

Moment of embarking
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In the half-light of dawn in September, the river Narmada glides tranquilly in the ancient riverine town of Maheshwar, cinnamon-colored at its furthest outstretch, a burnished copper in the middle and a hazy orange nearer towards the bank where I stand, radiant and incandescent at the same time as she absorbs and reflects the light of the rising sun.

Moist breezes play subdued music in my ears in this quaint, speckless temple town in Khargone district in the state of Madhya Pradesh, in central India. And their clean breaths, lush with the cool of a tapering monsoon and the aromas of damp earth, *sal* tree-sap and dew-bright grass leave the taste of Narmada on my lips even as they lull me into a state of cozy childhood lullabies.

Even in my blurry state, I am alive to how these refreshing drafts are a reprieve from the everyday furnace in the northern part of India, from the quicksilver heat in New Delhi from where I have traveled, that switches from dry to the sweaty and steaming in minutes.

Other aspects of distance, historical and cultural, play on my mind. I am aware that the flow of Narmada is through several time strata and there is no easy telling of the difference. The ninety-one, sepia-colored sandstone temples of Maheshwar, its several brawny forts bristling with ramparts and palaces crowned with cenotaphs, all of who wrap themselves around the curve of the river with a purposeful elegance of style, give me a feeling of having traversed through

centuries yet of being comfortable in its clean and serene contemporaneity, its living and breathing spaces.

Swaddled by the hush of the present, the muted overhang of the past, the soft sibilants of the Narmada, the assured silence of the rising sun, the ever-so gentle melodies of the air and whiffs of earth-scents, the rising scale of birdsong jars. My being rebels at the petulant clamor of these feathered creatures that sound ignorant, misplaced and somehow discourteous.

I wait to wind down my heartbeats and breadth, to regain the space of silence, its power, not with my ears but my spirit, till I can once again hear the subtle. This blankness I come to is not an absence of life's cadences but their elevation, quite like hearing the wind in a cave, where sound and soundlessness merge, a state that brings me to the fringe of a meditative state though my eyes are open and I stand.

My attention wanders to the sun's poised blooming into power from the edge of the world into the horizon. The extravaganza of this cadmium-colored ball is a show of how the sun suffices itself, of how it revels in its singularity.

As its arc rises bit by bit in suspenseful radiance and as it anchors its way into the center of nature's composition, I marvel at how its iconography, its heraldic vision, one that stands for wholeness, continuity, infinity, gains surety within my consciousness, its tread noiseless, much like the sun.

I stand rooted, my attention sedulous, to take in the next stage of its journey, its necessary travel that will bring daylight to an end with finality, a passage that will end in its complete dissolution. "The morning sight of this disc's melt-away at Maheshwar is as beguiling as its

coming together in its wholeness,” travelogues and yoga practitioners, who come here for sun salutations, promise alike.

I see the sun give way from its center by degrees, dissipate from a deep orange to sepia, from tawny amber to dull tan, till it disembodies into the Narmada in a liquid light, into a glassy transparency like a semi-molten mirror.

At the same time, I trail my eyes to the waters of Narmada that chase these wavering color contours of the sun. Its iridescence alters with a chameleon-quick swiftness to settle into the ghostly shimmer of the sun, its shade of glossy pallor, a signal that the quiescent moments of dawn are up and it’s time for the frenetic routines of the day.

A craggy, loin-clothed, closed-eyed sadhu silently serenades the cosmos, waist-deep and one-legged in her waters, his other leg folded on his knee, blind to everything immediately around him. An image of my own guru who has brought me to these harmonies, away from the restless elements of the city, its unstill, on-the-move elements, attaches itself into my consciousness.

Not quite willing to forgo these enthralling moments, I sit down at the *ghats*, within the cool confines of one side of the populated, relict bank, from where I can see across to the other bank, one speckled with rows swaying and bright-tipped *sal* trees no longer suffused by the velvet veil of the pre-dawn hours.

As the cool light breezes continue to waver teasingly over my skin and billow around my person, making my loose cotton pants flap, I run my fingers through Narmada’s brimming waters and wonder if I should indulge in a ritualistic dip for her symbolic power to come alive within. First immerse myself completely in her waters, then pirouette with my hands raised, follow this

gesture by making a cup of my palms to drink a mouthful of her water and then in an expanded, final gesture pour some of her water over my head in salutation chanting ‘*Har Har Narmade*’ (glory be to Narmada).

A closer inspection of Narmada’s impish wavelets that eddy, curl and vanish into her flinty depths, however, offer a warning against losing impulsively myself in the sanctity of the river.

