

The Present – A Rezor’s Edge

Or

‘Kshurasys Dhara’

The Dr. Amitabha Chowdhury Memorial Lecture

Guwhati

19th December, 2011

My Gratitude

Over the years, kind people and organizations whom I have not known earlier have invited me to speak to them. And I have received all courtesies from them. Yet, rarely, if ever, have I received an invitation from someone I have not known which sounds as if it is coming from one I have known all my life. When Sri Justice Dhires Narayan Chowdhury rang me, it was as if a member of my family was inviting me. I was so touched that almost before he could change his mind, I said ‘yes’. I offer to Sri Dhiresh-babu and to Smt Chowdhury, and to their children, my wife’s and my thanks and our grateful and most heartfelt namaskar. May I deserve their affection and the trust!

At a Loss

I do not know how to even begin to pay tribute to the memory of Dr. Amitabha Chowdhury. What does one – what can one – say about a person who I should have been able to meet, to get to know, one who should have been returning home today to his wife, to fond parents, bringing a surprise gift to his sister, a hug to his brother. But there it is. The hard reality is that we are meeting around his name, for him, because of him, and with no one else in mind, so much so that we can feel his presence but, in actual fact, without him. We are here and he is, one would one would like to believe, in a better world.

I am no philosopher. However as one who has seen sixty six calendars, I can repeat what is really, a commonplace: No one has control over Destiny. Birth is sudden and unexpected gain. It is a kind of achievement, almost a victory. Death is an abrupt and inexplicable loss. It is a kind of failure, almost a defeat.

This occasion has been authored by loss, *but not by defeat*. The Chowdhurys have suffered loss, incalculable, irreparable loss; they have refused to be defeated by that loss.

John Donne on Loss

Jhon Donne, the great sixteenth/seventeenth century poet, wrote the amazing sonnet 'Death be not Proud'. He wrote it in a spirit of metaphysical defiance of the physicality of death. All of you know its verses well, yet I would like to quote its opening lines:

*Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not soe,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.*

Would like to steal courage from Donne and in his wake, add a further bold advisory: 'Death be not proud' Come, if you must, with prior warning. Do not sneak up like some thief from the shadows. Ring the front door-bell, present your card, ask to be seated, speak your purpose, and wait for attention to be given to you. You are a visitor, Death, not a bailiff; learn some etiquette.'

Death of course, is not listening. It has its own immutable ways. Besides, Death too has to tackle the problem of numbers. It has six billion people to chase. Why should it waste its time listening to me? If it at all

does, it will perhaps tell me: ‘You are an Indian, you have the good fortune of having Vedas and the Upanishads to understand my ways; study them, do not waste my time.’

Now, I am not learned in the literature of any language, least of all in Sanskrit. Most of my reading has been either opportunistic or accidental.

The Kathopanishad on Loss

And so, when I chanced upon the ‘Kathopanishad’, I was transfixed by the dialogue between Yama and Nachiketa in that Upanishad. I believe that has to be one of the great narratives of philosophical literature, rivaling that between Sri Krishna and Arjuna in the ‘Bhagavad Gita’ and for its simple candour, even improving on it. There can scarcely be a reasoning superior in theology or metaphysics to the Kathopanishad’s formulation on Death. It says that the undying Universal Spirit pervades individual lives as well and therefore nobody or nothing ever dies. NaA ‘yam hanta no hanyate’ – ‘It does not slay nor is it slain’ – is a formulation John Donne would have paused to consider, for it robs Death not just of victory but of any independent value altogether. Yet, I cannot, in all honesty, say I am completely convinced by it.

Is pain not real? Is grief not real? It may be that the one who has ‘gone’ has not gone but what of the ones who stay behind? Are they not deprived?

Did the author or authors of the ‘Kathopanishad’, never feel the whiplash of bereavement? Did he not have family, loved ones, did he not see the pang of loss, hear its forlorn wail? His verses, I admit are great, unbeatably great; they help me place loss in perspective. But show me one person who says I am so content with the Upanishadic explanation of Death, that I do not want my dear one back, and I will show you a liar.

