

SOME STICK-ON MEMORABILIA



Around the time the autumnal equinox falls the surreal spectacle in the wee hours of the morning quite puzzles me. And this happens every year. The elderly women gather much before daybreak in the courtyard of the apartment building next to ours on the city outskirts where I live. In the roiled light of the dawn the silhouetted figures seem like apparitions. They sit in a circle and sing in praise of some strange god in their frayed, folksy voices, keeping time by clapping their hands. Then they make a fire in a flat iron bowl and dance circling around it, holding the lighted lamps. Diwali is round the corner. With dew and a slight hint of winter the lone *harshringar* tree on my terrace is in blossom. I get busy without waiting to see where the women disappear with their lamps and little drums – or if they are of this earth at all.

This is also the time the Earth moves closer to the winter solstice – 22 December when the day is the shortest. In a 21st-century city where carbon footprints and congestion do not let you feel early the slight nip in the air, the shorter days are the only sign that we as a people in one part of this planet are getting farther from the Sun. The long night, dipping temperature and the white fog hanging like a curtain limiting your world stress the truth about the fragility and evanescence of our existence – we moving away from the source of light and warmth. Beyond the ordinariness of our quarrels and conflicts, we realize there is a cosmic dimension to our life on this planet. An awareness seeps into us that the equinox and solstice points are only liminal to the capricious ways of our life on earth.

This vulnerability before the uncertainties and unpredictability of tomorrow takes us up the stairs to the shrines, to the religions and their texts. The more visible among them have placed you under an obligation to carry it on. This job, to be performed efficiently and professionally, calls for a well-knit network and high-quality management. And all that requires a steady source of funds. Once started, this process rolls on like a juggernaut – inexorable, implacable. The only way a major religion can survive is by growing, adding more numbers to its roll; that in turn would mean more structures, stronger support and a greater urge to maintain a higher profile. One can achieve all this through a publicity blitz, well-coordinated propaganda. In the 21st century, fund raising is a fine art. Religious communities now own television channels, radio stations, newspapers and even stadiums, hospitals and universities. Have you noticed that often in a Bollywood movie the leading characters visit the Shirdi Sai temple? The shrine figures more in films than any other. Top cricket stars like Sachin Tendulkar and Ravi Shastri wear a Sai Baba locket. A professionally trained, Olympic medal winning Russian wrestler succumbed to the yoga prowess of Swami Ramdev in a highly publicized encounter. This is Big Faith and its strange ramifications. By stretching your argument, you may see this as part of the Great Tradition of religion as well.

The elderly women who perform the esoteric ritual when it is still dark, need neither any fan following nor funds. They are in sublime conversation with a god who they believe can reduce the day to its shortest by making sure the Earth's North Pole is tilted farthest from the

Sun. Their mystical tune evoking another time and world casts a charm on an odd neighbour who happens to be awake long before the first crow caws. Haunted by their atavistic ritual I now get up very early for a magical flat lay of the act of adoration from my dark, ninth-floor balcony. Diwali has come and gone but the old women still move in a circle, clapping to keep time for their rhythmic steps. I wonder how long the rituals hailing the approach of the winter solstice will survive? Perhaps so long as the daughters of God are around? Or are there many more of them – silent, unobtrusive balladeers of unrecorded, noncopyrighted songs they had picked up from their grandmothers in village homes? The little songs have travelled with them, like some stick-on memorabilia, inseparable from their life.

Come to think of it, there is a thin but distinct line between a well-orchestrated religious jamboree and the folk tradition of faith. So if there is Big Faith there could be Little Faith as well though not necessarily in their original Christian contexts. Big Faith is a behemoth, perfectly managed and funded. Its following is so huge even the state holds it in awe. The political system accommodates its leaders, for their one word could make or mar a government. Irrespective of the complexion of a regime, the godmen and new-age spiritual gurus at times actively seek political power and wield enormous clout with those in office. This is not a new thing but has been going on for decades. The imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid used to publicly endorse a political party before elections. In 1989, this institution vetted the list of the Janata Dal's Muslim candidates for the Lok Sabha elections. And yoga guru Ramdev is known for his proximity to quite a few centres of political power. He has his followers all across the political spectrum. Marianne Williamson, an American author, activist and new-age spiritual leader, unsuccessfully ran as an independent for a congressional seat from California. In January this year, she announced her campaign for the Democratic nomination for the 2020 US presidential election.

The idea that the seeker of the spiritual truth is at peace in the solitude of a forest or the mountain passes does not seem to be valid anymore. The new Indian power elite is represented by the high-profile gurus, a few Bollywood stars, top corporate leaders, trending celebrities, a handful of cricketers and of course the powerful politicians. The Baba is no longer a famished-looking ascetic but an image-conscious celebrity jostling for space in the colour supplements of newspapers. Big Faith has evolved its own rules, set priorities and rolled out its cast.

Far away from this charmed circle, another face of faith unfolds on a village path, along the mountain trail, by the riverside – somewhere around ordinary homes. Religion here grows on the land and has a definite social context. It does not crush obstacles in the local culture but sublimates them. Faith is a way of life. There are shrines where people from more than one religion go and pray together. God is not a giveaway, not a brand that can be promoted; He grows into us conditioned by our culture. This is Little Faith – at least for us. And again, you may call it the Little Tradition of religion, too.

The elderly women who make a fire and dance around it singing in praise of a god they believe will protect the mankind from the severity of winter on 22 December, are happy they have said their prayer, have done their bit for the world around. Like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, they seem to be commenting on their place and time.

I do not know why another scene of spiritual demonstration comes back from the past. One day in late winter a few years ago, driving down National Highway 24 on my way to work, I saw a bizarre spectacle on the floodplains of the Yamuna. A massive structure had come up

overnight, colourful banners mildly fluttered in the breeze; I saw arrangements for illumination in the evening. A writer in this magazine graphically captured the madness in his account of the event:

A big celebration, it seemed, was around the corner. That was the venue – more than 1000 acres of floodplain, rich in biodiversity and living micro-organisms – prepared for a three-day extravaganza organized by spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living. The hosts called it World Culture Festival, but in effect, it tolled the death of a perennial river. Tons of rubbish and garbage was dumped onto the riverbed, and then, bulldozers flattened them to ready the ground for the global event.

In ecological terms that vandalism of the river in 2016 was our equivalent of the Amazon fire. That macabre depredation was the handiwork of Big Religion.

The old women who gather in the courtyard of the apartment building braving the early morning chill, are a throwback to a simpler rural culture where rituals were guided by the realities of life, by the larger truth that you face as a community. They represent what we believe to be Little Faith. Quietly but assuredly they keep alive the Little Tradition of religion.

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