Even as the temple bells above the *ghats* peal, the brass plates pound, the songs of devotion by the pundits reach their pitch and the crescendo of the morning *aarti* arrives, where lights with wicks soaked in ghee are lit and offered first to the deity and its smoky flames are passed around to the devotees, I remain in this state of capture, in a private and personal world, where all anxious rational thoughts of my neural circuits are obliterated, the mind emptied and the spirit in a place of its own.

This is what I have come to Maheshwar for. To allow my mind to settle. To allow myself to disentangle from daily involvements of city life. To let go of all the glues of my tangible world. To flow into meditation naturally,

I go back to my guesthouse for now but come back every day in the small hours before dawn for four months for these very same sights. As Ram Dayal, my portly, moon-faced, genial and well-read guesthouse manager, says, “I think you tirelessly lope down Narmada’s banks every day to test your level of calm, strip your inner self to see your balance is chancy or you can sustain it within and without.” His tone is one of wry amusement but I cannot deny its deadly accuracy.

My sense of equipoise at Maheshwar is both visceral and intangible.

I try to explain my feelings about this contemplative morning mood of Narmada, her effect on me, of how the geography of Maheshwar, has imprinted itself on my fifty-five-year-old mind to my guru, Ravi Shankar as he simply likes to call himself.

He is helping me find what I seek.

My guru of eight years is a tall man with a lean frame, an easy manner, a sanguine, unlined and youthful face though he is in his seventies. His faultlessly white kurta and pant and white close-cropped hair define him in the way clouds define rain.

He came into my life when many of things in my life failed to make sense and I had reached a *cul de sac* of sorts. Worldliness brought a sense of dismay, work felt like an unintelligent parlor game, prayer distracting rather than transporting and the closing my eyes fetched emptiness rather than relief. I was looking for something more, a different frame of faith.

Even before I met him and accepted him as my guru, his disciples described him to me as a man of few words. Leela Madan, who has been under his tutelage for fifteen years, ever so often, tells me of how he can “go back in loops of time and cracks in space” and “read people and their problems like a written page.” It prepares me for his reading of my life with accuracy though I have not been explicit, the prescience in his eyes are a giveaway of his knowingness.

Guru Ravi Shankar offers me a route to know myself. Seeing my own truth, before I try salvation or to know the world. His way is a compelling one. A start with the sharpening of my sensibilities and cultivating my self-knowledge in order to understand the workings of the universal.

“It is way guided by Hindu philosophy and practitioners over millennia. One not based on Hindu religion with 36 million divinities, not in tradition, not in dogma, not in faith based on

orthodoxy but in something deeper. Something that involves the filtering out the chatter and learning the sound of your own voice. It will be your own journey unlike that of others even if they do it at the same time and the same place,” he explains.

Said in his voice and in his manner it sounds disarmingly simple, though I know it is far from that. I trust him completely, ever since I felt I felt his energy when he extended his right hand over my head to bless me. Wildly illogical, unreasonable, unbelievable? Not for me.

I talk to him about Narmada, hesitant and nervous of appearing like a naïve, mad celebrant. “Narmada’s muted undertones, her fluid serenity at dawning have unloosed me, layer by layer, over these months, tenderly and with caution first and then with more flamboyance. Her waters urge me to feel and see myself as I have never done before. She mirrors the trueness within me, washes away my lifelong anxieties of being fractured and frustrated, fearful and alone, and shows me that I have an enough-ness of spirit to live fully in the world. That my broken psyche can be made whole again by seeking a larger purpose. Despite seven years of tenacious effort, inner rigor and yogic practices to regulate life forces in the city, I have been unable to arrive at this state of equilibrium, a state where I feel happy wheels of energy within my abdomen. I know I will forever carry a drop of Narmada within me just as every grain of wheat and rice in this region do.”

To my breathless gust of words, at first, he simply says, “I think you will now understand why many saints and all manner of people have said the mere act of contemplating the Narmada can absolve you.”

Then as an afterthought, he adds, “Narmada is placid at this time of the year in Maheshwar. But not always. And even as she flows through this state, from her headwaters in

Amarkantak, through Mandla, Hoshangabad and Nimawar and then downstream to Karanjia and Patan she changes her moods and colors capriciously. As a raging torrent she is Rewa, in restfulness she is Manananda, bringer of eternal bliss, where she is spirited she is called Rajani, as a seductress she is Kamala and in places where she destroys is Vibhathsa. She is similarly called by other names in the two other states she flows in, Maharashtra and Gujarat.”

I am keen to talk about Maheshwar as it is he who has suggested I come here to “cut away from all social and emotional connections to see life from inside out”. I pause uncertainly to see if he will let me. He nods with a smile so I continue, “The town of Maheshwar with her clay houses, ochre-tiled roofs and low brick walls, wrinkled fields of cotton, wheat and soybean, the click and hum of her villages and her people’s quiet community involvement on the one hand and her classic, symmetrical historical structures of religion and ruling on the other pulls in her many facets into a harmony of being. This truth has shifted something within.”

