

STAGING DIVINE COMEDY ON WATERS : SWADHYAYA EXPERIMENT IN INDIAN FISHERIES

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Introduction:

Institutional arrangements emerged to address allocative issues of common property resources (CPRs) - more particularly in response to the pessimistic outcomes hypothesised as "tragedy of the commons"¹ are fairly known and widely discussed. These arrangements include privatisation of the resource or public intervention as remedial measures. They take humans for granted and accept as what they look like, based on perceptions developed largely by the mainstream economists of the neo-classical school. People using CPRs are portrayed mostly as greedy, selfish and utilitarian - caricatured as isolated,² unrelated and atomic beings.

But there is also an alternative approach to view humans not as what they look like but as what they could be.³ This approach claims to have been presenting a more natural picture of human beings as opposed to that of a commodity type, developed by the neo-classical school.

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When we find that resource management models, based on the narrowly perceived image of a man have either failed or aggravated the tragic situations, discussions of alternative models have become imperative.

In the above context, an innovative institutional experiment entitled as " Matsyagandha" (a legendary name of the fisherwoman) is discussed in this paper. This name is given to all 32 boats, in common, engaged in marine fishing along the upper western coastal belt of Gujarat and Maharashtra in India. This is one of several projects launched by a non-formal organisation known as Swadhyaya Parivar (SP henceforth). Besides this, SP includes other projects like, Yogeshwar Krishi, (God's Farms, in agriculture), Vruksha Mandir (Tree-Temples in social forestry) Gouras (dairy units) ,Heera Mandir (diamond cutting and polishing units) Loknath Amritalayam (the village level unit for the creative community development), etc.

All the above projects, sponsored and managed by SP, carry spiritual approach of human development and social change, based on the vedic concept of " indwelling" God.

This paper is divided into three sections for the convenience. The first section includes meaning and philosophy of SP, followed by detailing of Matsyagandha experiment and its analysis in the second section. Whereas, the concluding remarks are presented in the last section.

Section - I

Origin, Growth, Meaning and Philosophy of SP

Origin and Growth:

Before the meaning and philosophy of SP is explained, a brief outline of its origin and growth would facilitate in comprehending the whole image of this organization.

Bhagwad Gita Pathshala (a place of Vedic learning and teaching), located within the thickly populated areas of proper Bombay (the State Capital of Maharashtra) is the birth place of SP. The founder of this organisation, Rev. Pandurang Shastri Athvale, is affectionately called "Dada" (meaning elder brother) by the millions of SP followers. He inherited the whole responsibility of running and managing Pathshala from his father when he was in his early thirties. He received his education in Sanskrit and English from his father but did not join any professional -degree- courses. He, however, extensively used public libraries of Bombay and mastered knowledge of several disciplines including humanities and social sciences. He got fully conversant with various schools of thoughts which have closely influenced the contemporary political and economic systems. He could astonishingly synthesise his deep knowledge of ancient Indian Vedic scriptures and philosophic traditions with modern thoughts. With the result, he could create a distinguished space for him as a master communicator. He attracted huge crowds to listen to his Sunday discourses which he ceaselessly continued over since his father assigned this task to him.

The Sunday crowds drawn from the cross-sections of Bombay included, among others, youth and intellectuals. From among them a small group of 19 came forward to take Dada's message and mission to the interior places, including village communities. This first group of 19 later grew into a family of more than three million Swadhyayees over a period of its history of about four decades. This movement, at present is no more confined to the Western India but has been making a silent penetration into other parts of the country, as also in some places of the Middle East, Western Europe and North America.

The Meaning :

The very name - Swadhyay Parivar - is self explanatory in its simple meaning. The Sanskrit word Swadhyay includes 'Swa' - the self and 'adhyaya' - the study. Swadhyaya, therefore, suggests study of the self or knowledge or discovery of the self. The term 'Parivar' is used to describe a group having familial relations.