Loss is a real. Its metaphysical rationalization is medicinal. In conditions of loss, I need the medicine. But I wish I did not need it. I wish I did not have to bear loss, or pain and then to understand it in a spiritual experience.

The Sage of Arunachala

Sri Ramana Maharshi, that very personification of understanding and compassion, when stricken by cancer, was asked by a visitor if he was in pain. He answered honestly: “In pain, yes, but not in suffering’. I cannot imagine a truer and more succinct encapsulation of the entire issue.

Pain is a fact; loss inevitable. A highly realized individual can overcome pain. Can simple folk do that? Can a country, which is a collection of simple people, do that?

The anticipation of pain, the fear of loss, places one – an individual or a family or a society – on a Razor’s Edge.

The Razor’s Edge

I owe the little of this lecture – ‘A Razor’s Edge’ - to part of a verse 1.3.14 of the Katha Upanishad’: *uttiShTha jAgrata prApya varAn_nibodhata kShurasya dhArA nihitA duratyayA durgam pathas_tat_kavayo vadanti*’ – of which the latter part means “The path is difficult to cross like the sharpened edge of the razor (knife), so say the wise.” I find that part – verse fascinating, even more so than the prescription attached to it, namely, ‘*uttiShTa jAgrata prApya varAn nibodhata*, which means ‘Arise, awake, and learn by approaching the exalted ones.....’

When Pandit Nehru once said ‘The present moment is a razor’s edge’, I am sure he was citing the Kathopanishad. The novelist Somerset Maugham used the Kathopanishadic verse and phrase for his 1944 novel, ‘The Razor’s Edge’, based on his spiritual quests, particularly with the sage of Arunachala, Sri Ramana Maharshi, in India. The novel is about coping with loss, many losses.

The truth of *Kshurasya Dhara* can be approached metaphysically. In about fifteen or twenty minutes’ time, I would like to examine the condition of India on that edge, not philosophically or metaphysically – which is beyond me – but existentially, which is not beyond any individual or being that exists.

India on a Razor’s Edge

Is a country made of it is territory or its people? The convenient answer would be, both.

Would the Republic of India forsake a chunk of land because a great number of people living there want to disengage from the rest of India?

No, it would not; indeed, it could not.

Equally, can the overwhelming and emphatic wishes of the people be disregarded by any Government in India to do what it wills with land?

It would be insensitive and imprudent if it did.

A country’s territories are easy to define, demarcate.

Not so the inner landscape of human thought. Both the inner and the outer are on that edge, today.

India's physical Condition: Its Land

That stands very much on a razor's edge.

India occupies a mere 2.4% of the world's landmass, but holds a whopping 17.5% of its population. To feed and quite simply to just hold that population, India needs all the land she has. And yet what is happening?

We are losing hold over that land. Thanks to indiscriminate and excessive use of chemical fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides and deforestation, India is losing 5,334 million tones of soil every year due to soil erosion caused by. Then there is river-bank erosion. I do not have to tell this audience about the experience of Majuli, the largest river island in the world. Ghoramara, an island located 150 Km south of Kolkata, in the Sundarban Delta complex is quietly disappearing due to erosion and sea level rise. It has, in fact, shrunk to under five square kilometers, about half its size in 1969. A recent study by Sugata Hazra, an oceanographer, found that during the last 30 years, roughly 80 square kilometers, or 31 square miles of the Sundarbans have disappeared and more than 600 families have been displaced. I have seen a chunk of land along a river-bank in west Bengal crumble, with a tree on it, into the river, like a moist biscuit into a cup of coffee. People living in areas vulnerable to erosion are perpetually living on a razor's edge.

The Sea Rises

Little can be done by us alone to check mean sea level rise, or to control cyclone furies in their tracks. So, over and above the mean sea-level rise, come another Cyclone Aila, say, two, five or ten times stronger than the previous one, the human populations of both the Indian and the Bangladeshi Sunderban could well gravitate towards the relatively higher venues in India as our century's most desperate climate refugees. I do not

want to imagine what that huge population influx would entail in terms of population-infra-structure balance and in the balance of human relations. This is not a surreal imagining any more than mean sea level rise is. The Maldives are thought of as a small country. They are thinking big about submersion. We are a big country. Are we thinking 'medium' or even 'small' or, thinking at all, about it?

