

# The Ninth and Final Ode to Life

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*For all their search  
they cannot see  
the image in the mirror.*

*It blazes in the circles  
between the eyebrows.  
Who knows this  
has the Lord.<sup>1</sup>*



Directions. The script was there: Infantry Road, right *maad*<sup>2</sup>→left No↔No way, it's a one way. Look to the left and look to the right. Please beware of unhatched chickens crossing the road. Incubator down this road. March on, march on. GET OUT! Go in.

Safe... for the time being.

On the first day of Bangalore, my true friend said to me, "A cat has nine lives".

I need glasses, I thought to myself. Need some Crocin as well. I walked down to Shiva Medical Store and bought a gift from Archie's Gallery for a friend's birthday. Then I had a cappuccino at Café Coffee Day. I wiped my sweaty hands on my blue jeans and red top, plugged my ears with an iPod shuffle and flailed for an auto to take me to my hotel room.

I packed my bags and paid Rs. 700 for a cab to the Bangalore Airport. I glided up the security check and glanced up at the blinking monitors. My flight was not listed. Frowning, I took a takeaway cappuccino from Café Coffee Day and sat down in front of a monitor. There were a few others around me doing the same thing. We all worked on our wireless laptops and hurried into the moonless night when she asked us to board our flight.

Touchdown in Delhi. A long queue coiled around the pre-paid taxi booth. A longer one was waiting at the taxi boarding points. *The Little Prince* (1943) fell out of my bag. Just then, a taxi arrived. Taxis and autos are as important as *The Little Prince*. They take you from one place to another in the dark.



As I was peering out of the cab, trying to find my way, I wished I could meet the geographer on the sixth planet who would tell me about locations. But if he “couldn’t tell” him, why would he tell me? Especially when things are ephemeral.

*“But what does that mean, ‘ephemeral?’” repeated the little prince, who never in his life had let go of a question once he had asked it.*

*“It means, that which is in danger of speedy disappearance.”*

*“Is my flower in danger of speedy disappearance?”*

*“Certainly it is.”*

*“My flower is ephemeral,” the little prince said to himself, “and she has only four thorns to defend herself against the world. And I have left her on my planet, all alone!”*

*That was his first moment of regret .<sup>3</sup>*

\*

I put my ticket as a bookmark on the page, waiting at Bikaner House for the bus to come. I looked at the time. It was 12.30 p.m. Time flies. Sometimes you don't remember the date either, until you see it printed on your ticket to Jaipur. “It'll come”, said the man next to me.

“What, the bus?” I asked, eating Bingo Mad Angles. I didn't even offer him one.

“No, the film”, he said, pointing to the foldable TV screen in the deluxe A/C bus.

“Listen to me”, said my mother, hugging me tight as I walked through the door. Aha! Am home, I thought to myself. I followed her into the kitchen, looking at the family pictures in the new photo frames. My Very Educated Mother just show us Nine Planets, I said, dumping my bags on the floor. “Let's go out”, she said. “I can't go out, it's too dark in Jaipur”. She sighed and lit her lamp in her temple. “Dear Gods, help her for she knows not what she did”, she whispered to them.



I flung down my banana peel, laughing at that one. What Katie did, what Katie didn't.<sup>4</sup> Yuk-yuking, I stepped on it. And, well, not all of us fall down. But I slipped.



I was taken to a doctor to see what I could have damaged. Head, heart, lungs, liver, teeth, eyes, shoulder, ankle. He gave me one medicine for everything. "Just work. Forget about everything".

But I could not work. Diagnosis after diagnosis revealed nothing. So I stayed a bit longer in Jaipur. I would come back home before dark. Sometimes I could not go out at all. When I did, I noticed these new shops around our house in Shalimar Bagh. Shiv Furniture, Shiv Glass House, Shiv Band. And whenever I took an autorickshaw, the autowallahs would ask if I wanted to go to Shalimar Cinema, an old cinema hall now made into a mall called Sangam Towers at Church Road. Shalimar Bagh is beyond Sodala, new houses and temples and buildings are being built till Ajmer Pulia. Even beyond that, I think.