I wonder if my interspersing of the cartography of an outer world into an internal world is simplistic, banal, the work of a neophyte. Fortunately for me, my guru comes up with a delightful surprise. He saves my observations from the humdrum and shows me fun in the fuzzy spaces between philosophy and spirituality.

With a wicked glint in his eye, at least it appears thus to me, he says, “Maheshwar is Shiva’s town, the Destroyer in the Hindu trinity. He balances the power of the Creator Brahma and the Preserver Vishnu, to destroy all things negative, be it evil or ignorance. He delivers things he destroys to Brahma when they are ready for recreation. Yet believe me when I say he has some unhallowed passions and not all of the city is sanctified. Do you know Nandi, the sculpted bull, who is Shiva’s guardian at the temple above the *ghats*, jumps his cage takes on the

form of a real fierce, black bull and cavorts around town?” I am amused by the bull’s devilish sense of humor, his crooked, uninhibited internal transformations.

In the month of February, when the chill webs Maheshwar, I feel a certain inexplicable readiness towards many things. I sense I am at the right point of my personal evolution and that my moment of embarkation has arrived. Not so much through external signals as an inner knowing. I confide in Leela when I feel my shift from traditional frameworks of cognition.

“Are you ready to let go of the world of appearances, the temporal world of reality? To trust in the power superior to the intellect? To transcend sense-experience, unverifiable by science, one beyond the Western empiricism that you are familiar with and handle the polarity of this space? Are you prepared to trust in the metaphysical base of the philosophy of Hinduism that will connect your being, your finite *atman* to the universal *brahman*, the ultimate invisible reality that encompasses everything even Gods in a unity?” she quizzes unceasingly but not caustically.

Her intent is probably to assess my capacity to cast away my many familiarities and to shoulder the implausible complications of these experiences that will be qualitatively different from anything I have experienced so far.

My guru has talked to us over years of this inner journey. “Your inner journey, *darsana*, or the soul-sight as we call it, will not ascertain and acquire facts, illuminate truths of revealed religion or divine reality but will take you on an unfamiliar, expansive, quest of values to align yourself with as the nature of reality reveals itself.”

He speaks of it being each one’s subjective journey, distinctly one’s own, one that has no roadmaps to follow. In his words, “It will be your direct and intimate knowledge of reality of

truth, its *élan vital*, or its vital impulse. You have to make your inner way and at the beginning, it may not be necessarily comforting, foot sores rarely are.”

Rajat Sen, my ex-colleague and friend, seeped in city life, discredits in a phone call from Delhi, my efforts at “creative intelligence, my intuitive inner search for ideal values through my innate sense of knowing.” He pooh-poohs it abrasively as “so much nonsense” and commands me back to New Delhi.

“Dissecting your experiences within your head as a template for God's attributes or universal intentions and matrix is plain stupid,” he snaps. After an awkward pause between us, he says in a less ill-natured tone, more as an appeal to my sanity, “It is without any logical support, has no methodology which is measurable and demonstrable or recognizable sources of knowledge.”

I know many in my family and friend circle are variously alarmed and puzzled by my contrarities over the years, their stares of incomprehension say it. Fortunately, my husband’s happy indulgence of my exploits save me from hostility within my innermost circle and from dealing with his internalized angst. And as I am not interested in co-relating my explorations with the bells and whistles of calculations or technology or counter-defenses, I let Rajat keep his keep faith in knowledge using empiricism and rationalism, in its exactitudes, as I go on an undefined exploration.

I know drifts of knowledge gained through intuitive powers require preparation and can be trusted only if the seeker is well equipped to handle its inner truth. My first brush with such intuitiveness comes as I quiet the turmoil within and I am in balance with my surrounding elements of earth, water, fire, air, and space. It is the hour of the Creator, the *Brahma Muhurtha*,

at 3.30 am, when everything in the universe is said to be in its perfect state. I sit on the banks of Narmada.

My diary, dated 3 February, 2019, that inks my thoughts, best conveys my first experience, my initial, small epiphany. “I am in a space where the play of my senses dull and my conscious thoughts subdue. With no sensory stimulus to delineate the borderline between the self and the world, I arrive at a space where I am endless and intimately interwoven with everyone and everything. My sense of self diminishes. I find myself naturally involved in a vaster existence yet one which is one with my own. I know it sounds contradictory and abstruse, more so when I say I make sense of these things in an impersonal yet deeply personal way.”

Yet I cannot think my intuitiveness away or disbelieve it in any way, however maddeningly opaque it sounds to others. And what is remarkable is that there is a simplicity to my knowledge even though it is so profound.