Coastal and water-fronting areas apart, even those who are living on so-called 'sable' locations are also on a razor's edge. I refer to the phenomenon of heightened seismicity. Some weeks ago, on 18 September this year, to be precise, when I rang the esteemed Governor of Assam to tell him of my acceptance of Justice Chowdhury's invitation and my proposed visit to Guwahati, Sri Janaaki Balalav Patnaiak told me 'We have just had a severe earthquake....Have you not heard?...t has jolted the entire Gangetic Plain, from Delhi to Guwahati.....'

The Earth Quakes

Epicentred in the Kanchenjunga region of Sikkim, it shook the whole of the Indo-Gangetic plain, with tremors felt in Delhi going right through to Assam. This earthquake has already earned the name of the '2011 Himalayan Earthquake'.

Friends, please tell me, do you not share my impression, somewhat un-scientific but nonetheless undeniable, that seismic and atmospheric disturbances are increasing in frequency? I certainly think they are and it will need about one day of intensive Googling for me to come up with detailed statistics to establish the point. Suffice it to say the Himalaya from Kashmir to Assam have been jolted over the last decade repeatedly.

To alarm and to get alarmed is wrong. And it does not help.

To alert and to be alert can never be. And it always pays.

Earthquakes do not come on ceremonial State Visits. They come, kill and leave without trace. There, they are rather like terrorists. But in reality it is not the earthquakes that kill, it is buildings collapsing because of the earthquake, that kill. Which is why, today, earthquakes are more hazardous than they were some hundred years ago when buildings were made of less heavy materials and fewer people lived in and around them.

But are we doing all that is necessary to be prepared to meet the consequences of earthquakes, and to minimize their blow? We are not. We have a fine, active and alert National Disaster Management Authority. But it needs far greater backing by state agencies and society. Until we develop like the Japanese a sixth sense about earthquakes, plan, retrofit our architecture accordingly, put in place schemes for rescue and relief, and stop the crazy sprawl, vertically and horizontally inviting to seismic disasters, we will remain teetering on a razor's edge.

Water Shock

As with land-related dangers, we ought to be aware of a danger that faces the drier regions of India, namely, of a water shock. Of all scarcities that can be expected to hit us, the one to hit us the hardest will be that of water. Sources of water supply are inelastic. How much deeper can we dig? How many more aquifers do we open? If the monsoons fail us two years in a row, as they are known to do, in cycles of ten years or so, we will be in deep trouble.

If the third year also tends to be dry, we will be in crisis. It is not as if we have not had such sequential parching in the past; we have. But we are now that many more, not just in terms of that many more thirsty mouths but that many more industries, heavy-duty consumers of water, that use it with a profligacy that is shameful. Water use efficiencies in agriculture are spoken of as a solution and of course they would be

essential. But is anyone preparing the nation, the farming nation, to start readying for that major shift, especially in paddy cultivation?

No, on the contrary, we are going in for increased acreages high water-demanding commercial crops replacing traditional food crops.

A change of Rasa – Hopes

Friends, in a concert of classical music, after a long aalaap followed by the raaga's rendition, the listeners are entitled to a lighter piece, like a thumri or a bhajan, before another aalaap and its raga appear.

So I must, departing from the title and theme of this talk, bring in a change of mood by talking of something that is hope-giving, that talks of how some things are indeed helping us negotiate the razor's edge and how we may look forward, around 2021, to a better decade.

Leadership

MPs and MLAs now in their 30s and 40s will in about a decade's time, still be in their early 40s and 50s and therefore, at the peak of their vigour and outreach.