Where is Sitapura?

I was trying to find an encyclopedia on Jaipur. I wanted to know about the Origin of the City. Google it. I also stumbled onto the Origins of Myth and Religion. Mere coincidence. A la *The Matrix*? The architect is at work. But there are flaws in the system.

I needed to buy more medicine. I called up Shiv Medical and General, my aunt's regular medicine shop. My phone is ringing. Zooming into the night towards Sitapura, I saw Shivam Medical and General store. I bought some honey drops from the man at the counter. "Why did you call your store Shivam?" I asked him. "My younger brother died in 2005. These names are taken from the *pitras*".<sup>5</sup> I nodded my head and thanked him.

"MOM, WHAT ARE *PITRAS*?" I yelled as I swung in. "*Pitras* are ancestors", she said while she was cooking.

"Like *Godzilla* born in 1954 is to *Godzilla* in 1998?" I asked. She nodded as we watched the film. "Why is there so much violence in these films?" she asked me. "I don't know these things, please don't ask me". Forgive me Lord, for I have sinned.

In *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1929), Freud talks about the development of civilisation and curbing instincts. Anger is an instinct. It tears at your insides as you break free from containers that block you in. Will I be free if I flow like liquid modernity?



Thousands of people were rendered homeless when the Indian Oil Corporation tanks burst open at Sitapura while we were watching a marriage party go past the Shri Shani, Shri Shiv, Shri Hanuman, Shri Ram Temple on Ajmer Road. It was a *sava* day. “*Savas* are auspicious days when people get married”, my Mom said when I swung in again. An overall loss of Rs. 300 crore was reported in the fire. Shiv Dresses at Khatipura was bereft of customers.<sup>6</sup> A restaurant at Sitapura gave away marriage dinner meals for free.<sup>7</sup> Don’t look at me when I eat more than two *rotis*. Pass the rice. Dessert. *Paan*. Ice-cream? Coffee? Wine and Cheese? Please flush out your toxins. Am trying. Will *ancien régimes* help me? “Hey Ram”, I sighed.



Why do they use Shiva’s name in buildings and temples in Jaipur? Nokia Tadkeshwar Mobile Shop, Shiva Shakti Juice and Ice-Cream Parlour, Shri Mast Mahadev, Shri Tadkeshwar Mahadev Mandir. Amriteshwar, Gyaneshwar, Maheshwar?



“Everyone wants happiness, fulfillment. And not even happiness so much as fulfillment. Fulfillment happens with three things. First, the destruction of evils, Shiva is the destroyer of evils. Then, his *Shivatva*,<sup>8</sup> his *kalyankari* aspect that is, manifest for the welfare of beings. And, finally, there is absolute happiness. A sense of fulfillment. This sense of fulfillment is in no one else but Shiva. Consumption is the beginning and the end of all activities. All of us are running around for this happiness in our goals, aspirations, desires, dreams. But the Gita is very important. You should concentrate on the Gita and do a comparative study with Krishna for your paper”.<sup>9</sup>

Focus, right? I stepped out in bliss. I had my answers. Ring-a Ring-a Roses. “MOM! Where are my books?” I screamed. And we all fall down. “Please God, nothing should happen after this”, I whimpered.

In *Family Matters* (2002), Nariman’s father regrets filling his head with modern ideas. And how “he never learned to preserve the fine balance between tradition and modernness”.<sup>10</sup>



New epistemology can have strong influences. Sometimes it can be violent. I picked up a biography on Gandhi from the bookshelf. Louis Fischer writes how Gandhi had a friend, Sheikh Mehtab, who was bigger and stronger than him. Being, frail, Gandhi could not run and jump like him. "He regarded himself as a coward. 'I used to be haunted,' he asserts, 'by the fear of thieves, ghosts and serpents. I did not dare to stir out of doors at night.' He could not sleep without a light in his room..."<sup>11</sup> But he dealt with his fears.

