

Destiny certainly curses bitterly a few, the deserving few. For such a curse the remembrance of Draupadi’s life of torture and affliction is like a balm to pain. If the world of *today*, the fate of the present punishes hard, then the ‘story’ of the world of *yesterday*, of long past, has to come forward with the strength of sustenance. As long as the people are awake to this thought, this living heritage, this protective hand, they can never be defeated by despair and depression. In their *haste* of the present, if they will not break

¹³ Realizing immortality

Song of the Soul

away from the enriched past, they will never have to falter or fail. Food or no food, cloth or no cloth, poverty or opulence, placed amidst favour or disfavour, they will still be able to find a noble anchor in themselves, an unfailing succour, to raise them from the utmost depths, to deliver them from their strongest bonds.

My heart throbs, my lungs heave in strange vigour, my bloodstream begins to murmur and sing, and on the whole my spirits rise high when I start reflecting over my grand heritage and the glory of the country where I am born!

If the past is properly conceived and realized and the future earnestly visualized with hope, the present no longer remains fleeting. Its persecutions, if any, are really endurance and perseverance implied, challenges hidden. Its haunting fears are really the hidden promises. The risks and ordeals of the present are really pointers to the victory treasured in the future. All one needs to have is patience, humility, a sense of love and acceptance without any reservations of the mind.

The child of our land, the son or daughter, sucks the milk from its mortal mother, but along with it sips the sweet immortal culture which the mother bequeaths automatically to the child. But this culture has to be made to grow along the growth of the body and mind. Then our children will be a blessing to themselves, a boon to the world at large.

Stories that live

At any time personal stories are the prevailing influence in the minds of people. Man learns from another first, then alone from himself. The lives lived by the forefathers died for them. But they do not die for their descendants, for the generations that will follow them. With every new generation, their valued lives begin to live afresh. Their memory, their narration, their power to enthuse people and invade their hearts are the strongest source of correction and guidance for the society.

Song of the Soul

The son of Harishchandra died in my mother's words and in my ears' hearing.¹⁴ It was night. The clock had struck nine. I was lying on a mat beside my mother, awaiting the day's sleep and longing for the next morning. Before we slept my heart yearned, as on many other days, to hear a legend of the land, a story of my forefathers. I had found great feeling and inspiration in it. My mind that day looked for a healthy reminder of the country's great legacy. My mother's tongue and lips started moving displaying their skill and love. My little ears got sharpened. There was curiosity in my mind. At times fear, suspense, anxiety and affliction were evoked as my mother went on with the story. There were moments when I doubted my strength to listen to what she was saying. 'What', I used to think 'am I so weak-hearted as this? Can I not stand the touching stories of humans?'

This time it was the *story of truth*, of a resolve made by a king, Harishchandra. He had determined to preserve his loyalty to truth at any cost, as long as life would last in his body. And here all of a sudden his loyalty was tested!

Sage Vasishtha was really great, honoured by all alike. Vishwamitra, born a Kshatriya, took to rough asceticism in pursuit of spiritual power, when his confrontation with Sage Vasishtha convinced him of the superiority of spiritual power over material strength. But his ascetic life and the powers he gained through it were constantly preyed by the fighting spirit ingrained within his being, exactly the opposite of what a true seeker should try to avoid. Vasishtha extolled Harishchandra as an example of a great mortal who practised *truthfulness assiduously* and was indefatigable in his dedication. This was enough to inflame the 'fighter' Vishwamitra. The sense of competition in him shot up with vigour. From then on it was his constant effort to dislodge Harishchandra from his path and disprove Vasishtha.

The competition was between Vishwamitra and Vasishtha. But the noble mortal to be made a victim to it was the innocent Harischandra.

¹⁴ A story related to me when I was a child

Song of the Soul

Vishwamitra began to try all the vile tricks available to him on the poor king. Trials and ordeals followed. He was mortified repeatedly. Despair and desolation, affliction and agony became his, along with him his family's, constant companions.

Vishwamitra's arrows of chastisement pierced the victim, one after another, with terrible impact. The king was made an insolvent first, an utter destitute next and a total slave last. A perplexing array of events, facts alike fiction, contrived by Vishwamitra accomplished the entire episode almost in a month.

One day, suddenly, a fierce boar marched to the royal gardens and began its work at destruction. The lower and higher officers of the palace proving unable to contain the enemy, the king himself went out to check the animal. The boar ran on and on managing to draw the king further and further away until they reached the depths of a huge forest. There the animal disappeared, making the king feel lost and then fall a sudden victim to the Brahmin who chanced to come to the scene and show him the lost way to the open.

Harishchandra, with his kingly gesture, promised his helper as reward anything he wanted. But, alas, the great king's piety and gratitude fell a prey to the unjust demands of the greedy Brahmin. In a minute the Brahmin, by his demand, turned the glorious king an inglorious beggar on the streets, with only his wife and son left any more as his belongings in the world. The recipient was still not satisfied. He insisted that the kingdom, he was offered, should be given off along with an appropriate dakshina (a gift befitting the occasion) of ten thousand gold pieces!

To the already impoverished Harishchandra, where was any source of wealth to be looked to? Yet, his large heart, filled with unflinching loyalty and devotion to truthfulness, refused to shrink before the beseeching Brahmin. He, therefore, asked for a month's time to fulfill the new demand.

Song of the Soul

The Epic tells us that the king of the mighty palace deserted his throne once for all, to walk away barefooted with Chandramati, his devoted wife and Lohitaaksha, their only living wealth on earth, the son. Intent on reaching the precincts of Benaras (Varanasi), the neighbouring kingdom, the three, born blessed but now accursed intently trekked streets first, roads next, lanes, bylanes and footpaths later, leaving behind them towns, villages and forests to reach ultimately the borders of the oldest town of India, sanctified by the Holy Ganges, in whose ceaseless flow murmurs the feeble, yet audible voice spelling a sure promise of redemption to all those suffering torture in the hands of their own minds and memories. The royal party reached Benaras, the days went by in despair, and lo, came the last day of their promised one month. With that also arrived their hard-hearted creditor, the strong-willed Brahmin, emitting derision from his eyes and hurling humiliation through his lips. “Ah, tell me but once, that you do not owe me anything or that you cannot make good your promise and I shall readily go the way I came.”

Harishchandra, perplexed and dazed, looked at the unfailing Sun on the skies, to heave a sigh of relief. To his surprise, the radiant orb shone even more richly and red that day, refusing to admit either poverty or distress. The king now found his direction clear and firm. Turning his gaze to the tormenting Brahmin in front, he submitted in full humility: “O venerable Sir, have mercy on me. The day is still not over. The sun is yet to take his dip into the waters. Let darkness set in, and by that time I shall make good my promise. Harishchandra shall not fail in his obligation!”

The ruthless creditor could find no sense in his debtor’s last hope. He went back gnashing his teeth and threatening the poor king with a vengeful curse.

The hope was expressed, no doubt. But the question still was ringing in the king’s ears, “Where is the money to drop from?” Harishchandra tried all his means to preserve his cheer and courage. But gloom, however, overtook his looks, punishing Chandramati even more. The little son closely followed his glorious parents wherever they walked, not knowing

Song of the Soul

what the scenes he saw meant really, nevertheless feeling in his own filial measure the acute touch of an impending crisis.

Now and then the king heaved, sobbed, looked down, up and into the four directions, but again reminded himself of his commitment to truthfulness, and therefore, of what his pious words stood for. Chandramati, a full participant in whatever her loving lord had said and done, could no longer contain the prospect of a moral crime which hung out in front of her husband's lot. A devoted wife, so long the honoured queen of a resourceful palace, she somehow still felt sure of her abundant source of strength, though standing deep in helpless penury!

Yes, before the honest and the wholehearted, the earth may sometimes crack but surely not the heavens above. The planets around may move and tremble but certainly not the immeasurable space within which have they all their grand existence. The heart may sink, the eyes grow dim, but not so the Soul within, their unmistakable centre and support.

She had, now as ever, one invaluable possession with her, to be parted only for the king, her lord, and for his sole sake. Determined to redress his plight and redeem the truth of his life, she banked upon her distinct loyalty and claimed the right to barter her position as the king's wife. Was she transgressing her limits, Chandramati did not pause to wonder. Tortured bitterly at heart, glowing nevertheless with the radiance of supreme love and the deep sense of timely fidelity born out of her impeccable wedlock, she submitted to her husband, the now dislodged king:

“Why worry, O good lord, when I, your valued possession, am standing alive before your eyes, to be used or even disposed, if that be the need of the hour? Your word of promise is my act of obligation.

As it was to this day, so be it now, in this hour of our dire need. The bond of marriage had bound us together. But it has also to afford parting if that be necessary to save the partner in his crisis. Even then our ties will not break. Stronger than strength, it can still endure,

Song of the Soul

born and bred by LOVE, the one source of superb joy equally accessible to all the beings of Creation. Even when Destiny turns utmost cruel, the heart given to love, will rise up to meet the outcome friendly with reliance and hope. The path is hard, but its call is compelling.”

“Hesitate not, my lord, to give me off for a price, and fulfill your honourable obligation. Here or there, by your side or away, I am ever the same Chandramati with none other in the world as my lord, to serve no other cause than my honoured lord’s. Give me, I pray, this last share of my life as your partner and bless me to take us both to the Immortal realms, preserving and nourishing our bond of oneness, making it stronger and stronger.”

Though expressed in the height of affection, the words shook the husband’s heart to its depths. Bent on relieving his agony, the wife tortured him all the more by the cruel prospect her matchless words held out by their impassioned appeal. Ah, what an amazing loyalty, a supreme sense of duty and partnership, but too much so for any loving husband to hear and bear, more so for one of kingly worth and ambition.

In the fullness of mutual love, but driven sadly to the zenith of distress and privation, one prevailed upon the other to accept the proposal with readiness while the other pleaded strongly not to. The deadening war of conjugal thoughts, memories and emotions, the abstruse depths of human pathos, the stunning terror of moral predicament, the untold crisis of the mind’s earthly concerns, all shot up in quick succession visibly but in silent tumult between the peerless partners, throwing the stronger of them literally to a swoon. But Nature, relentless as ever, did not release Her hold. Reviving the king to his senses, She made Harischandra look manifoldly at his beloved wife, who by now was drenched in speechless tears yet shining gloriously with a rare sense of contentment.

Chandramati never felt hesitant about her own last duty as wife or her husband’s last moral obligation to the Brahmin, before whom the truthful king was now to stand as a helpless debtor.

Song of the Soul

Though wedded, no doubt, to live together as partners for ever, she now felt wedded to live *apart* for ever, finding it the last demand of her wedded loyalty. Truly, in front of men and women so wholehearted and committed, Nature too poses with Her startling determination, teasing, tempting, and taxing tirelessly till the last. The one given to virtue must grow with his virtue, nursed by its own strength and grace, persuaded and preserved by its own rewards.