Electoral Democracy

But I anticipate, in the elections of 2014 and 2019, and in any mid-termers before that, many youths, now in their late teens, we do not know the names or next thing of, posing huge challenges to the present pattern of crorepati MPs and MLAs who seem to be impervious to the Kshurasya Dhara. Younger, angrier men and women till pit restlessness against restlessness, rage against rage, reform against reform, with money winning here, muscle there, but with a new and energized moral force also fluking in. We could hear in a decade from now, the multiple drum-

beat of dichotomies so deep and so divisive, as to make today's contestations look like a picnic. But some relatively young non-political figures in the limelight today, will also be very active still and will contend with the large and lung-full chorus of a generation that is a clear decade younger and, right of recall or no right of recall, asking those in legislatures and in high office to prove themselves.

I see hope in this. I believe the next decades will see a more spirited, a more accountable and therefore a more effective leadership, not just in political terms but in social terms. I believe our NGOs and social activists will begin to be heard more and more and with increased effect. The country's reduced faith in politics and politicians will be replaced with an enhanced respect for leaders of opinion who are not in politics but are engaging in public causes. Former judges and constitutional authorities, retired civil servants and police officers with high credibility, will have a greater say in national discourse. As will prominent public personalities in the creative arts, in writing. The grief that was writ over Assam when the legendary Bhupen Hazarika passed away, and then when the distinguished Indira Goswami left us, not only showed the personal esteem in which they were held, but also the heightened respect which non-political leaders and social icons have come to occupy. They are in a sense filling the vacuum created by the abridgment of popular trust in politics. This, I think, should not be seen as an infarction in the democratic process, but an enrichment of it.

Non-Electoral Democracy

The electoral aspect of democracy is one aspect of democracy, even its major aspect. But it is not its only aspect. Non-electoral, even non-political articulations of the democratic spirit are as valid and should be as welcome players on the democratic stage as its political cast.

I therefore believe that, apart from social activists, we will have social philosophers amidst us, analyzing the scene, making wise recommendations, giving mature guidance. And above all, our media will see the dangers of sensationalism and of the advantages of an alertness that has no agenda except to keep readers and viewers alert to risks and hazards.

To Return to the 'Edge' : Terror

Now, if I may resume my grim prognostications.

This part of the country has been menaced by terrorism, mauled and mutilated by it. I can never erase from my memory the photograph of the rickshaw puller in Imphal who innocently carried explosive cargo to have it explode, blowing his legs off. His face had a mix of incredulity and resignation as he saw the remains of his own body. He died a few hours later.

I will not labour the point, but will say just this:

'Maoism'

We need not doubt that Maoist operatives are going to take their attention further from their rural and wooded strongholds (which they will not abandon) to suburban and urban centres, especially to our metropolitan show-pieces. The one inner restraint that might work with them is the ideological dilemma of inflicting large scale suffering on civilians. Government offices as well as the premises of our legislatures need to be extremely vigilant. Individual officials and politicians may expect to continue to face threats of violence and abduction against ransom claims. And one may expect them to leave their mark on centres of upper class consumerist overdrive.

'Jihad'

Jihadi terror will continue to stalk us. While we are convulsed with Telengana and the issue of where Hyderabad will fall in a future reorganization of Andhra Pradesh, Islamabad's population is being served poison about the sub-continent's history and the Nizam's accession so as to incite passions. And while we are worried over the revelations of a police officer in Gujarat, and the SIT's findings about the Gujarat outrages of 2002, Jihadi groups are talking about Junagadh and about the outrages of 2002 in the same breath. The story of India's division is History in India; it is Breaking News in Pakistan.

Hopefully, the intelligent and well-informed people of that country will not be swayed by this propaganda. But the Jihadi groups are not dependent on popular support. They get their sustenance, their motivation, their manpower, and their weapons from other sources.

India – Pakistan

Peace efforts are vital, composite dialogue with Pakistan essential, people-to-people contacts the very life-blood of an abiding solution, but vigilance irreplaceable. India is a piece of camphor by the side of a fire that is being blown towards it, 24X7.