I went out to deal with mine. We visited the old city when it was lit at night, Padam and I. Jharkhand Mahadev at Vaishali and Shri Tarkeshwar Ji at Chaura Rastaa are the oldest temples here. Shri Tarkeshwar Ji temple was built in 1784 A.D., according to the *Shilpa Shastra*, a late mediaeval Hindu text on iconography and architecture, around the same time as Maharaja Jai Singh II built Jaipur. There are various other temples in the middle of the concrete road at Chaura Rastaa. The concrete was laid around these temples to accommodate the old within the new.



I also met a *drg ramatta*<sup>12</sup> during a visit to Jawahar Kala Kendra, the art centre Charles Correa designed in 1986. The *drg ramatta* has travelled. He told me that a river dries up, but then it flows again.

"Do you perceive differently with the change in the city?" I asked him. "No", he replied. "I perceive both tradition and continuity. I believe in both Makar Sankranti and in the *sanatan dharm*".<sup>13</sup>

But I insisted. I just wanted to know if there was a plan to the naming of certain temples in certain locations. "It's nothing. New colonies come up. New temples get built. People can pray in their houses also. But it's *shraddha*. So you build a temple. Every *budh* [Wednesday], we visit the Hanuman temple. Then we go to work", said Kailash Munso.<sup>14</sup>

In Hinduism, one can question. A dialogue happens. But then there are questions of faith and practice. You cannot put posters on paintings of Hindu deities in public places. Or you can if you wish to. Just that no one does. The writ and the image fade into faint remembrance with reassembling, but the image remains fixed in habits of the past. Amnesia happens with epistemic violence. Since unbounded consumption can exhaust the sensation gatherer,<sup>15</sup> disbelief and faint remembrance have to be anchored to the spaces provided with the discontentment with globalisation.

A cat has nine lives. So do human beings.

## Notes

1. *AK Ramanujan. Speaking of Siva* (Penguin Books, 1973, New Delhi).
2. 'Maadi' means 'take' in Kannada.
3. *Antoine de Saint Exupéry [1943]. The Little Prince* (Pan Books, 1974, Great Britain), p. 54.
4. *What Katy Did*, by American children's writer Sarah Coolidge, was published in 1872.
5. Interview with Dinesh Sharma, 22 October 2009, 8.30 p.m.
6. Interview with Vishal Baristo, 31 October 2009, 6.30 p.m.
7. <http://www.patrika.com/fire-in-jaipur/index.htm> (accessed 20 November 2009).
8. I understood this to mean 'that which is essentially him'. *Kalyankari* means one who does good.
9. Interview with Vishwanath Jalan, scholar and writer, 6 November 2009, 1.30 p.m.
10. Rohinton Mistry. *Family Matters* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, New York), p. 15.
11. Louis Fischer. *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (Grafton Books, 1982, London), p. 31.
12. *Drg* means 'one who perceives' in Sanskrit. A *ramatta* is a seer. 'Drg Ramatta' is a collaboration between Himanshu Vyas and Amit Kalla on photography=poetry=painting. Interview with Himanshu Vyas, photojournalist, poet, artist, on 18 November 2009, 2.00 p.m.
13. *Makar Sankranti* is an annual kite-flying festival in Rajasthan in January. The day is considered auspicious in the Indian calendar. The festival is closely linked to blue pottery making in Rajasthan. It is said that during the reign of Maharaja Ram Singh II, two potter boys, Kalu and Churaman from Achnera near Agra, came and beat the royal kite flyers. They had put powdered glass on their kite strings. They were immediately invited to Jaipur to teach the local craftsmen their craft. In modern times, the dying craft was revived by Maharani Gayatri Devi. Dharmendar Kanwar. *Jaipur: 10 Easy Walks* (Rupa & Co., 2004, New Delhi), pp. 45-46. *Sanatan dharm* is a Sanskrit term meaning 'eternal law'.
14. Interview with Kailash Munso, owner, JKJ Jewellers, 18 October 2009, 11.30 a.m.
15. Zygmunt Bauman. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Blackwell Publishers, 1995, London), p. 112.