Despite the sweeping sentiments of his heart, the moral call was still loud in Harishchandra's mind. Seeing in his thoughts' front the sheer arrival of the Brahmin, who had just left in a mood of vengeful resolve, the poor king was forced to yield to the queen's pressure, her demand as his wife to share his singular plight. It was not a consent sought, refused and then given, but a distressing solution pressed and acceded to in worst affliction. For, that was the only course available to fulfill a solemn vow, tied to which the wedded couple were forced to terminate the final bonds of their very wedding. Ah, what a travesty of humanhood and a trample on its virtue, which yet holds out its inexorable message before the exclusive votaries of truth and moral benediction! The Nature's system which has shaped and moulded the Creation into what each one of its beings thinks and wishes, is truly multi-splendoured. It can at times be lowly and mean to bring to the august minds verily any outcome, sweet or bitter, perplexing and aching to any great extent. But all such plights are sure to be led to redemption and reward in the end, if not earlier. And then the whole episode is transformed into a living story of example, to elevate mankind and give hope to the tormented.

Unwillingly, yet bitterly persuaded, the helpless king collected his sunken spirits to announce the auction of his queen. Just then a group of men was passing that way. To their hearing Harishchandra shouted: "Here is a costly possession of mine. Bid, buy, whoever you can this lady, my devoted wife, for the best price you will afford. So long mine, she will, when bought, be under your lordship." The head of a Brahmin team came forward to snatch at the offer flinging a heap of gold coins, and in the next minute the king's wife passed on as a slave.

Song of the Soul

Chandramati, standing in full readiness, went for the last time in her life, round her husband, the king, the only lord she knew of her heart, three times – a significant gesture shown in holy moments registering gratitude, love and adoration, an act quite usual for a traditional wedded woman in front of her husband, as is also common for children before parents and students before loving and graceful teachers, more so to mark the event of parting and farewell. This completed, she passed into the custody of the red-eyed Brahmin who, by dint of his wealth, bought her life, to show all the mastery and cruelty he knew as a conceited buyer over a product he bought but did not deserve to possess. Tears rolled down the royal cheeks of the graceful queen. With her breasts rising and falling, body trembling and mouth turning dry, voice sunk in surrender; she took a last look at her royal lord and partner. By then, the owner pushed and pulled her in his direction, as one would an animal, with his whip raised ready to beat her on the back. The dispossessed lord of hers stood watching the entire scene, his right bartered and ownership lost for ever.

The son, torn sadly between the helpless father and the enslaved mother, stood dazed and numbed. With filial affections rising in a cyclone, the boy ran up to cling to the mother. But lo, the mother burst forth: “Dear boy, you have lost your right to follow me any more. I am now powerless as your mother. Pray, do not touch me. This body is no longer yours. Go back to your father, who is still yours and can further be.” Chandramati could speak no more. However, her rich heart still overflowed with the gentle stream of motherly love, the one unquestioned gift of Mother Nature, a gift which now proved to be a costly curse, suffering as it was the unjust attack on human virtue launched by high-born men given to lowly ambitions!

The insistent son was bent on following her, in pursuit of a right which the single fact of his birth bestowed upon him but which the auctioned status of his mother sternly denied. Unable to bear the sight, Chandramati sought again with hope the unfailing voice of her noble heart, the heart which earlier saved her husband from his moral death by the solution of slavery. Now too the redeeming voice was distinct in its message. The loyal heart did not fail to heed the bounden call of distress this time as earlier.

Song of the Soul

For on the whole of earth, she had but a single person to turn to, who presided over all her blessings and curses, the one who bought her body and was standing by her side with his whip raised to extract full service. With tears running in torrents, voice hardly audible, head bent low at the angry master's feet in faithful surrender, she begged with womanly appeal: "O great sir, I, a distressed woman, and your humble slave, have no heart to bear this plight of my son. Kindly master, have pity on your servant, and also this boy in her front. Pray, be good enough to buy him too with your wealth from his father, as you did me a while ago. With him also won to your household, I shall be made stronger to serve your cause better, my son adding his little mite every time to mine."

What a nice plan! The proud buyer was pleased with this undreamt prospect. With another heap of money thrown down in scorn, he bought the little son too to add to his stock of slaves. The mother was fully relieved while her master was immensely exhilarated. The honoured queen and the promising prince both thus became at once a pair of poor slaves at his feet, to be kicked and beaten, ordered and abused as and when he pleased. Tying the mother's body and the son's with a piercing rope, he drove the two like cattle. Whipping them freely on their backs to get them now to the right and then to the left, he went on pushing them forward with a scornful haste.

The life of truth is a startling adventure of a mortal human through a host of trials and travails. Love for truth is a rare honour which man can win. But it binds its votary with a number of cords, some very strong and some invisible. But none has any cause to complain, for none compels another to tread this risky path and make his perilous adventure. The option is always of the individual, the pursuit solely for its own unique pleasure and reward. The persecutions invited stand to the seeker's noble credit. In adhering to a truthful life does man grow in his moral strength and stature. In it alone is his heroism truly tested, often through hazards and humiliations. Pursued first by one's own option, the august path is preserved by its own sublime merit, to be furthered till the last by the sheer strength which its own hidden depths deliver in time.

Song of the Soul

Though linked to factors external, the whole venture is, from beginning to end, a full plan to ascend to one's own inner heights, to reach in the end the unparalleled abode of peace and wisdom. As the height of the mountain to the strength of its waters flowing below, the might of his ordeal adds richly to the glory of the moralist. With every new event, adverse or unfortunate, the moralist takes his leap forward, though unaware of his gain. His bitter destiny, if that it is, leads him to mounting strength through all his travails. It may sometimes threaten to kill, but even then he is led secretly to victory and reward. Great indeed is the message of a truthful life, of the path of unflinching loyalty and devotion, which the noble humans of the earth alone are given to pursue and benefit greatly by.

The mother and son reached their buyer's home and settled themselves in his slavery and service. The mother running first, the son trotting behind, both vied with one another in obeying the master's bidding. It was a rare privilege, a unique blessing, for the neglected home of the orthodox Brahmin to have a queen and a prince to clean its floors, wash the vessels and do the rest of the daily chores. The master of the house gloated over his luck, while the two under his feet struggled hard to give him that privilege.

Days and months passed, delighting the master but by that also bloating his pride and authority. One day the master bid the boy to go to the woods along with the others of his age, from the village. The order was to bring a bundle of kusa (a kind of grass) to be used at the ceremonial altar. The innocent boy, the erstwhile heir, born and bred with kingly love and splendour, was little used to the rustic scenes and modes of work. Yet, as one among the young peasant folks and playmates, he now rushed with the rest to fulfill the task. On reaching the forest, the fearful spot of their choice, his friends and rivals worked fast their sickles to cut the ceremonial grass. But, alas, the little Lohitaaksha lagged poorly behind. Hesitant and fumbling at first, he tried his best, often slashing his fingers along with the grass. Biting his lip, heaving in strain, he tried hard and harder. The others racing ahead with speed, the enslaved prince cursed himself for the poor work and skill he showed. But watching the others around, he picked up courage. Holding the first sickle of his life, destined to make it also the last, in one hand, and holding with the other a heap of grass, he was about to cut

Song of the Soul

his last bunch for the day. Suddenly rose up in front a fierce cobra, its head raised, looking at him intently, not as will a friend but as a deadly foe.

Trials at their worst

The lonely boy never till then exposed to perils of this kind, pulled back his hand and stood with eyes wide in terror. The reptile held its posture, waiting. He shrieked in terror. Alas, none of his friends was near to hear him cry. All of them were skillfully busy in their task in distant places. Each was in a hurry, bundling up his or her proud bunch of the day to rush back home as early as one could. They forgot the newcomer, some by chance and some with intention.

The boy, in his eagerness to catch up with the friends, checked his fear and swung his fateful sickle for a last try. The hissing cobra stretched its deadly hood, drew it back and struck as though in life-long revenge! Ah, the fated bite was over. Kissing the skillless hand with its flashing fangs, it injected the hot fluid of death, which rushed in through the life stream to the heart, turning instantly the precious body of the child to a pathetic corpse. There it lay, deserted hastily in fear by all those who verily brought it to that fated spot, there it lay an object of irretrievable loss and endless grief to the accursed yet beloved mother.

The awful sight, haunting the more friendly of the lot on their way back, reached fast through their lips the ears of the mother, who was as much tied in submission to the master standing in front as to the pangs of grief for her lost son lying afar. The plight of a mother, especially of one driven to lonely servitude, the turbulence of her earthly instincts, the sudden upheaval of the still deeper emotions within, speak so strongly before all, ready to melt even the most wicked minds on earth by their instant touch of appeal.

The mother, told of the news, was robbed instantly of her senses. The elderly women of the place gathered around her fallen body. Sprinkling water on her colourless face, they brought her senses back with all the rustic affection. Raising Chandramati with their feeling arms, they tried

Song of the Soul

hard to console her sunken heart, sharing themselves her plight and giving her their strength instead. But what could all that be for a woman slave, before whom bereavement now stood doubled by this unknown stroke? With the husband already lost in the earth and the son now suddenly taken unseen to the heavens, her heart was drained of all its strength, disabling her even to mourn the loss for relief.

Yet the living cannot follow the dead. Nature's instincts are strong enough to prevent even the dearest from following the fate of the departed. It is cruel, perhaps, but this cruelty we all have to accept without option. Wriggle, struggle, heave and weep, rise in rage or sink in swoon, yet none can flee from this inescapable plight.

After an hour of joint effort, the pitied mother rose up to find her faltering steps to the lord of the household, to beseech him in tears: "O respected lord, show pity on me once again, even as you did on the same account that day, when the father was standing near the son. Now the father is away and the son gone for ever. It was then to afford me do what a mother owed to her living son. But now the permission I humbly seek is to do what the same mother owes to her son lying lost for ever. The dead is dead, but the living still live. He, now dead, owes me nothing. But I, the living, do owe him the mother's last presence and rites to mark the gruesome event. Give me the chance to fall forlorn over him, begging the mute soul of his to take me where he has gone.

"I am yours, O lord, by your own grace bestowed on me in time, yet I still have another as mine. He indeed knows it no longer, but I live only in that knowledge. Pardon me for my indulgence and give me leave for the purpose."

It was mid-day when the master heard his slave's appeal. With looks frightening, the ruthless master spoke: "No, not now, in any case. Do first your duty to the living, and then alone think of the dead, whoever the lost one may be. I paid my hard-earned money and bought you to please me and fulfill my needs, not to sanction your prayers for leave. I say, therefore, finish the day's work and the night's too. Then indeed can you go to where

Song of the Soul

your son, useless to me, lies. But remember, do not bring his body inside my gate, or beg for its burial.”

