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FRAYED SUTRAS – REACHING OUT TO THE WISDOM OF THE LAST MASTERS

by Raghu Ananthanarayanan

As I sit down to write this paper I find myself located on the knife-edge of a conflict. I am deeply moved by the beauty and inner passion of our tradition, but I am holding on to a livelihood and a life style of a professional in the world of industrial organisations, I have been touched by the last strands of the tradition even while I trudge through the dry work-a-day world of today. There are many like me caught between the two worlds.

Trained an technologists, doctors, lawyers as the outcome of ‘convent’ schooling and scientific education but awakened to the meaning and significance of the culture and tradition of this land, what I outline in this paper is, therefore, called out of the experience of me and many of my friends engaged in the same struggle.

The problem is needed

I will start by giving the devil his due. The class of people I talk about are the evidence of Macaulays success. Some of us are the cream of Nehru’s dream (many of us are graduates of IIT’s and IIM’s). About 200 years ago, Macaulay won a very important battle – the decision of what the British ought to follow as their educational policy in India. “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”¹. And the reason according to Macaulay – “a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia”².

“What we spend on the Arabic and Sanskrit colleges is not merely a dead loss to the cause of truth; it is bounty money paid to raise up champions of error”³.

“In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of government. It is likely to become the language of commerce through out the seats of the East”⁴.

Along with the parliamentary form of government, the IAS and the ICS bureaucrats, the British laws, the railways and the postal system the British bequeathed to us the educational system. A system that turns out a regular crop of youth trained in the western modalities, firmly conditioned by the western paradigm and eager to find employment in the newly emerging modern India. The elite institutions turn out people more suited for working and living abroad than in India (More than 60% of all IIT graduates live and work abroad) and those who do live and work here are absorbed in multinationals or high tech institutions. At the time of graduation, the worldview of this group of people is myopic to say the least.

The processes of study and acquisition of a degree are very limited and narrow. The student has access to information, knows some methods to manipulate this information

and obtain solutions. This makes him employable and useful. Schools and Colleges are teaching us methods that systematically kill the sensitivity and initiative within each of us. The student is taught to be objective i.e. learn how to keep in abeyance all his / her conscious responses to the situation / problem being analysed. The training imparted both at home and school is to cut a person off from the world around, stay out of all involvement in the context and just study well. The only purpose in life is to get high grades. It is the burden of others to take care of all his / her needs, the nitty gritty of running a home, the struggles of the family etc., in short all the little nuances of every day reality that is the drama of life. It is no wonder then that when he / she graduates the only concern is to find a comfortable niche in the newly created middle class urban elite of India and keep delivering the output required of him / her. Any involvement with the rest of the world is limited to media exposure and small talk. Educational institutions frown on any real involvement of the students in the social reality of the time. They come down heavily on any one who dares question the directions and purpose of the educational system. The students must stay on the narrow and straight path of good grades in their exams. What he / she learns is not critical. In a very implicit and insidious but deeply conditioning way this experience leaves the student with a small, fragmented, defensive, consumption oriented, self centred view of life. With his skills and abilities he is hopelessly dependent on the system and the technological complex for his living. His link with his family and tradition is tenuous. If he at all thought about it, his culture and background are a source of meaningless pride or a secret shame. Any analysis of things Indian is always done in an objective scientific manner. Either to prove that our tradition is really comparable in every way to the western scientific world or to disassociate oneself with unexplainable and, therefore, superstitious stuff.

The incarnation the problem takes today

This, then, was where many of us were at the start of our careers. Of the many who went abroad, some became very conscious of the struggle India is going through. They became acutely conscious of the needs of the country and often came back with a yearning to discover their roots, relink with its tradition and belong to its struggle. They returned totally disillusioned with the directions of Technology and Industrialisation. They had witnessed at first hand the degradation of nature that is caused by the successful application of science in the Western paradigm. They had experienced the erosion of the inner being through the compulsions and pressures of this worldview. A few of us who had stayed back had also reached a similar state of mind and shared in the disappointments and disillusionment of our colleagues.

The search to discover what it meant to be Indian, the meaning and significance of our culture was difficult. There are only a few masters of the tradition alive today. The struggle for independence and the early directions at modernisation of India seems to have taken a turn where there has been a whole sale casting off of the old. The stuff that we were longing for was being relegated as chaff.

The last of the masters

The few surviving masters that I and some of my friends have had the good fortune to come in contact with are Sri T. Krishnamacharya, Sri Ganapati Sthapati, Sri Vishwanatha Sharma and Swami Poornananda. There are some parallels between these people.

All of them were born in families where the tradition was preserved and given great value. Their initiation into a study of their family vocation was done very early in their life. Shri Ganapathy Sthapati recalls how as a child he spent time in midst of sculptors and grew up with the sound of the chisel and hammer. Shri Krishnamacharya was taught the vedas as a child and very quickly absorbed it. Shri Poornananda was born in a family of vaidyas and Vishwanantha Sharma among Sanskrit Scholars.