And this realisation also makes me fear that the efforts of some amazingly brave people to foster human links, healing links, between India and Pakistan, between fellow-citizens in Jammu and Kashmir, and between communities in India will suffer. That will be both a tragedy and a hazard in itself, for nothing can be worse for a society and for a people than for iron to enter its soul.

We should however know that terror groups will diversify their skills, both to gain secrecy and impact. They may be expected to steal

nuclear, biological and chemical materials and terrorise a world caught unawares by this new dimension. The Damocles' sword of terror is the biggest Kshurasys Dhara of our times.

Nuclear Safety

A nuclear plant may be made as safe as technological ingenuity and human intentions can make them. But we are living in the extraordinary times of post 9/11. Which plant can be safe against that kind of attack by terrorist groups? Or even by an individual? Destiny has favoured India with two kinds of onlookers – those who admire it, and those who resent it. And resentment, today, is not a sullen entity curled up in some gloomy corner. It is the Devil's very own workshop. And working 24X7.

The distinguished astro-physicist and a philosopher no less, Lord Martin Rees, writes in his seminal work, *Our Final Century* of "...the possibility, now nightmarishly familiar, that kamikaze-style terrorists could aim for just such a target, using a large fully fuelled jet, or a smaller plane loaded with explosives".

Risks of nuclear terror are conspicuous.

Bio-terror and nan-terror

But let us not be unaware of the risks of bio-terror and nano-terror as well. I am sure some of you remember the use of the nerve gas sarin in a Tokyo subway in the 1990s, and of the anthrax letters in 2001, just ten years ago. The horrors of chemical or germ-warfare unleashed by non-State players from laboratories held hostage by them is not a science fiction scenario. It is for real. Driven by bigoted mis-passion, terror has a cold, cynical laboratory doggedness to it. And I cannot believe that politico-technological systems that can purloin nuclear secrets are not

incapable of stealing the far easier-to-transfer technical know-how about biological warfare.

Error

Terror apart, we should also be aware of something called human error. In the world of nuclear technology this of paramount importance.

Safety is about technology plus the human factor. Is it the safety-guarantors' case that our nuclear reactors are hundred percent safe, irrespective of any human component in the maintenance of that safety?

If so, the case rests. If not, then we have to know more about the human factor. Have the proudest airlines flying the finest flying machines not been humbled by pilot error? And in so far as nuclear waste disposal is the responsibility of human ingenuity, there again, we have to trust the human factor. The creating of nuclear waste is an entirely technological process. The disposing of nuclear waste not entirely so. Man issues are involved. Is trusting the human factor in contexts such as this an exercise in our technological self-pride, in a nationalism of Indian science? A step in pure faith? I submit, in a matter where the health of millions is involved, only the most rigorously objective and transparent norms that satisfy mandated representatives of the people can suffice. Aspiration for reassurance of error-proof installations does not betray lack of confidence in our scientists and technologists, who are among the world's best. It is a sign of awareness that human beings are fallible and that scientists and technologists are also human beings. If terror is about the ragings of fire, error can come from cold neglect. Robert Frost has the great poem:

*Some say the world will end in fire
Some say I ice.
From what I know of desire
I hold with those who favour fire.*

*But if it were to perish twice
I think I know enough of hate
To say ice is also great
And would suffice.*

Disease

Another razor's edge we are living with, without realizing that we are doing so is about disease. We are becoming vulnerable to zoonotic pandemics as never before.

If some 'common' modern diseases, including epidemic diseases, started out as zoonotic diseases and the bubonic plague, measles, smallpox, influenza, HIV, and diphtheria came to us this way, the common cold, and tuberculosis, it is said may also have started out in other species.

In recent times, SARS, avian flu and swine flu certainly have. It is the relentless congestion of human populations with lifestyles, food-styles and therefore animal food breeding styles that are leading to this new health vulnerability. We have been tackling these actively but episodically.

The bubonic plague is believed to have been the cause of the Black Death that decimated 30 to 60% of 14th century Europe. In the 17th and 18th centuries cities like London, Vienna and Marseilles have been ravaged by it. In the mid-19th century the disease killed millions in China and India and then spread worldwide. Plague remained with us continued into the early 20th century and in 1897, poona was severely hit by it. And as recently as 1994 several parts of India, including the city of Surat were again hit by plague.