What a lavish mercy! How humane a master! What an expedient delay! How generous a sanction! Chandramati had to still find her much-needed relief in the kind words she heard. In the hope of the lonely night she passed a listless day. Doing all her work to the minutest detail, as was the bidding of the master, and then seeing also the full part of the night’s done, she went to fall at his feet once again to remind her lord of his promise. With grudge and resentment, he said: “Go, but come back without fail two hours before the day breaks.”

“So be it, kindly sir, I am grateful to you for this grace.” The mother turned toward the woods and walked off in search of the speechless presence. Weakness and exhaustion overpowering her body, sorrow and dejection depressing her mind, utter helplessness greeting her at every step, seen only by the unseeing darkness, the great queen of the palace, made small in the arrogant homestead of a powerful master, was made to hurry her steps by the piercing thoughts of the departed one.

The only force that impelled her was the torment of a *mother* caused by the only son whom her heart hosted with fervour ever since he came out of the womb.

She was missing her steps, missing also the direction, tripping often, yet dragging herself up and forward. When the forest was nearly reached, the firmament grew suddenly bright. Yes, the heavens were blessing her lot in time when the earth disowned her plight. In the brightness of the sky, she found where to go and walked faster in greater loneliness. But what of it all to a mother panting to see and fall upon her son, who, by his death, was beckoning to her loudly though lying inert in silence!

The mother’s blood is warmer than the child’s at any time. The heart which hosts a life is stronger in kindness than the guest whom it hosts. Devoid of ambition, yet bubbling with the Creator’s love, known to be weak yet rising always in greater strength by dint of its sovereign status, ready to

Song of the Soul

meet any failure but never to fail in itself, the *motherly* heart is motherly at all times till the last.

And so, Lohitaaksha's mother at last reached the deadly spot where had grown the holy *kusa grass* to play its fatal role. Ah, she reached the place. But was it a relief? Yes, perhaps, for by that was Chandramati given the chance to see her son's body, and in a last bid make her unheard speech of farewell. Yes, it was a great blessing!

Falling now flat on her son, then rising and sitting up near his head, with hair flowing loose, stroking his chest in love and beating her own in mournful hate, the living mother and the dead son made a lifeless communion of the hour:

"That day, my dear son, you cried out to come with me. I took you from your father to afford the motherly solace and care. And lo, was it for this undreamt plight? After all these months, now suddenly have you taken yourself away, all alone, refusing to take me with you. True, you left your father at my instance of the hour. At whose instance, O dear son, have you left me, and your father alike, so suddenly, giving neither of us a chance to see you leave?

"Can it be at your own prompting? Are you then crueller than the lord under whom both you and I served? What, even then? For I would still have served you, strengthened by the hard experience we gained together! Why then did you decide to leave, O my beloved son?

"Ah, the mother knows the stuff of a filial mind, but little does the son the mother's. You came to the earth much after I did. And so you must leave it only after I do so first. But, alas, the young has no feeling for the old. What a pitiable plight! Of what use then is the feeling of the old for the young? Who is to blame? O son, if only you will breathe once to say the first word of your mouth, to call me with your right, and then go where you will, how fortunate and relieved shall be my lot! Will you do this but once?

Song of the Soul

“No, not even this much. What a bitterest pity! I was born well, but that fate was designed to tease me by its memory. If I had been an orphan right from the start, my memory would have served me better. Now the thought of my past thrusts upon the present to punish me by its sting. From destitution I passed to ‘widowhood’, from pride to privation, from graceful lordship to cruel lowliness, now in the end from motherhood to its own wicked denial! What further can Fate hold for me in Her store?”

“O Fate, be more cruel to me if you can. Let there be none to come to this earth any more to suffer a greater cruelty. I ask you with right to finish the last design of your witchcraft by playing it on me, so that the others of my kind will be saved from your plot!

“Ah, where is my husband unseen? Who will tell him of the last news of his son, whom he saw alive at the time we both parted from him in slavery? Can he see this story of darkness being sheltered by distance? O Nature, sanction him, if you will, for a while the power to penetrate darkness and glimpse its exploits, to see distance and discover its curses, to come face to face with death and life held together in embrace.

“To my son, who lies dead, I yet speak and discharge my last homage. I find him right in front. But to my husband, I am denied even this little chance. My son, I shall think as dead. But my husband, I can only think as alive. Where shall I find him living or dead, and when will he find me either? Ah, that is again a worse story of my failure, my greater distress.”

Mankind craves for delights and ecstasies. But verily they grow by the mystic touch of sorrow and depression. In meeting sorrow are the greater lessons met and learnt. To enjoy happiness one needs neither depth nor stability. Like the largest flowers displayed in striking colours at a distance, they are easily seen and readily felt. But the smaller ones, with their petals still smaller and fragrance lightly spread, have to be looked for closely with keenness. Their sight is the one to afford the greater joy. That always awakens the deeper levels of our vision, to generate in our minds a loftier insight and a greater sense of the more abiding values.

Song of the Soul

Sorrows then are not so much sorrowful, trials not trying, and humiliations not painful. They lead our strength to the higher hemisphere within, lodging our vision and succour in their unfailing anchors.

Fate had resolved to honour Chandramati's appeal while the bereaved mother and the lifeless son were still in their melancholic encounter. For the King of Kasi had sent out his men masked at nights to catch hold of criminals who moved in stealth to plunder and murder unseen. These guards were up and active that night as ever. The rays of the moon came out conspiring all of a sudden with them, and in an instant the guards stepped in the direction of the woods where lay the dead child. The men came to find culprits of their own sex, but lo, here found they a female, for the first time in their long search. Partly baffled and partly excited, they murmured among themselves their doubts and hesitation. Feeling sure in the end, they caught the shivering hand of the lonely woman just when she was trying to lift the body of the deserted child.

That was the time the city's children were frequently kidnapped for the jewels they wore or the promise of youth they held. The worth of the rule was put to censure by many of the subjects as the crime grew unchecked and the people's fear mounted. Hurt and angry, the king ordered his night guards to bring the criminals before him in a week or face their own end in defeat. All but six of the seven fatal days had passed.

Their fate hanging in Death's delicate balance, the guards felt relieved and rewarded on the seventh night at last. Showering venomous curses on the villainous woman, who, in their eyes, was the head of a child-lifting team, they tied her hands and bound them with the feet. Pulling the criminal by her long hair, they hurried to the court of the king. The king too poorly fell a prey to the falsehood of justice, as did his guards of poorer wit in thoughtless haste. Sparing all question aimed at truth, allowing neither confession nor appeal, he, in unjust eagerness to relieve himself more than to eradicate the crime, ordered his men to behead the fair culprit, adhering to the laws of his rule.

Song of the Soul

The guards gloating over the prize of approval they got from their lord, led her away, spitting all the while on the frail body of the most exalted woman the earth had ever seen till that hour. Their sharp-ended whips were frequently at work to show their contempt and prove their authority. Their mission was to take the victim to the crematorium, where the guard of the grounds was to execute the punishment by a skillful stroke of his sparkling sword!

Truthfulness encountered

The son is already gone, and the mother nearly so. But what of the father who sent them both to slavery, remaining himself free? The full price got for the wife, and a half won for the son, Harishchandra was still short of the requisite sum of ten thousand to clear his commitment to the Brahmin. The acute crisis of his personal morality, therefore, persisted with its final notes. The Brahmin insisted in his harsh demand. Harishchandra clung to his sovereign truthfulness. And therefore the higher-born, with the unique might of his voice, shouted: "Say, but once, you are unable to give me my full money and right then shall I go pleased, leaving you in peace."

For what he all along sought so studiously was not so much either the might of the kingdom or the power of the promised riches, but the unique gift of Harishchandra's *supreme failure*. For that alone meant the singular success of the vengeful Sage and the colossal defeat of his reputed superior.

In the momentous moral war caused by the ascetic's greed and intolerance, one persisted in his 'literal' authority, while the other struggled with his personal propriety. Each was clinging to his own unquestioned ground. While the Brahmin tried all his right, the king was proving all his truth. When the victim suffered the bitterest attack from without, he got fortified immensely from within. Then one rose adamant. The other stood committed. The invincible encounter, till then unknown, waged by the corruption of the earth and the nobility of the heavens, the challenge imposed by the mind's dross upon the heart's purity, mounted in the last few minutes, in lightning magnitude. It is a pity that not a third being from

Song of the Soul

the earth was there to witness the heart-rending scenes enacted with force to elevate the heart's own hidden glory to the zenith.

Yes, the earth utterly failed to assign its ambassador to report to the teeming millions of its creation the full news of this exemplary episode, and everything till now went unnoticed.

Mother earth born no doubt from the heavens above and nourished by the bounties of the sky, registered defeat in supporting Her lofty creation while he faced his severest agony. And so the Celestial Progenitor rushed himself to the spot, to save the crisis and complete the hazardous voyage of Truth. An uncouth human, clothed in repulsion, appeared all of a sudden, driving his pack of ugly dogs. Stopping a while, he felt drawn to the dialogue in front, in which one spoke strongly in sarcasm while the other softly in full submission. It revealed to him a strange fight for truth, to win it at any cost.

The humble voice muttered in full surrender before the arrogant claimant in front: "Alas, whither shall I now go? My wife and son already sold, I alone am left as mine. O honoured Sir, if I can but spot some rare one willing to buy this body of mine for the amount you still need, how fortunate will my fate be? I can then clear my last debt to you, and redeem my faithful promise. O Infallible Providence, where is that crucial buyer, whom you have cleverly hidden, who will yet come out of his hiding and afford me a clear life!

"Ah, there is yet another way before me. If you, O venerable Sir, will take me in lieu of the last bit of sum I owe you, then kindly make me your humble slave, and relieve me of my mind's intolerable burden. I will stand contented that my word has been true, my truthful life vindicated."

At this, the Brahmin was quick in his retort: "Of what use to me, an ascetic, given to rituals and austerity, are you, a stout *Kshatriya* (one of the fighter class)? In getting money lies my salvation of the moment! Find me, O man of firm resolve, the balance to make the promised ten thousand. Or say openly, in one breath, at least this last hour, *you cannot pay*. Verily, I look to no third means."

Song of the Soul

The surprised *Pariya* (a man of the lowest caste in ancient India) looked intently at the pleading personage who, he found, carried the rare traditional signs suggesting supreme goodness, worth and promise. “How has come such a great one here? Why for him this unseemly degradation”, he wondered.