They lived in a truly gurukula context where they lived with their teachers. Their anecdotes and recollections abound with stories that alternate between the rigors and discipline of the learning and the intimacy, affection and care of their teacher. They experienced their teachers as human beings as well as masters of their art. This aspect stands out in stark contrast to the schooling we went through. We have experienced teachers only as authority figures in the classroom who taught for a pay. There were very few who taught with a passion for the subject and fewer still who could be called masters in their art. Thus, when Shri Ganapati Sthapati or Shri T. Krishnamacharya speaks of their teacher it is with deep affection and respect. The changing context of India has seen all of them suffer privation. Shri Krishnamacharya lost the patronage of the Maharaja of Mysore in 1947 and moved to Madras where he had to start life all over again from very humble beginnings. Shri Ganapathi Sthapati's family was just short of being poor and so were Shri Vishwanatha Shastry and Swami Poornanda's families.

But through all this their love and commitment to the tradition never lessened. Infact, like gold being beaten and drawn, it grew more pure and passionate.

In an attempt to keep alive the flame of the tradition, all of them had attempted to create and sustain organisations through which they would share their wisdom and learning.

Through his son Shri Desikachar's efforts the yoga of Krishnamacharya found continuity in the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram.

Through the Mahabalipuram school of sculpture and architecture Shri Ganapati Sthapati kept his father's art alive. Shri Vishwanatha Sharma struggles with keeping the Venkatramana Ayurvedic College alive and Swami Poornananda through the Thirtha academy.

These institutions were the bridges across which we met. Young people trained in alien paradigms searching for meaning and roots and old masters hoping to evoke worthy carriers of their tradition.

The twain meet

It is only now after a decade of reaching across this chasm that one is able to reflect upon and understand the processes we went through. The essence of these processes are contained in the following chicken and egg paradoxes.

1. Young minds conditioned in objective analysis facing teachers who had flowered through being deeply evoked.

This is probably the most difficult of the paradoxes to resolve. We were trained in a method of learning where one accepted anything as true or right after looking at 'sufficient data' and logically analysing it. The learning we had to engage with was one where the wisdom of the master is unquestioningly accepted, lived with and practiced. One could engage in discussions with the master after going through this process. We were conditioned to acquire skills, which we could use as instruments to manipulate the environment. The learning of the tradition is a discipline of honing and sensitising oneself to be the instrument, the vessel that is 'the consciousness of the tradition' (to borrow a zen term). Every effort that one puts in is an attempt to deeply internalise the wisdom and change oneself. The mind that cleaved to understanding through the intellect confronted with the mind that evokes with the heart and vibrates with passion. How would the processes of real learning start? How would the teacher create the receptivity to transfer his learning?

2. Young minds in possession of the instrument of technological knowledge facing teachers who belongs to and are the embodiment of a tradition. This then was the next step one had to take, we had internalised a world view where knowledge was a tool for conquest. Science had conquered nature, man conquered problems of a primitive environment and so on. In this worldview knowledge was quickly converted into a thing of use in transactions. The more useful it is in situations of conflict with another (plant, animal or man) the more its value. Our teachers saw themselves as vehicles for the flow of an ancient wisdom. A wisdom of discovering harmony within oneself and with the context. By acting from this inner space in the world, and using ones knowledge and skills within the boundaries of this harmony is the way to earn ones livelihood. The tradition was like the sutra – it provided the essential principles and outlined the values while action in the context was from ones choice and responsibility. Our idea of ourselves and our transactions with the world, allowed us to shift location and loyalties. We change jobs and organisations. We are detachable parts that can fit into and adjust to a variety of machines. Our teachers were inseparable from their learning and vocation. The tradition lived and flourished if they acted with conviction. The tradition lived or perished with them and they lived or perished with the tradition. This difference implied that while our investment in the learning and in the task of nourishing the tradition could be conditional our teachers were passionately committed to it. What would seem to us as a demand, a situation needing a decision to be taken was to our teacher's realities on the path, realities to be dealt with. While we needed to have our commitments strengthened, our teachers were forced to extend to us their understanding of our predicament. Every step we took in fully committing ourselves to the tradition was a turning back, a changing of boats. Every hesitation of ours in taking a step was to them an evidence of our unpreparedness to receive.

3. For us this step is an alternative, to our teachers it is a way of life. Our disillusionment with the Western paradigms of Growth and Development had led us to search for alternatives. The fragmentation in our lives had left us bereft of inner meaning and completeness. We were rootless, searching, empty, hoping to find a fresh direction, a space in which to drop anchor. A search for a way of life with inner meaning and out or solidity. Our teachers experienced an inner meaning and fulfillment. Infact it is this experience that has given them the extraordinary courage to face the many travails and struggles to keep the tradition alive. How would we find convergent action? How would we discover comparable intensity in action?

Spaces where the problem can be resolved?