My next understandings, above the threshold of stimuli, come to me with relative ease and felicity, almost in a just-like-that-way, after a month. Of them I say in my writings, “Time has no meaning. Past, present and future exist simultaneously. When time stops, all problems disappear. As endlessness prevails, I no longer identify with the body or the mind. And in this mellow state, the thought ‘I am and I am aware’ comes. As does the understanding of ‘I am, I was and always will be, beyond all worlds and all universes, infinite and beyond time.’ From this, I know that death and afterlife are just small incidents.”

In my last entry on April 25, 2019, in a hasty summary of my inner scape, I write, “What I can say of this experience except to say that this luminous floating-ness is bliss? How can I try to utter that which is unutterable in mortal speech yet something that is true and exists? All I can

say with certainty is this primary consciousness functions with its own inner logic, where it is its own means of knowing and that one can merely know by feeling it. And also that I have arrived at a higher definition to my person though my sense of self is diffused.”

I know that my inheritances are small, infinitesimal, just at the very beginning and the arrival of the supreme reality is a long way in coming and in all likelihood take more than one lifetime. But having had a glimpse of it, this is the world I want to be in as I am sure its difference will keep me enchanted for life.

I plan a move to Varanasi, or Kashi as the locals call it, or Benares as my guru refers to it which is further north in the state of Uttar Pradesh. I will move with all my co-disciples and my guru to yet another city of Lord Shiva, one of the oldest in the world and a center of civilization for more than 3,000 years. The revered river Ganga flows through it and to die in Varanasi, close to this river of purity, is to break free from the endless cycle of rebirth. The promise of Shiva is immediate liberation.

I do not intend to go there for salvation or for whatever it is that the six million tourists will aspire to in their visit here this year. I will go instead to take on the challenge of finding my interiority within the greater depth of this city, where the cult of death is the same as the cult of life. Where the cremated dead from the Manikarnika *ghat* and the living worshippers at the Dashashwamedh *ghat* and the 87 other stone *ghats* walk the same paths.

Will I able to do it?

My co-disciple Manish soothes my apprehensions of doubting in this manner with patience. “Doubt helps you shake the status quo, face and overcome your inner fears, rethink

success as you see it, reflect on previous stories you've told yourself and search for the silver lining, to ask new questions, and to search for new answers.”

I now able to accept doubt as an important part of my journey.

“Varanasi’s macabre welter of sanctity and strength can frighten an initiate who uses the energy of the external place to forge a way inside. Shiva’s avatar here is not the gentle one in Maheshwar. Here, he explosively breaks social, moral and legal codes and rebels against order,” warns Veena. “Are you sure you are ready both for the city and to withstand the essence of Shiva’s vehemence that is not altogether sane?” she wants to know.

I am not sure but if the sanity of civilization has got me nowhere, I am ready to try the reverse and forgo the comforts of the familiar. With help from my guru.

Countless people have described the living crematorium drama that is Kashi.

I read the relentless details of their writings, in its multiplicity and variety. Of the sights of corpses lying on bamboo biers wrapped in white cloth waiting to be burnt, the endless stacks of pyre wood gathered haphazardly, the blazing fires from dawn past dusk at the *ghats*, the fire-aided decomposition of human flesh, the bodies of babies and holy men tied to flotsam and floated downriver, the riot of claws, talons and beaks of predatory birds who fight each other to eat putrefying flesh, the unavoidable jostling with goats and cows who come to chew on the flower offerings for the dead and the raucous chants of the pundits who combatively transact the business of death.

I also know that the Ganga has been gutted in Varanasi beyond remedy by these activities, of how its murky water carries the ashes of 30,000 people cremated here each year, of how the faithful yet believe it is pure enough to drink.

It throws me in a spin.

Will the city's upturned, irrational and absurd polyphonies, its haphazard growth where the flying brick dust of modernity has been awkwardly overlaid over traditions, catch me off-guard, throw me off my trail and unspool the small inner balances that I have just come to? Will the Ganga be my lifeline as the Narmada did?

Kashi, I know will be a hard personal litmus test, a true assessment whether I can keep my calm in its cacophony. And then as I resume my normal life in New Delhi.

Perhaps, for a fuller consideration of the city and its confusions, its whirling verbal and visual codes, I could make a start by listening to the city's multifocal narratives, grapple with their lyrical anxieties, as their subversive practices of using indirection as a storytelling strategy. Maybe then of blurring of the sounds of the conch, bells, chants, bargains and howls will happen and allow me to hear the subtle sounds of my inner life.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

I shall lay my faith in my current belief that life has a way of leading me to exactly where I need to be and do exactly what I need to do.