One’s own need is greater than another’s honour. The set purpose of oneself is always the one to weigh more than the success or reward of the other. The world’s philosophy is ever rich in its protracted thoughts of *selfish reason*. With its doubtless quest for the Supreme Truth, the real philosophy stands always apart, forced to feel shy and lurk behind mankind’s glaring curtain.

The best virtues are more uttered and *praised* than thought and *lived*. If ever one rises in revolt and submits in devotion to tread an unbeaten track, he gets shunned by his own men and the rest in their notorious bid to correct him with their corruption, to make him wiser with the world’s noted shallowness and stealth. Yes, this is the obvious fight of the majority of all times against its rare marked rival, the onslaught of the common vice against the emergence of the uncommon virtue, the powerful current of a proud society upon the firm rock of a pious individual.

And it has ever been the history of the earth, the recurring moral record of the human kind. It prevails and persists, while the destined exception intercepts and repeats. This rule need hardly be learnt. For it is sure to be bequeathed by the force of mankind’s common heredity. The blessed exception is not so. It has to be heard, read and thought of, often and more, before one derives the sure inspiration to live it by himself, ready to lay down his life in its own ceaseless pursuit.

Then therefore, the *Pariya* suddenly felt a clear need for a stout man of the kind in his front, to be the guard of the crematorium he held under his charge. The man was to make friends with the dead by preparing the flames to send them off to the unseen heights. In daytime or at night, whether it pours or scorches, the *pariya*’s man should wait on the ground of burning to levy a toll each one of the dead had to pay before it was placed

Song of the Soul

on the ceremonial fire. The dues then were to reach the master the same day without fail. And here the *Pariya* lord found a befitting candidate for the post under him, which was lying vacant for nearly a decade.

So, he went forward in characteristic hesitancy, and broke into the dialogue, much to the annoyance of the Brahmin, and said: "I am ready to buy this stately person of extreme promise. He will rightly fill the long-waiting job under my lordship. Say, what the price is and here I pay it." Harishchandra sighed in full relief. The proposal had come just at the nick of time! In the formal procedure that followed, emerged an unthought obstruction, caused by the strength of the prevailing religious custom, to which the orthodox Brahmin added his own unquestionable weight. The proposed buyer, a lowly *pariya*, and the person he sought, a *Kshatriya*, greatly high in status, the whole deal defied all moral sanction!

Harishchandra again got disheartened. Even the last bolt of blessing, dropped by Chance, was being snatched at by the cursing fact of his higher birth. The impasse proved excruciating. But then came up the taunting Brahmin, well-versed in religious lore, with his marked solution. Citing precedents and quoting authority, he burst forth: "Here is the way out. You will first be taken by me. Once you become mine, I have the required authority to hand you over in sale to the *pariya*. That will gain for me my dues and give the *pariya* the right he looks for. Devoid of any religious blemish, you can safely be in his slavery."

It was still gratifying to the struggling Harishchandra. And this was the last act of obligation he could think of doing with freedom as a full individual. This done, his independence would instantly stand pledged to the lowly lord, and whatever the service under him meant from time to time. Like his erstwhile wife and son, his lot toppled from the palace to the footpaths, from opulence to destitution, and now from freedom as an individual to absolute servitude. Yet, his mind was contented that his word had been honoured and the last promise of his life fulfilled to the core. Is there anything still worse his path of truthfulness could lead him to? Can dedication of one's heart mean anything more baffling and painful? But then, does the sky have any upper limit? Is the human mind to be thought

Song of the Soul

akin to the skies? The more you penetrate, like the skies, will it also recede more? Is the mind's tolerance also endless? What is the ideal magnitude of the virtue called endurance?

However, the powerless king got saved from the evil clutches of the Brahmin creditor. The thought of debt haunted his mind no more. But here now stood and equally tyrannical lordship, even more demeaning to please and abide by. The new lord also, to prove his worth, tied his esteemed slave's hands, bidding him to go the way he showed. The cremation ground was made his permanent abode and place of work. On reaching the destination came the master's order: "Be watchful, ruthless when so needed. Remain loyal to the cause of the ground and the service of your master. Every body that finds his way to this ground must bring me my share of dues. Make no concession. Brooke no delay. Come never to me with an excuse or error. May all be well with you. Here do I now give you the sword of authority and protection, the sword which I inherited by my birth and profession. Preserve its worth; add to its esteem if you can."

With these words of order began the tragic role of the Cremation Guard. Soon came the epidemic season, and with that rushed to the guard heaps of the dead. Huge tolls collected and promptly accounted for; the *pariya* lord was greatly pleased by his faithful nominee. Zealous in his duty and loving to the master, the new guard rose up in reputation for the meanest job he held, both among the rich and the poor. His fiery truthfulness followed him wherever he went with its unfailing reward amidst the vilest of persecutions.

Then one mid-day came unannounced the helmeted guards, the emissaries of the palace, with the first woman culprit of misplaced repute they caught. The cremation guard was totally bewildered by the sight. "Ah, what is this? Here are generally brought the lifeless bodies, carried by its own men in a bier. How comes now a *live* woman tied in ropes, dragged by a team of royal nominees? The spiritless bodies go to the flames, but where is this spirited woman to go? What am I to do to her?"

Song of the Soul

By then the visitors yelled out the command of the king, commending it in crude vicious phrases, showing their anger at the woman and allegiance to the king. “Here do we convey what our great king has ordered. This wicked woman’s head shall be cut off in one stroke by the sharp sword you hold, to send her cruel soul to the scorching hells. Devoid of all ceremonies, having none to mourn the end, her body must be burnt with the wastes taken from the other burning pits. This is the dreadful thief of the town, who with wicked resolve has lifted a number of gentle children away in the blind nights of the month. Only last night did we succeed in our bid to lay hands on her crime. It was the last day of our tenure under the king. But, O Great God, it proved to be the last day for her! By robbing her life with your sword, many a mother of the town will live robbed of their terror. You, O *pariya’s* servant, are the most fortunate, for the great king has given you this high privilege! Hold her firmly. Let us go our way to tell the king of the duty we have done.”

Inner dictate, the ultimate deliverance

The guard of cremation heard the king’s order. He knew what it really meant. But his mind refused readily to think in the lines it was dictated to.

Love and loyalty, service and obedience, the full host of *duties* induced, compelled and instigated by these, and even by the other akin trends of human nature, all have no doubt, their allotted place. But above them all, at the last breath before a just and judicious action of a thoughtful human, committed in equal measure to the others and to himself, will ring infallibly the majestic tune of his inmost self. This tune is grounded upon the intrinsic worth of oneself, a merit which one’s own basic quality first bestows and then hosts for ever.

Before this benign tune, all the rest stand silenced. Above its unfailing call, none can proceed. Besides its doubtless compulsion, nothing of any kind can prevail. Heard well, clearly, it is a full sweet song, perhaps bitter at times to grasp and obey. When grasped in haste, it strikes as a broken note to go extinct soon in the gush of those lower in worth and crowded in their display. For the entire mankind, this Song of the Soul, reverberating within

Song of the Soul

oneself, its Monumental Message of Immortal Promise, is the ultimate force to reckon with in every situation, be it of delight or dejection, of acceptance or rejection.

The entire moral effort, the whole of mankind's religious and spiritual advance, equally so the wide variety of social and ethical norms, the many restraints and balances observed to preserve these, all have ultimately but one aim-to lift one's vision from outside to inside, to raise him from all external dependence and anchor his insight in its own independent loftiness. This, when achieved and preserved, gives the first and last direction to him in all his conflicts and crises, whether they are general or particular, personal or social, religious or moral. The potential individual becomes profound to the core; his actions reach the zenith of their heights, when he is able to find in himself a flawless master with his priceless message!

This supreme message of direction was now to break open from the Cremation Guard's innermost recess. His great call of duty, the full sense of commitment to it, the strength born out of his bitter experience from the task gained till then, the moral and social consequences threatening to follow, not one of these prevailed in front of the magnificent voice emerging from his own intrinsic goodness and worth. Held warmly in firmness by its might, his mind whispered:

"I, no more a king to meet the pressures of the throne, dispossessed as a husband by using the last right over his wife, to lose her for ever, have, by dint of the claim my present master has won over me, nothing to do with the *living*. My task, a trifle, is only with the dead, to burn the life-lost bodies, even that only after those who bring them here have left. Nothing more, nor less.

"Now here have left the royal men giving me the command of the king to do what I am forbidden to on a woman, who stands tied, in tears and suspense. The crime, if at all, is hers. The witness, if any, are the others. The judge, if he be, yet another in unchallengeable

Song of the Soul

power. But, alas, the punishment finally is mine. Verily, it will remain mine, and mine alone perhaps.

“The ones who order it to be done sit safe in their seats of pride, power and honour. But my seat will ever be in dishonour. Of what consequence is the approval or reward of them all, if it is to stand condemned by my sober sense and insight?

“One has to deserve the *moral repute*, first by his own intrinsic worth, the purity that belongs rightly to his action. Then alone is he noted and heard by the others around. The real sense of morality is first felt and hosted by oneself, and then does it become a guest of honour for the rest. The unseen, but all-seeing, truth of oneself is the greater when judged in front of the truth held as ‘seen’ by mankind. The undimmed conscience is the ultimate witness and judge in all crucial moments of life. The self within is the sovereign custodian for it in all.

“Here, now, turned down by all the rest, I turn up to it in full. When the words of order coming from the outside lords have failed me, I look implicitly to the behest of the inner lord, known never to fail. Every one and all may desert one in the world, but not so oneself, one’s own Self. The Self within shining, the others get their lustre, the seeming power to shine in their own distinguished light.

“This Supreme Truth is seldom known, as is its seeker hard to find. I, a humane seeker of truth, am resolved to find the sovereign light within. Ah, is this resolve of mine a denial, a preference born of the weakness of flesh? O, not at all. My enriched tradition tells me so, O, it further adds....Not a poor surrender, but a rich success instead.....”

Silence ruled the kingly slave for the few minutes that followed. It was still vibrant. He stood, eyes closed, drowning his emotions and suspending all thoughts at reason.

Song of the Soul

The task of the hour was yet unfinished. Thoughts though ended, the action was yet to begin. Dragged by slavery, but held back still by the might of the unenslavable soul within, the tormented guard walked home to his master to tell him of the crisis and plead his final stand of refusal.

The master heard his servant's confession. The appeal made on the plea of human gesture, the minimum restraint, which even the vilest of men owes, for his own sake, to the meanest woman of disgrace, had no worth and status before his prudence. He remarked sternly: "A crime is a crime at any level of reason. If a woman is bent to do what the strongest man shudders to think of, it makes the crime doubly heinous. And the criminal invites a more gruesome end.

"What then if the king has ordered you to cut off her head? If the king's command lacks the power to take away your fear and weakness, then to his now I add mine too. Squared in strength, the order of slaughter must safely lift your mind above all doubts. However, from this definite role of a human butcher, you have no right to claim any redemption."