Until recently only the world of medicine knew of leptospirosis. Now, with rain-water flooding our congested cities, people wading through the water-logged gullies of Mumbai and Chennai know it too well. The infection is transmitted to humans by water that has been contaminated by animal urine to come in contact with unhealed breaks in the skin, the eyes, or with the mucous membranes. So there we go again.

I am afraid we have learnt little, forgotten much. With habits of mind and life that we are slave to, we do not always need sinister enemies. The filth that is growing in our cities by the hour, by the minute, in terms of unsegregated, un-collected or slowly-collected garbage is making conditions ripe for a Mahamari of Mahamaris through the plague. And I see no signs of a socially-understood and interiorized epidemiology. I hate to, but cannot help, guessing several devastating outbreaks of zoonotic diseases, the plague in particular, for which we as a cynical use and throw society will be responsible, not just the civic or conservancy agencies for we are the authors of filth, they its editors. The royalties will accrue to us in forms I need not describe further for you are already sick of my morbid forebodings and, if this was a music concert, you would be wanting your money back.

The 'Disease of Corruption'

And this too we must concede, that in the spread of the metaphorical 'disease' of corrupt practices in India we, the people of India, have ourselves played a role, one of passive inertness at the best and of complicity at the worst. We too are accountable.

Behavioural Change

It calls for behavioural change among those in power are accompanied by calls for behavioural reform within society, we will avert what I would call the hazard of politico-moral disequilibrium. In a

democracy political choice brings about changes of regime, and moral evaluations bring about regimes of change. We need both processes to function in accordance with codes of civility. We need a strong Lok Pal and we cannot thank Anna Hazare enough for having given the national frustration with corruption a focus and an energy it needed. But corruption within society, in manufacturing and trading houses, in the world of wholesale and retail business, in the shape of spurious drugs, adulterated cement, contaminated water and food, needs to be addressed as well. Be-imaanii is not confined to the agencies of governance alone.

Work-Ethic

We must also take note of another grave social hazard which is corroding us. I refer to the evaporation of what used to be called pride-of-work. Except in flash-point moments of crisis as during a terror attack when simple citizens rise heroically to the occasion and provide first aid by instinct, we have, as a rule, become a hands-off people.

Some amazing individuals, NGOs and social groups apart, we tend leave everything to an already stretched State, which means letting things slide, letting things be, letting things to sort themselves out. Why is this a hazard? It is a hazard because freedom without responsibility is not tenable. A society whose limbs atrophy is no better than a living creature in a similar situation.

This is where we may look forward to the wisdom of age being supported by the energy of youth to give to not just the state apparatus but to the body social the stamina it needs to face the hazards that face us. I said at the start that it is right and logical for us to be optimistic about finding the right leadership to take on the hazards being outlines, especially that of an impatient and angry population of very young people. I would re-iterate that, not just because we are a democracy which keeps throwing up- and throwing out – our representatives, but because

we are also a nation of mature people who may lose their cool, from time to time, but who as a rule, also know how to recover it from the debris of their rages. And, more, we are a people who have both skills – how to count and how to weight.

Another Change of 'Rasa'

Before I close, it is time for another positive 'break'.

There is one arena of life where there is no razor's edge threatening us, no imminent disaster.

I refer to the world of our classical arts.

They are as strong and secure against any decay as ever.

Just consider the number of young artistes in all the classical arts, be it music or dance or high theatre. The best are amidst us, in all ages, particularly among the young. And their listeners and viewers too are as strong and stable as ever.

The annual Music Season is on in Chennai, as we meet here. A galaxy of artistes is there, giving concert after concert to packed audiences in 'sabha-s' as they are called. The Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha may be in tension. The Vidhan Sabha-s may be in difficulty. But the classical sabhas of Tamil Nadu are vibrant, full of life and creative energy.

The glow in our classical arts fills me with hope.

Not just for our country's future in peace but for a future in greatness.

