



MY VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Neglecting the Real; Loving the Symbol

○ Sunanda Mongia

A combination of many factors, the philosophical grip that advaita — monism — has on the Hindu psyche, our habit of turning everything into a divine power which can be worshipped, the symbolic nature of our worship, the *Gita*'s teaching of disinterested action, and the philosophical contempt that all these things have been created for the material world, has totally deformed our relationship with our country. So India may be perceived as, a strange triangle wearing a hen-shaped hat, or as *Bharat mata*, the lush young goddess perfected in Sivakasi calender art.

The cultural and religious habit of creating and worshipping icons has transformed India into an icon and a symbol. On reading all the literature about *Bharat mata* one would think that India was dearly loved by its citizens. But herein lies the paradox, for by worshipping *Bharat mata* — the subject of songs and poems, the goddess on a calender — we feel sufficiently elevated and pious in the belief that as good citizens, singing '*desh bhakti ke gaan*' is the only proper

way to love our country. And, even easier — if the country happens to fight a war, just donate money, and more money. It really is that simple. All we have to do is forgo one restaurant dinner. The love for our country poured out during the Kargil war in a similar manner. This is the easy way out. It gives us many privileges without any responsibilities and a clear conscience, as a bonus.

The kind of love we profess for our country, makes me wonder what kind of citizens we are. We ourselves are possibly beyond improvement but we should think seriously about the kind of citizens we are bringing up as our future generations. And that really brings us to the education we give them. How do we teach them to think for their country, what kind of social responsibility do we inculcate in them? I do not believe the idea needs to be ingrained as it was in the past, that we should sacrifice for the nation. Instead, we must give them an Ayn Randian hatred for the very idea of sacrifice and 'desire-less action'. These concepts have caused enough damage to our social system. Sacrifice cannot serve as a motivating force because what is the most effective force is self interest, People do not contribute to the country by pretending otherwise. Our future generations must be taught only that personal worth can add to national worth. Neither a sense of sacrifice,

nor the new mantra of purely personal success, will do. We have to get rid of one of the most pernicious of our national misconceptions: that it is alright to be undeserving, but the rhetoric must sound right. So, I do not want the future generation to pretend (like we do) that we think of ourselves. They must be taught to get over such harmful ideas as transcending the ego. Let us leave such ideas to rare human being like Vivekananda and Gandhi. A couple of sages in every generation, is more than enough. What we need to do is to teach men and women, to roll up their sleeves and work, for themselves first, then for others.



The other extreme: the new generation of go-getters who have nothing to show, but their professional qualifications and their egos. How do we teach our coming generations such radically new lessons? On the one hand we create memory machines in the elite schools and on the other, the government and other substandard schools are creating half-educated children who end up being slaves of the former. Is it not enough that the caste system has made Indian society fundamentally inegalitarian? Our educational system should encourage privileged children to think about the less fortunate. Our modern educational system is perpetuating the inherently inegalitarian nature of our society by not being able to strike a balance between personal needs and social responsibility. On the one hand we do not teach the children that their success in life, is partly a debt to society because of the conditions for their growth—for example, the highly subsidized cost of a medical and engineering education. And on the other hand, we allow them to think that it is enough to be hypocritical

and pay lip - service to the society and country — that it is enough if they are able to sing patriotic songs every August 15 to prove their love for the country.

A radically new notion about what India means, needs to be instilled in them. India is not an abstract idea; nor is it the adoration of a cricket team, and however wonderful the great musicians of India sound, India is just a tree outside the window; the road we dig up for our daughters wedding; the lane; the drain we choke up with polythenes; the river we dirty up, the temples which have become the cradle of cacophony; the traffic rules we do not want to follow. I believe, that the slightest sense of responsibility for our immediate environment will make India a better place to live in.

Our future generations have to be given a whole new concept about work and responsibility. A school may have sweepers but every class should be cleaned by its students. The SUPW must not remain a joke but be honestly implemented, as an article of faith. The children must be exposed to the

society at large to form emotional connections. My vision for the future derives from the truthfulness and the immediateness of our commitment, from the consciousness of every citizen of his or her contribution to the country. Forget the spirit of India. Let us even forget some of the lessons of history — we are so well taught about the greatness of our past that it almost becomes a justification for neglecting our present. We must now move beyond the idea of a spiritual nation because it is something of a myth and a deliberate construction. If we could ask one of the soldiers who died for the nation, he would describe how concrete our concern must be, how precise... We must make our future generation aware of the fact that India needs the efforts of our muscles rather than our vocal chords. Even so small a thing as making the cleanliness of the classroom their responsibility, can connect students and make them feel responsible for their surroundings. We have to carry out this social and cultural re engineering if we are to establish connections between the India in our minds and the India out there, festering in the open manholes. □



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Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head

Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.

Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,

Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,

Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermillion in my hair parting,

The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.

Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.

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