The master's words of approval pushed Harishchandra's steps back to where they came from, where the woman in ropes stood faithfully awaiting his quick return. On the way back, his mind struggled on: "Ah, what a thunderous progression for my mind! The master disclaims my stand, defends the king's. Of what moral worth is my thought then? Is it all the folly of my own mind? Are its thoughts of morality a sly escape from the glaring facts of earth?

"Is mankind all wrong, and am I alone correct? Or is the reverse true now? Am I a human, and the others all beasts? Or am I what they, I think, are?"

His thoughts persecuted themselves. Sentiments struggled with one another. There was revolt, tumult, agony, pathos, utter helplessness, but his unsatiable spirit still prevailed. The tussle lingered on.

Where was the way out? Not from within, as he first thought it was. But the woman held in ropes used the freedom her mouth had to rescue the guard

Song of the Soul

in his direst crisis. “My husband already lost in slavery, my son also gone falling an innocent prey to the deadly breath of a cobra, I too must have left the world right then. Therefore, my dear guard, debate not upon my life, its preservation. I need your mercy, in the clever use of your sword. Its slash through my neck is the only salvation I cherish. Hesitate not then, my dear friend, to flash your sword and free my soul!

“I have but one prayer, O my last saviour, before you do this. My little son, his body blue with the serpent’s venom, is lying afar. His body, though not his, is still mine. He owes not anything to it. But, I owe him something. Give me leave, therefore, O lord, to fetch him here. I also plead that you wait till his last remains are consumed by the fire of your ground. And then, in all firmness of resolve you can lead me to the fate the king has ordered and your master has confirmed. Let the serpent lying in your scabbard take my spirit away as did the other living in the distant woods. By that will you be saving me forever.”

This at once shook the entire moral ground of the guard. He was once again belied by what he knew as common ethics and what he now found it was. “What, this culprit of a woman to speak in such graceful terms! Though standing to behead her by an order she invited, I am still addressed as a *saviour*. To release her life forces away by this sword is, she says, the choicest blessing of the hour. Surely lurks here a queer mystery! This cannot be the woman whom the royal men hunted in despair, or who the king thought in haste was a criminal.

“However, my heart bids me to value her innocence and give the leave she earnestly seeks. Like her dead son lying at a distance, I, living enslaved in these grounds, too am of a mother. Can even the heavens withhold the right a mother holds by her status on earth? Come, therefore, what may. Let me send her to where she wants to go, wait myself here in league with the foul air of my grounds till she arrives. For one already sunk up to his nose what is there in getting fully drowned? Kill I shall, as ordered, but the consent sought of me I shall not deny either. This part of the deadly encounter rests solely with her and me. It is a fair alliance of ours, sought by her crying heart and sanctioned alike by mine, both equally dedicated to noble

Song of the Soul

humanhood. O good heavens condone me for my transgression, if it be one.”

Her ropes made loose by the friendly guard in full mercy, the woman went off, to come back as promised, carrying the breathless son on her head and shoulders. When an august mind in distress or hope, pins itself down to a definite aim, the body follows it, throwing away all its rules and limitations. If heavy, it turns light; if lame, it begins to run; if weak, it grows suddenly strong. This is the hidden power of the spirit over the evident strength of matter. The power of loyalty, the resolve of distress, the behest of graceful motherhood, the promise of the hour of death, all collecting together gave her the supreme strength which her frail body and the heartless men of the palace denied in full. That is how the helpless woman got her strength to carry the child on her way back, as if the surrounding air pulled and pushed her at every step.

Her promise fulfilled, the son brought to his unceremonial pyre, the mother was greatly relieved. And so was the guard, strangely, who said to himself, unheard: “Graceful indeed. Even the murderous culprit hosts in her a simple guileless heart. The mind, which once swerved from virtue to vice, can also reverse its course. The secret which one’s soul holds within it is indeed marvellous. In the long *self-denying* life of mine, this is verily a self-redeeming moment. That makes it dearer too.”

The woman laid her burden down. Making the child lie gently on the hot ground, she again burst forth in lament: “Where is, O son, your father, the great king of Ayodhya, whom you and I had to leave by fate? O lord, my child’s proud father, how can I reach to you this terrible news of your son? Or will you come now yourself to take the last glimpse at your son’s body, waiting here to meet the scorching flames. I have heard of a sixth sense for all good humans to serve them in dire need, when all the five prove inadequate. O gracious Air, be kind to give his father this sixth sense from your precious store. Ah, what shall I tell him if ever he comes a minute late, after the body is turned to ashes? Nay, will I be here if at all he comes?”

Song of the Soul

“O my beloved prince, where took place your birth? And where now is your death? What sin have I done in this life or the one earlier, to bring this ignoble plight to you, my great son? The only sin of yours is the fact of your birth from my wretched womb. O, I wish I were barren.”

In the silent horror of the burning ground, the cremation guard did hear all that the bereaved lady said. Every time she uttered the words *king* and *prince*, unknowingly he shook. A strange tremour passed from his head to foot. The heart beating faster, the abdomen sent up the unusual waves of burning. It was clear that behind the pressure of slavery lived strongly the genuine call of hidden parenthood!

The woman fell into a full swoon, unable to contain her pangs of grief and separation. The guard then went to the boy, removed gently the cloth from his face. Looking closely, he fell into a sudden suspense. For, lo, the blue face showed the unique marks he knew, was fully familiar with. “Where is my son, resembling this boy well, whom I, the accursed father, sold for clearing my debt? Ah, this good boy has met a cruel fate. But what better fate has followed *my son*, living equally cursed? Where lives his mother?

Are they living together? Or has the jealous Fate separated them too, as She did me from them?”

The mother by then revived her senses, to cry out again in greater distress, cursing, above all, her failure to inform the father of his son’s last news. So long only the dead son, but now equally the ‘living’ father, both threw her mind to the severest agony.

Lo, the scene, by now, had strangely invaded the guard’s mind too. He tried in despair to suppress his emotions, to deny to himself what was happening, but every next moment his folly came to greater revelation. For the cries of bereavement shook his heart, as the mother wailed over the son linking him with his father, holding the plight of both as undeserving on all fronts:

Song of the Soul

“O malignant fate, is there anything you did not do to the glorious king? His fortunes you robbed his throne you usurped, for what? *Truthful* he was, and he ever wanted to be! Was this a fault, for which you punished him in this way? Still are you satisfied? Making him walk poor on the streets, you chased him cruelly, to snatch away in a month his wife and son in utter slavery. Have you cared to tell him, any time since, what has happened to them after the fated sale? True, he lost all his right over us. But does not his blood-full heart still have the right to know the welfare of his kith? And what about our need either? Did you but once tell my son, before his death, of his father’s news, be it happy or horrid? Even now, what have you to tell me, left alone like this, counting the last hour of my survival?

“Tell me if the great king of Ayodhya, the single man of the purest resolve, is still breathing or not? Is he now the same free king, his son and his wife knew him to be when they left? Or have you dared to drag him too to slavery, as you mercilessly did we two. You know, O all-knowing Fate, I, a Hindu woman, live nurturing always the traditional hope of leaving this abode when my husband, though unknown, is still living. Bereft, by dint of your recurring curses, of all the blessings of earth I know, can you, at least in this last *muhurta*¹⁵ of my life, give me this single blessing of the heavens – to precede my husband in death?

“O, I find you *kind* at last! For, that is why this heinous crime has been thrust upon me by the king’s men and the king alike, which brought me here before this strange, yet friendly butcher of my life! Will this be robbed of again, in the last minute, by your more villainous moves?

“O Destiny, I have lost all faith in your succour, I leave your earth with the last account of my failure, in any case. You have made me succeed in my duty to the son. But in the duty to my husband, I am still unfulfilled.

¹⁵ A significant, auspicious moment

Song of the Soul

“O friendly guard, may you be the lone witness in this plight of mine, of the tears I shed on this last cause of a woman’s life upon Mother Earth. Report, if you feel, to the denizens of the heavens the real story of my failure, so that at least those above the earth will know it in truth. The news will still reach my ‘lost’ lord when he gains his seat of honour in the celestial abode.

“Surely, all of us live in this earth, but our life is meant to be lived more in the heavens. The tenure here is short, at any rate, but in the supreme heights above it is long, even endless. So, failed completely by this world, I go to the celestial heights, to wait there for the arrival of my beloved one, in pious hope and faith.”

The guard’s suspicion was fast declining. “Who is the king”, he asked in his own mind, “this lady cries out to? How penetrating are her loyalty and devotion to him? Is all I see and hear true? Can it be just imagination? Then is the daylight before me a myth? The rest too cannot be untrue then.”

Causing an undreamt revolt in the guard’s mind, the lamentation threw her into a longer swoon. That was a startling moment for the man by her side. He stepped to the lifeless child. And, lo, neither was a stranger to the other now! Losing all his *slavely courage*, but gaining instead the missing father’s love as if in deluge, he fell uncontrollably over the breathless boy. Knocking his head on the ground, kissing his son from head to foot, he lifted the body from the earth to press it to his starving bosom. Bewailing his own negligent lot, pleading helplessly before the son’s, he fought piteously to conquer death by life, or lose life in the combat! Alas, he could not succeed in either. His long story of pathos now reached its horrid climax. What worse can a man of truth suffer yet? Can the sly destiny think of working anything more crucial? “Ah, what a fitting reward for my life of truthfulness? Still greater blessing for the innocence of my priceless prince! What to say of the rich compensation bestowed upon my great queen, a peerless wife and mother alike!”

The woman rose up again to sense what went on between the tall guard and the blue child. She was stunned. In the surprise of the moment, she stood

Song of the Soul

utterly forgetful of her son, herself and also the guard. Could she believe what it was all about? Or could she afford to disbelieve? Looking now at the lean unclean body of the man, she compared it with the loveliest pages of her memory. She was still not sure in her mind. Doubting and curious, she blurted forth: “Say, how came you here? And from where? What is this guard’s role for you? Where is your wife, if you have one; and the child, if there was one?”

The guard now recognized her finally. They looked at each other, heard one another, reinforced their memory to add strength to their grief and share equally the common irretrievable loss. Was there, amidst all this, a sense of elation at mutual discovery, the unthought-of reunion? Yes, perhaps. But where was the time to give vent to it?

The Air was not mute as it is taken to be. For it did respond to the desperate prayer of its esteemed beneficiary! Yes, the sixth sense the lonely woman begged for had really been born, when the lower five together failed in their vital mission of the hour! The heavens, seeing the world below inadequate to render its timely help, descended indeed in one great leap to deliver the inevitable rescue. The lost rhythm of the human lot, it proved, was not really lost. It was but lurking proudly for a while, to compel a greater search by its more earnest votaries.