So also, I must say, does the high quality of contemporary writing. All our languages are astir. Their literatures are agog, their publishing, even in our digital age, full of vivacity.

Let me also say that forms of creativity, quite extraordinary, keep surprising us.

The recent design for the Indian rupee, with its simple lines and curves, its invoking of the Devanagari 'Ra', the two dashes associated with currency symbols the world over, is nothing short of a little masterpiece. It was designed by a young Tamil designer, Udaya Kumar, who has had the good fortune of working here in the IIT at Guwahati.

Talking of money and currency, seeing simple folk, with what are called 'mofussil' backgrounds excelling in quiz programmes, and seeing Satish Kumar win the top prize by answering the most impossible questions in KBC, made me feel joyous about our younger generation.

On a different note, my gloom at the news of the disastrous fire in the AMRI Hospital in Kolkata would have deepened into a permanent depression had I not also read of the incredible pluck, reflexes and ingenuity displayed by young slum-dwellers from the vicinity who helped evacuate patients. What challenge, natural or manmade, can our people not face?

If the 'dhara' is 'kshurasya', India's sinews and soul are made of tough stuff.

It is more than a match for its challenges.

A decade from now, I 2021, we will be three or four years away from our planned human landing on the moon. I will not be surprised if

this happens even earlier than that. And a great moment it will be for us, not because we would have proved something to ourselves.

I sincerely hope an Indian woman is among the two or three to reach that surface. And that team will be iconic as no icons in modern times. Like Rakesh Sharma was asked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, that team will be doubtless asked, while in orbit, '*Aapko vahaan se Hindustan kaisaa dikhtaa hai?* And where is the doubt that the answer will be, as Rakesh Sharma's spontaneous answer was '*Saare Jahaan Se Achchha*'.

For despite all these hazards that I have enumerated, all the turmoils that I have anticipated, the country that has conducted election after smooth election when nations around us have burned, that has fed a growing population now at 1.5 billion, almost, that has defended itself against external aggression and internal insurrections, that has faced natural calamities, and has made communal riots, despite grave provocations, thoroughly discredited and in fact, despised, that has checked HIV AIDS in its tracks, that has held its own in the face of at least three major post

WW II global meltdowns, that has stunned the world by its intuitive mastery over the marvels of IT, but even above all these, has remained committed to a civilized human order, one that debates corruption among the high and the mighty on the squares and in the streets and then sends reverberations of that straight into the halls of Parliament for enacting legislation when elsewhere condign and instant punishments have been inflicted, the country that debates capital punishment, even in the case of mass-murdering terrorists and the assassins of our beloved leaders, that country cannot but go confidently beyond not just 2021, but many 2021s with dignity, poise and grace. That country will find its leaders, young as well as the once-young, in and outside politics, will find its wisdoms, agonizing as the process might be,

Why? Because reason is not the only active faculty of the human being. There is such a thing as inner belief, ladies and gentlemen, the one that made Iqbal write:

Kuchh baat hai....

Kuchh baat hai ki hasti mit-tii nahiin hamaarii

That ‘kuchh baat’, indefinable and yet palpable, will carry us through not just to a survival that does not smudge, but a success that does not satiate.

And it is the same impulse which impelled Gurudeva Rabindranath Tagore.

Friends, our great National Anthem is an abridged version of the Gurudeva’s composition. The unabridged version has the dark and sombre lines:

Ghuraa timira Ghana nibira nishithe

Piiritamuurchhita deshe

Dusvapne, aatanke, rokkhaa karile anke sneha mayii tumi tumi maataa.

These are plangent words.

But in the very next line, the Poet gives us a change of mood:

Raatri prabhaatila udila Robi-chhobi

Puurva udayagiri bhaale...

I find the reference to Puurva significant. The Sun that rises on India’s East, Tagore tells us, will dispel the darkness with its radiance.

We await that Sun in prayer and hope.

*Dhiresb-babu! Aamaar dhanyabaad-o-namaskaar neben! Sobaike
amar namaskaar.*

Jaai Hind.