1. Keeping alive the wisdom and tradition of these teachers is a vital need for today. The worldview, the inner tranquility and the deep sense of meaning that these teachers act from seems to be the very thing that today's dominant world view is devoid of. That is perhaps why so many persons go searching for them. The schools that these masters have established are the places where these paradoxes must find resolution. The schools need to look at three important aspects. One, the purity of the learning and the spirit of the tradition. Two, the organisation of the schools, their systems and structures and three the institutions that will help create the ambience and context of group cohesion and collective effort. The gurukula system in which the masters learnt was designed for a child just entering his teens. It was meant for the fresh mind that would be moulded exclusively by the particular learning. The system of teaching had been perfected in a context where the ambience that the child grew up in and therefore, his implicit and subliminal learning was replete with the stuff of the tradition. The schools today have students of varied backgrounds who come in to study and then go their separate ways. Students with minds already conditioned, and each with his / her own expectations and preferred directions of growth.

In the background of the chasm already discussed this becomes a very major problem. The teacher can easily retreat into his shell and decide that the students are unworthy, or he could become authoritarian and insist on his terms. The creativity and the genius of the teacher in finding a viable alternative is of crucial importance here.

2. Most of these schools have taken to organising themselves along bureaucratic lines or along the lines of private business offices. This is anomalous to the endeavor of the school. The teaching technique already has a heavy bias of discipline and rigor which is often mistaken as authoritarianism. When the teacher also doubles as the head of the organisation the hierarchy and the authority component gets enhanced. The master seldom articulates the dreams and visions he has for the tradition he holds; the students stay entrenched in unarticulated hopes of their own; the task of the organisation becomes narrow; it is reduced to study and performance of the jobs assigned by the teacher; the students now become his extension and his echoes.
3. The combination of the young men seeking traditional knowledge but living in urban settings and their having to create the opportunity for the study often precludes non-task contact between the teacher and taught. The time and space where humanness is shared and deep feeling level contact is made becomes non existent.

Thus these schools start becoming more and more like the modern schools. Dry structures fragment teacher and taught. Lifeless acquisition of knowledge divide the learning and the life stream of the person. The spaces where the struggles of the master and his pupils can be shared and thus evolve a convergence are absent. Each struggles alone and collective passion for the institution is seldom generated. Without the flow of mutual caring and a shared feeling for the larger task and role of the master the intense human effort and sacrifices for the institution will not emerge. Living institutions and *padhatis* and *gharanas* or *marabu* (in tamil) outlive individual masters only because they evoke such conviction and commitment. They become a pool of culture where individual masters arise and flower from time to time only when such an evocation occurs.

The flow of such mighty rivers of traditional learning are thinning out in our times. The bridges that link us to their throbbing hearts are swaying in the winds of change, the sutras that link us to the roots of our traditions are fraying. Will these last masters be able to seed the new soil so that the tradition may again grow and flower and bear fruit?

Bibliography

The core of this paper is based on my experience with studying yoga with Yogacharya T. Krishnamacharya and Shri T.K.V. Deshikachar, Data and ideas have also been gathered through discussions with the teachers and with their students, Girija Mukundan, Sashikala Ananth, G. Gautama. I am also listing the books and authors who have influenced my thinking.

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A Note on the possible ways on which some of the earlier teachers from KYM could link back with the institution

Shri Krishnamacharya was a one man institution representing the rich Indian intellectual tradition in many of its important facets. That he is remembered today mainly for his proficiency in the therapeutic use of *asana* and *praanayama* is a measure of our failure as a society, a failure to bring the full range of his knowledge into the main stream.

Our vision of what we, as his students, hold is the proper way of preserving and continuing his heritage in this: To create a centre of learning where there is a deep study of Yoga and related Shastras; to apply this knowledge in helping individuals looking for health and well-being; to place this knowledge in the main stream of development.

A number of us who studied with the Acharya and taught at the Mandiram for a while have gone in different directions professionally. However, the work that each of us does at present is influenced strongly by our commitment to the intellectual tradition represented by Sri Krishnamacharya.

Shri Desikachari has requested us to look at ways in which we can co-operate. We see the possibility of doing so if a larger meaning is attached to the role of KYM.

We envision the KYM evolving into a unique university with a strong focus on all aspects of inner and outer health.

To start with, we can work in certain areas where we have some expertise. These areas are:

- i. Therapeutic aspects of Yoga linked with the practice of Ayurveda.
- ii. The use of *Asana* and *Praanayama* in pregnancy and postnatal care.
- iii. The application of Yoga Sutras and other Shastras in the practice of psychology and their application in the organisational context.
- iv. The use of Yoga to help the mentally retarded to lead a fuller life.
- v. Application of the metaphors of Indian thought in the mainstream of Development.

Work in these areas will combine systematic study and research with concrete applications in day-to-day practice. Each area of Research can be undertaken by a faculty team of Senior Researcher and a Research Assistant. This could provide the start. Some time say 20 to 30 hours a week can be set aside to teach Yoga on an ongoing basis. Each area of Research ought to be funded either as a specific project or through instituting a chair. After two or three years we can review the progress of the work. If the conditions are right, an effort could be launched to found an educational / medical institution on a permanent basis.

The ideas sketched here are meant to provide a framework for discussions. The details concerning how the proposed activity can be embedded into KYM while taking into

account space requirements, finance, autonomy and accountability remain to be worked out.