Wife excels, husband honours

With the lost father of the son now gained, Chandramati’s mind grew light on one account. She entrusted the guard with the full task of burning the dead body, not alone as the cremation guard but also as the father of the dead. She, therefore, requested him to prepare the flames, but said:

“Before doing that, take, O lord, the sword, as ordered by the king and as promised to your master, to cut off my head. You must be true, as ever, to your master, to the cause of his service. Do not doubt or fear. I have, after all, come to your presence in the end, though with our son dead. By the report of the king’s men, the witness, and the verdict of the king, the supreme judge, I am the murderer of the

Song of the Soul

dead, our only son. Although the one to know the truth has now known it, the fact seen and heard is stronger, and therefore, the verdict it compelled must prevail. The unseen truth has no claim whatever, when the seen facts disprove its whole place and worth.

“I lived by your side ever since I became yours, to help you in your duty, striving myself in the cause. That day it was I who begged you to place me in open auction. I did so for the same cause of your duty, a cause that binds you and me fast. Well, it was an issue of sale at that time. Now it is of beheading. Even then what? That common cause of ours, the *supreme call of duty*, which held me then in my resolve, led you to your painful step, is, even now, at this last juncture, the highest goal before you and me alike.

“Our alliance, sacred and wholesome, was surely meant not alone to *live* our joint life but also to *leave* it outright when that becomes the command of the hour! All this protracted travail of yours should not, my lord, be led astray just at this last moment of its completion, due to the trifling neglect of either of us. You were born for truth, you have lived for its supremacy, and now kill you must, also for the sake of the same cause of truth. It is the king’s order for you, while the crowning salvation for me, your wife. If you construe it an act of merciless slaughter, I regard it the most covetable reward of honour. For all the afflictions and tortures I bore till now, this will be the final redress. Need I remind you, my lord, how restless is the female mind of our land to court death in the husband’s arms? At a time, for a cause like ours now, this is exceedingly so.

“Hear, therefore, the last word of my appeal, take your master’s sword and cut off this head of mine, this humble head which always loved to bow at your feet, to make it fall there once and for all. It is the greatest fortune which my life on earth can win for itself. By affording me this supreme wealth, my heart will be richly fulfilled.”

What a cruel hearing! The guard, no, the king Harishchandra, reached the ultimate limits of his mind’s virtuous tolerance. “What”, he wondered, “is

Song of the Soul

the fire of my truthfulness to be blown up by such a turbulent wind? How dare my wife pour forth so much of hot oil onto my burning heart. O, I am wrong! Is this not the Chandramati, my godly wife, who always excelled me in virtues and defeated me in resolves, to save me from dishonour? To show me and many others that the alliance which blood makes finds its supreme sweetness when it takes both to the union of the souls! What a lot more did she teach me, more by action and less by words?

“Ever present by my side, she has always lifted me up whenever my mind fell in weakness or exhaustion. Her instantaneous resolves were always superior to my impervious reason. Without her, verily, I would have lost my entire worth, and perished poorly in demerit.

“However, O my dearest, your Harishchandra is helpless in using the sword of his master on your neck. I do know I have no permission to say this. Shall I then slay myself? I have no right for that either. For my life is my master’s now. But surely, I am letting you go, O my Chandramati. Go to the Brahmin from whose house you came, promising whom you went to Lohitaaksha lying dead in the forest. Serve him again loyally. Let not this life of mine bother your work. Our son has already left us. We have left with us only the cause of our duty, the endless mission of faithful service. Preserve this precious gift always. Go, Chandramati, go, I beg of you.”

Chandramati was more adamant in her appeal. Harischandra proved equally resistant. One held the call of duty supreme, even above the strongest pull of the mind’s human sentiments. The other pleaded that all conceivable duties stood terminated at this tragic level of humanness, when the human mind is driven to its final limit of tolerance.

“Even duty is a means” said the king. “If my master’s master is now a king, I was one myself, not very long ago, who never took a decision in haste. So my king’s order has a sure limitation. True, the seen facts do dislodge the unseen truth. But, what when the truth sheds its mask and begins to shine with blinding lustre?

Song of the Soul

“If the judge is wrong, his judgement deserves boycott. If he be partial, his judicial merit will be in question. The honest man should hurry to shun it outright, in his own interest and the judge’s. The earth often goes wrong. For wrong is the major content of its history. If corruption is the rule, let the corrupt, those who can stand dilution to their hearts, not smitten by any better sense, abide by it. But they alone. Mankind cannot ignore its singular men, those whom the tired Creator comes down in person to woo in despair to get His long-sought relief, whom corruption dreads, cunningness hates, and camouflage shudders at. For they are the ones born to blow up patiently the brilliant spark of the human, that central part of Godly purity, around which builds mankind its impure heredity, to make it blaze forth in the bluest of flames, so that the nobler hearts, benumbed by the depressing sights of the common lot, are enabled to go near and bask themselves, for getting their much-needed comfort and hope.

“So, press me not with your stand, any more. Make no more pleas. I am the one to beg of you, not you of me. When I married you, it was but the usual event of a royal alliance. At best I had wooed you in the heights of romance.

Little did I know of any different purpose, much less of one higher. You were just a wife, an honoured queen. But now you stand entirely apart. The wife in you is not the one whom the men of the world have known of till now. You are one far greater, higher and deeper. O good heavens, I thank you from the core of my heart, if this poor act, done so late, can mean anything at this juncture, for bringing my heart so close to *your* Chandramati’s. Surely, it cannot be a mere plan of this admixed earth a man, indeed, learns more, derives more and reveals more when rightly nursed and sheltered by the woman. Mankind may tell the story differently. But this is the story I lay openly before them on my behalf, on behalf of the men of worth and integrity, on behalf equally of the great and loyal women, the holy mothers of the entire mankind.

“For the powerful king, falsehood of justice gave its poor light. For me, the powerless let the truth of falsehood give its supreme light of the hour. O, did I, in my bitter fate, speak ill of the Inner Lord, the Great Self within? I

Song of the Soul

beg my pardon now. The Outer Lord belied His seat of honour, but the one Inner has held his esteem gloriously. Let my mind close itself in silence before His imposing light. My way is the one which He shows.

“O Chandramati let my sword remain in its own sheath. Let it rest there to be picked up by the master who tied it to my waist, after he comes here to find me no more.

“You, my dear, I have no strength to kill. Me, I have no sanction to slay. What then is my course now?”

“Ah”, said the king to himself, “the Scriptures of our land have also given their thoughts to the matter.” For their aim, at every step, is to give the gracious succour to the tormented heart. They are clear in their analysis of the world, for they have found it to be inexplicable in many of its ways. The more one challenges the world, the stronger will it hit back. Yet, we are born in it, bred by it, and also destined to lay down our lives in it. For the noblest and the vilest alike, the fall of the body is the ultimate gain on earth. Life, however lived, has to end.

Of all the afflictions which mankind is called upon to suffer, the *moral struggle of the mind* is the most painful and dislodging. The crisis of the mind, brought by its deep moral sense, is sufficient to unnerve the strongest man and throw him into severe distress. The rich often die with their mind’s poverty and weakness; while the poor, on the other hand, in full enrichment of their heart.

For the body to live, the mind must exist first and last. The body, by itself, serves no purpose. The real cause to be served is that of the inner mind, at all times. The mind’s insoluble crisis is much worse than the body’s incurable disease. That is why our land has produced endless literature to deal with the mind’s problems and fates, and gain for mankind the fullest of mental wealth.

Song of the Soul

Moral guilt and recompense

There are instances which reversed the fate of an individual just when his mind suffered a moral defeat while attempting to do what he proposed to. By a magical turn of the mind's direction, a criminal turns away from his crime. So too, a moralist can drop his body if that be the *call of correction* before him. Once it literally happened.

Diwaakara of old, the best student of his teacher's choice, whom the teacher also loved most, and therefore reprimanded freely – that was the teachers' prerogative those days – realized the folly of his mind much too late. Instigated by hate he had made his attempt at the teacher's life. He waited upon the roof of the teacher's house, holding a large stone ready, intending to drop it on his master's head at night. Chance played its mysterious hand to deceive the student and the master alike, so was it proved in the end. Just then the mistress of the house, who too loved Diwaakara more than her son, questioned her husband: "What is wrong with the boy? I always hear you rebuke him."

At this, came the teacher's feeling reply: "O, he is the best student of the class, whom my heart also loves most. I want him to be superb in his ways and ripe in his thoughts. From such boys are to flow the perennial lessons of life to the mankind of our globe."

"Alas", thought the boy, "where do I stand now? What is this travesty of faith, of goodness? Me, the teacher loves most. But him I hated to the core. My ears heard his words. But my mind failed to echo his thoughts. My teacher, on the other hand, saw me, and also sensed my worth. As his eyes saw, so did his mind think too. Mine a 'double' failure, while his 'squared' success! What shall I, the defeated, do now?"

Where lies my redemption? In love any excess is condoned. But in hate not a single concession is allowed. The law of even the primitive mankind is firm on this fundamental value. It upholds an act, when it is upheld by unsullied love. But it is out to punish anything which hate causes and furthers."

Song of the Soul

Diwaakara's mind stopped for a while. He laid aside the stone, to spend the night in restless thought. Next morning, his ablutions over, he went straight to the teacher and asked: "O great sir, many lessons I have learnt from you, those which neither the parents nor friends can teach. I cannot return to you the wealth you have given me in love and care. So, I give you my heart's prostration in full regard and reverence. There is one more lesson my heart seeks to learn. Be kind enough to teach me that too."

Though surprised, the teacher stood ready to respond in his usual grace.

Asked Diwaakara then his teacher: "If a faithful student, in thoughtless resentment, attempts to kill his teacher, what form of punishment does the act deserve? For any kind of crime, there is punishment. But what recompense is there for this innocent crime of a pupil?"

"Why are you asking me this," the teacher questioned. "Just to know, to complete my knowledge," replied the student.

The teacher was obliged to answer. "The criminal has to immolate himself in neck-deep embers, to die a very slow death."

Diwaakara was immensely relieved. He said: "O great and kindly teacher, my saviour of the hour, I am the crime-doer, who now deserves the full punishment you have stipulated." The teacher fell into inconsolable distress. But alas, it was late, too late. His student was bent on winning the destined recompense.

Diwaakara dug a round pit deep enough. Bringing heaps of paddy husks, he jumped in, filled the pit with husk up to his neck, and then set fire to it. Was it an act of suicide? Can you say it was an escape from life which threatened to fail? By all adorable means, it was a painful requital the faithful student resorted to cheerfully, to relieve him, while alive, from his deep moral guilt to restore his soul to its own pristine purity. Where is the thought of suicide in such a graceful act of correction and redress at once?

Song of the Soul

His body shrouded in smoke, his mind and heart blazing in full inspiration of the soul, the matchless poetry of the hour was born. Delivered by his young mouth, recorded by his sorrowing friends watching helplessly, it deals with the holy birth and masterly exploits of the Great Sri Krishna. The matchless composition, to complete which, Kaalidasa, the Great poet of our land, when tempted, was truly dissuaded from within, still lives in our men and women, enlivening their spirits and elevating their hearts. Heard long ago, my mind still cherishes it to enliven these pages here, centuries after it was first born and rendered to palm-leaf.

The esteemed land of ours has even more astounding accounts of *morality at stake* and the faithful heroism it then gave rise to, to tell the seekers and the distressed. If it was the surrender of the whole body for Diwaakara, it is the sacrifice of the most useful thumb of the right hand for Ekalavya, the archer boy, the chosen favourite of Sage Vyasa, in pursuit of the moral cause of devotion to the teacher.

The demand of the hour determines, in such distressing instances, the sublime means of relieving the mind's torment.

The memory of his student days flashed vividly in Harishchandra's mind. His teacher's voice had grown rich and powerful when he was expounding the intrinsic right of an individual when faced by insoluble moral distress. If one's moral vision failed himself sadly, where lay his redress? "Of all things that drain a man of his health, strength and even the basic love to live." The teacher had said, "The crisis caused by one's own *moral thought*, is the most devastating."

Harishchandra's memory persisted: "The teacher who taught me the holy lore was then very emphatic while he discussed what constitutes the supreme formula of the moralist when met by the ultimate challenge of his life. He certainly showed immense forethought in dealing with the crucial problem. Little did he or I at the time know that the discussion, which formed part of the theory I was to learn, would become a vital means of deliverance in my actual life which was to follow.

Song of the Soul

Morality at stake

“Here now grips me firmly the last struggle of my moral life. It gives me the full taste of what my teacher strove hard to drive home to me then. The solution lies evidently in resorting to the last means of sacrifice, the sacrifice that *marks the very end of one’s life* on this earth, and therefore the final cessation of all his problems and pains!

“The peerless tradition of our land has the best of esteem for this last act of blameless nobility. Sacrifices there are of several kinds, orders and worth. The wise people have rated them with their inimitable vision. But all of these sacrifices, the acts of parting with, are true, will become possible, only when the basic factor of life is present empowering the body to live and act.

“Preserving foremost one’s life, in pursuit then of the ideal or delight he so greatly cherishes, does man give away whatever he likes and can afford. It is sacrifice, no doubt, ennobling too. I have done it in rich measure often. In a moment was given my large kingdom. With riches also I parted in full. The same spirit of sacrifice, persevering dauntlessly, took me to the next extreme step of selling my wife and child like common products of trade, which have now come back to me, one crushed, the other broken! I then sold myself, nay only the service of my body. Nonetheless, all this was still incomplete, for everything was done keeping one singular possession safe, the *life-force* which animates the body, from which proceed every breath, deed, and thought of morality. Was not my aim to preserve this dearest life, to derive from it the joy and contentment it would still afford from its deeper chambers? By gifting first, by selling next, by courting slavery last, I still found my need to live, an undying love to preserve and nourish my life upon this earth!

“And now, what? Where have all these acclaimed acts of surrender taken me to? The very things which I did have recoiled upon me with redoubled ache and challenge, making my life intolerable to the core, and therefore,

Song of the Soul

inviting me to take the ultimate steps in the same moral progression. If I honestly believe in what all I thought, said and did till now, I must at this juncture too, rise up in resolve to perform the final act of giving, that of sacrificing the last belonging of mine in the world. When this last possession stands relinquished, the fullness of giving is attained, and the noble spirit of morality is led to its final abode of fruition and victory.

“By doing this, I will not be disloyal to my master, or disobedient to the king. For only when my body thrives in vital breath, when I, as a living person, am present before them, questions like these will become relevant. Before one who seeks nothing from other, who wishes neither to give offence nor to take defence, the whole world has no claim whatever.

“Surely, this is not a venture at escape. The motive is neither hate nor fear. It is not an attempt at suicide either. Free from all thoughts of duty, right or obligation, it strikes me as the last means to bestow a full moral release for a mind committed to truth, and therefore, to refrain from all unjust harming. Truth shines at its best when pursued in the light of friendliness and non-harming. Strangely, but cheerfully, shall I resort to this last known step of the moral human to deliver himself from inescapable distress, which even a life of pure dedication inflicts upon his lot.

Turning now to his wife, he added:

“My dear Chandramati, I shall prepare a larger and wider pyre for my Lohitaaksha, your son. Placing him first on it as his father, I shall light the wood in full submission to your wishes and mind. But my task will not terminate there. I will also, by that, be *lighting my own pyre* to make the same fire burn my living body with the dead one of our son. But before I can do this, you must leave me and your son, for I know you cannot bear this torturous sight. I have no power to give another’s life off to the flames, while I fully have to give mine. Let us take leave of each other, before our pangs become stronger and blind our wits and resolve beyond redemption. Pardon me for all the hurt and pain I have caused you in sport or in fact. Be sure there was no intent. My aim was always to love you and delight in your

Song of the Soul

honour. Between a loving pair, all transgressions receive their implied permission. Now go and may you fare well!”

Chandramati was relieved by her husband’s last decision, but not pleased! Emboldened by the unique prospect his words held out, she submitted, this time with a more feminine force:

“The confessions you make, O lord, I fully adore. The last decision of your life I also accept. The right you have claimed to decide how your destiny should end, I acknowledge without reservation. But, my dear lord, by the same line of thought, I beseech you to give me my right to terminate alike my destiny too. If *surrender of the very life is the last answer for one’s mind* when met by ‘inescapable’ moral demands and persecutions, then the same course must absolve me from even the last duties you have enjoined upon me at this impossible hour of our life. If you have chosen to follow the fate of your son, then allow me the freedom to follow at once him and you alike. Our son, alas, does not know that I shall be doing this. But my dear lord, I want you to know it.

“We began our life together before our son came into the world. I lost you, but had him to live by so far. Now I have lost him for ever. By the very fate which brought his death, have I also been brought to your side again, though unwittingly. I, the mother, made so to protect her son, was ordained by fate to pose by his side as the culprit of his death. Fate’s cruelty and the wickedness of its messenger, both joining their invisible hands, have ultimately fetched for me your living presence. Having won your sight, against all my remotest hope, let me not make the error of moving an inch from here or from you. Shall I say our son died as he did to unite me, his mother, with you, his father! If he had not given his hand to the vile serpent, perhaps I and my son would have continued in abject slavery even this hour.

“However, the loss is ours together, the gain surely his. I thank him for what he has done for our cause, by choosing to become extinct

Song of the Soul

himself. Now the object fulfilled, I have no more mission on earth to live for.

Therefore, O venerable Brahmin, my erstwhile master, I pay my obeisance to you, for the last kind sanction you gave for going to the forest so late at night. O vengeful cobra, though you injected your poison on my child to kill him, verily by that act did you afford me a lingering kiss of comfort, for your act has blessed me with the last gain I so much cherish. My delayed gratitude to your concealed intention!

“O red guards of the palace, the eyes which spotted my body that night blessed my lot first, and then alone yours. But for your bold judgment of the hour, the strong ropes you held me with, the constant rebuke you showered on my ears, I would have missed the strength to reach this great abode of release.

“O king of the land, yours was not a ruthless order, but a tacit kindly reward. May our soul be richly blessed and your kingdom thrive in full prosperity.

“O beloved lord, I have said my farewell to the world, not however to you, my dear. Prepare the pyre even wider than you planned you will, to make it give me also a place. Sanction my right to share with you the funeral pyre of our son. Let us part together from the world in the hope to meet our Lohitaaksha in the heavens above, to give him the word of our reunion. This way neither will you be guilty nor will I be accursed, nor again will our son miss us any more! Come, my dear lord, we shall together carry our blue boy to consign him to the flames, asking them to devour us also alongside.”

The tragic end

Harishchandra's mind complimented his wife heartily. The grace and resolution which marked her words took him by surprise. He was left with nothing now to refute, refuse or modify whatever Chandramati proposed.

Song of the Soul

The only task remaining was to prepare the stage for the great event, asking his fire to win the twin task of cremating the dead and immolating the living.

Any more thought or time, if allowed, would prove suicidal. For the king's men and his master's messenger were likely to arrive any moment on the scene to verify his obedience and loyalty. The guard, therefore, got busy to gather the remnants of wood from the several pits he had lighted and to set up the big pyre on which could be laid his child and would lie his parents to welcome jointly the last fire due on this earth.

The king went to his hut and laid aside his sword with the few other belongings. Going then to Chandramati, he signalled her to start. The father held the dear son by his head while the mother lifted his feet. Head placed towards the south, they reached the awaiting pyre to place their load gently in the middle.

It was the mother's turn now to get upon first and take her place of rest to the right of her son's. Taking his last look at the dying mother and the dead son, the father picked up the funeral torch to light the pyre customarily at the three specified places. Making sure the fire was ready to burn; he too followed his wife to lie motionless beside the son and his mother.

And so the great moral adventure, in which the inseparable couple vied admirably with each other to gain this extraordinary end, in which also played the artless prince his benign role of prolonged silence, which nonetheless conveyed its eloquent signals now and then to his parents, was well nigh its marked fruition. Hardly was a score of moments left for the funeral fire to do its unprecedented task of devouring the dead along with the added taste of the living. It was a cruel scene in every way, nevertheless gratifying to those faithful two, who brought it about and were still enduring its fate.

Mother Earth, who was already aching under the *grave guilt of neglect* shown to two of Her distinguished creations, was at last awakened to Her folly. The resolve to make immediate amends caused visible tremours in

Song of the Soul

Her bosom, for the victims were already in the jaws of Death. The waves of agitation soaring high into the vast skies were echoed promptly by the denser layers of clouds surrounding the ghastly cremation ground. The rebounding signals of response were caught faithfully by the low fire, the immediate ally of both, which forthwith decided to honour the message by ignoring the order of the cremation guard it held at the time. And thus the mounting flames were called back instantly to remain hiding gently in the pyre, leaving only the heatless smoke to pervade the incomplete scene.

The increased smoke, fired with many unknown powers of healing, bestowed surprisingly by the assorted heaps of herbal wood, thickly surrounded the pyre, stifling the stronger two of its prey, lying alive, while struggling hard to revive the weaker one assumed to be lying dead in the middle. The young body driven irresistibly to a prolonged coma the moment the serpent's venom entered its blood, must have received a reviving touch when the black smoke entered its pores with an unexpected potency. Was it an outcome caused by the earth's own natural phenomena? Or did the invisible rule of the heavens extend for a while its purview to the lower planet in the Creator's lightening resolve of Mercy, is as hard to discern as to dismiss altogether!

For Sage Vishwamitra, whose will and direction were at the back of the entire drama, was nearly consumed by the pressure of events. Disillusioned, feeling humble to the core, he accepted his defeat and the glorious success of Vasishtha, his elegant superior, whose words he had challenged on the strength of his ascetic powers and merit. But then it was too late to stop, think or proceed after a while. So he, in miraculous speed, reached the cremation ground. While the royal couple were still on the death-defying pyre of theirs, fighting the unusual smoke the funeral fire mercifully puffed forth, the Sage arrived running, and piercing the column of smoke, he pronounced the unique words of benediction and apology:

“Rise up, O king; I am defeated by your truth. You and your queen have won your cause, bringing success to your life and life to your son. My first task is to revive your now-lost Lohitaaksha, and this I will instantly.”

Song of the Soul

When the parents heard Vishwamitra, they jumped to their feet to fall at his, in all humility and reverence. “O graceful Sir, pardon us for the trouble we have given you. With all our devotion and piety we struggled hard to preserve, if we still have caused the smallest hurt to our valued person, kindly pardon us, the confused mortals. Our aim was to be truthful at any cost, and this we did mean to pursue till our last. We might have erred in our judgement, slipped in our path, argued insensibly on our stand, but with all this, sincere we were, and we ever wanted to be. If not for anything else, at least for the sake of the earnestness of our cause, kindly give us your pardon. Only when godly men like you, O venerable Sir, set their feet on this earth, do we get the wholesome air of righteousness and morality to breathe and live by. May we deserve your blessings now and ever.”

By now, the tall sage, carrying the staff of knowledge and the holy water pot, had gone near the son’s body to sprinkle holy water on the boy’s person. This over, he took the life-giving fluid he had specially brought and poured it into Lohitaaksha’s nose. The unique power of sentience infused by the vibrant mystic chants of his ascetic mind also did its work, to impart life afresh to the alleged dead. And lo, his wishes worked, as did the prayers of the parents. The blue body was shedding its colour. Blood was beginning to flow. The inactive lungs started to show signs of renewed vigour. And, in two moments the heart had its first jerk. That marked the end of Lohitaaksha’s short-lived hibernation. The beloved son and the loving parents were again together, as if he woke from an unfamiliar sleep and his parents from a perplexing dream. The parents, their son now accompanying, again fell prostrate before the reputed sage, who said reassuringly:

The Ascetic’s message

“I am the first and the last culprit of your entire plight. In the assembly of the great, Sage Vasishtha made an acclaiming reference to your truthfulness. My mind, steeped ever in intolerance, also in subtle greed, revolted at the great approbation made by the most holy. The reference he made was to you, O esteemed king. But, alas, the person hurt at heart was

Song of the Soul

instantly I, myself. It was strange, cruel, unpardonable, yet my turbulent mind succeeded in victimizing my spirit.

“I rose up in revolt, protesting:’ No, it cannot be. I shall not support your claim. Your Harishchandra will be proved untrue, and here I go to disprove your words and vindicate mine.’

“The same intolerance (the dangerous hole which the rats of earth make on the heavenly heart of the humans) pulled me away from the merits I had gained with struggle, dislodged me from the lofty pedestal of holiness I was intent on reaching. In the breach that occurred in just a moment’s fraction, the huge waters held firmly by the imposing dam of long standing burst forth to flow unchecked bringing all the harm and damage to the lands lying below. And thus was the distressing series of tortures inflicted upon your graceful lives, and alas, also upon this innocent son of yours.

“It was I who chased you in the woods, following the unchecked boar. It was my set plan to pester you with my demands for the kingdom, riches and ‘human trade’. Relentlessly I prevailed, appearing both as the Brahmin creditor and as the *Pariya* master, your present lord. Equally I held the position of the householder Brahmin, the cruel master of Chandramati and your son. The snake again was hidden by me in vengeance. Your queen was turned a culprit at my behest. Reaching here, she was again sent to bring Lohitaaksha, to cause the last moral struggle for you. Turning your destiny crueler than it ever was, I purposely caused all that you underwent till this fatal moment. Now, weakened at heart myself, I have come to strengthen you both, to bless again the merit of a truthful life and lead the struggling and doubting mankind along their exalted tradition.

“My defeated heart prides over yours, the successful. All my ascetic merit stands depleted with the last event of Lohitaaksha’s first breath of his second life. But I am immensely pleased at my loss, and the world’s perpetual gain. Along with the brilliant story of yours pregnant with the message of truth, of devotion and piety, let my story of the ascetic mind’s suicidal intolerance and greed be also heard, read and discussed by the generations to come. Mankind must live and die for truthfulness, while the

Song of the Soul

more elevated among them, the holy ascetics, must strive hard to eliminate all enervating traits of their mind, by betaking to the singular virtues of tolerance and love to the last.

“Greed gives rise to pride. From pride is born rivalry. Even at the last minute of the ascetic’s pure life, he stands a possible victim to this probable fate of human mind. A passing neglect is powerful enough to dig for him his own burial pit. *Boundless humility and unreserved acceptance and appreciation* are the best watchwords and correctives for men as well as women of all levels and orders.

“If in the name of asceticism and its unique gains, the ascetic grows proud, to fall a prey to greed and rivalry, how can his lot be superior to any of the rest of mankind?

“O king and queen, blessed you are, and blessed too am I on your account. May ‘our truths’ permeate the air of our land, to remain vibrant reverberating in all quarters every time from now on. Let the future children catch the waves themselves; attune their thoughts and deeds in the lofty direction they show.

“Rise up once again, my dear children. Go, all you three, to the kingdom of Ayodhya you ruled and made holy by your truthful lives. Be the lord of yourself, once again and for ever, the great lord of your subjects, the own lord of your heroic Chandramati. Let this boy, your son, grow well-nourished by your thoughts and values. As the king of the land, you are also the father of your valuable subjects, a chosen few among whom will surely prove that this is verily so. And in this way I still have my hopes of perpetuating your memory in the land for generations and generations to come, until our earth along with the planets allied to it decide to end up by causing a thorough destruction to themselves and extinction to the presently continuing creations.

“While you return to your throne and palace, I shall to my accustomed woods, to steep myself again in ceaseless austerity and the still loftier reflection, to weed out from my powerful mind the last vestiges of

Song of the Soul

unwelcome growth. The object to cause this sublime effort of correction and ennoblement shall always be, O spotless king, you, the truthful, and your wife, the devout partner; while the subject involved in the process will constantly be myself, within this body.

Verily we fight with the objects feeling greatly for them, and believing that they alone are the cause of our struggle but, in truth the entire fight is with ourselves, our own mind And heart, their composition and values. How blessed will be one's lot be if only he can realize this supreme truth of life!

“A seen ascetic as I am, Vishwamitra is forbidden by custom to fall at your feet, the feet of householders. But the culture of the heart and mind reigns far above. By virtue of it, drawn and inspired by its force, my head will always be at your feet, O royal couple, to eradicate my pride and elevate my soul!

“Here I go to my life of further correction, and there may go you three to further your great lives of truthfulness and sacrifice. Hari Om Tat Sat.”

Grandeur of epic writing

The author of the Epic distinguishes himself in many ways. He excels in his role of *creation*, in that his writing stands out to reveal and teach the supreme facts of our life, along with the sovereign solutions which men and women of all times need to promote peace and harmony. Evidently this cannot be achieved if the individual is left to observe only some facets of the world, ignoring many others equally significant. The author has, therefore, to gain for the reader the definite task of perceiving things *in their entirety*, awarding the deserved position of merit or purpose to each. The faithful seeker, the evolving thinker, has to learn to make his observation fundamental and complete. Then alone will his insight of life deepen and the vision of the world rise to become all-comprehensive.

This is what the Epic writer does when he looks at any fact or feature with a *basic sense of acceptance*. He is out to discuss the phenomenon in its own unique light, bringing to one's vision the unalterable place it holds for

Song of the Soul

him as well as for the world at large. Thus he clothes cruelty in the most wicked garb, gives affection its most amiable brilliance, deals with hatred in the most repulsive style. Condemning the demeaning and praising the elevating, strengthening the ambitious but raising clearly in advance before them the signals of safeguard, in short, giving the right direction of progress to one and all, his grand narration makes its headway through the problems and needs of the common mind, keeping ever in view the sure aim of leading mankind to its ever-lofty ideals of unflinching devotion to truth and total adherence to one's existing loyalties; all this in the great attempt to rise above the fleeting temptations of the world, in order to win for oneself the undiminishing joy of wisdom and immortality, helping invariably in the process the several others living around.

The one constant idea cherished by the writer in every part of his narration is to make his rendering alluring, arresting and moving, whichever be, wherever relevant, thereby holding the reader's and thinker's attention, which soon grows into one of wholesome appreciation.

Surely a long life of struggle to make the mind accept the world with love and promise, avoiding at the same time the detestable features thrown by it from time to time, delighting above all in frequent introspection and nourishing by that means the starving spirit within, has to precede such a noble life of creation and presentation.

When the themes are aptly dealt with, they must succeed in moving even the strongest and cruelest of minds. The frightening narrations must be able to put fear even into the vilest of villains, the accounts of hatred must compel the worst of haters to hate their own hatred, the lofty episodes of love stimulate the ardent 'lovers' with a charming set of new aspirations in their path. When all this is gained step by step, but surely in ample measure, the noble author of our life's lasting lessons excels in his worth and becomes immortal in the esteem he wins. It is the writing of such authors of exceptional merit which has survived in our land for ages and ages, shining before every generation to add a new lustre to its ever-living message.

Song of the Soul

Was it any wonder then that my mother's lips, that night, plotting skillfully with my ears killed the young Lohitaaksha in my sensitive heart to bring the 'authorly' tears in my tender eyes! By that did not also succeed the effort of Providence to cause a new life for the ancient Sage to re-live his message, by adding a civilized vigor to the cultured thoughts of old, knowing that the people of this distant age will need it to enhance their attention?

My heart, not knowing then the worth of things as it can now, nor awakened to the truth of the fate to follow, wept shamelessly aloud wetting the clothes spread on my mother's mat, making the legend's pathos real. It also showed how devoted my mother was to her father. A rare soul of the ascetic level, he gave his daughter a valued heredity, wishing to make it richer partly through her womb but mostly by her lips. My grand-father, whose image is denied to my memory, did live in my mother to give life to what he read and what his heart so much cherished to share with the others around. The great author of the Epic magnitude thus comes into life again and again. It is true, for the real thought of life never dies. It lives, even more powerfully after the body of the thinker perishes.

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Song of the Soul



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