In SP 'Parivar' or family carries a special meaning. As Dada explains, there are two types of families : received and sought. Everyone is supposed to have his own received type family given to him with the very fact of his birth in a particular family. But a person may also have a family which is sought by him as a result of seeking relations beyond the received family. This may also be

described as one's reference -family. SP, in this sense of the term is a family of the later type.

The SP Philosophy :

As mentioned earlier, the whole philosophic super-structure of SP is based on the Vedic concept of 'indwelling' God. It is genius of Dada that he could use this concept as a strong stimuli for the social transformation. Dada, in his discourses and literature makes painful remarks about the crisis of cultural decline, impoverishment of basic values and ideals, weakening of community bonds, loss of humanistic reasoning, etc. All these, put together, may better be described as a loss of basic truth or reality as a reference point. As per Vedic Philosophical tradition, God dwells well within everyone (including objects of the nature and the man as a part of it), as an universalisable source of the truth. People, when fail to subscribe their judgements to such a truth crisis of various types occur. All tragic consequences may, thus, be explained as "loss of God" as a reference point. In this sense, in SP, the task begins with the study, discovery or knowledge of the self which awakens a man to discover and feel presence of God to whom he may refer to his judgements.

Though traditional religious orientation of an average Indian

towards accepting presence of God has made Dada's task much easier, it is beauty of SP philosophy that it illuminates mind of an average Swadhyayee through philosophic reasoning. The SP philosophy does not take religious beliefs as they are but reforms them, where necessary, and makes them free from the 'steel-framed' authority of the scriptures.

Reforms in Religion through Reasoning and Action :

The distinct characteristic of SP Philosophy is that it has further been expressed through action. Dada developed a number of projects to demonstrate how these reforms assign new meanings to the wornout traditions. Had 'Dada' not been able to satisfy curiosity of inquisitive minds of Bombay intellectuals of the initial batch of SP, they would, perhaps, not have piloted the spread of SP mission. He used facts of life with the force of observations and down to the earth illustrations to support his arguments. It is in this context that Majid describes him as "a modern man of action in Vedic tradition" He could give intellectual security to those who joined his mission at different stages.

Practicality mixed with Idealism :

The tribute to the SP philosophy would remain incomplete if due reference is not made of the vast practicality Dada could mix with the supreme idealism. He assured order in practical life to those who followed the way he suggested. He sorted out just principles of human behaviour and brought them in harmony with the 'utilitarianism' of his perception.

Acceptance of Subjectivity :

The robust utilitarianism of Vedic tradition does not reject the self, and therefore, subjectivity . But Swadhyaya as a study of the self awakens an individual to discover his or her true self or true subjectivity. Manifestation of true subjectivity takes the form of co-operation, collective well-being and self-lessness of human relations.

The simple utilitarianism takes a man for granted as a greedy indiscriminately competitive and self interest maximiser. This may be described as manifestation of his false subjectivity. In this context, SP helps one in the process of leaving his false subjectivity and making a definite move towards achieving true subjectivity.

The Process of Involution:

Tregedy of the commons type outcomes are mostly the result of the principle like survival of the fittest, made popular by the evolutionary theorists. As against this, SP philosophy may appropriately be described as one promoting the process of 'involution'. False subjectivity is expressed through the process of evolution. Whereas, true subjectivity is expressed through the involutory process.

In SP movement, the process of involution includes action. If one does not act, he can not have any experience. 'Swadhyaya' without action would mean remaining in meditation. This may keep a person in subjective illusion. SP, therefore includes both - the study as well as action. The plan of action helps in externaliasing one's true subjectivity. It is only action through which it can be known whether a Swadhyayee has made any progress or not. The SP philosophy, therefore, includes action as an important constituent.

Metabolic Relationship and Divine Brotherhood:

When Dada visualises presence of God as a creator and operator of body, he draws strength of his argument from the theory of

metabolism. He asks a simple question : who creates metabolism in human body and runs through the veins ? This implies, as Dada argues, presence of supreme power in everyone. Dada's concept of divine brotherhood is based on this metabolic relationship.

The relationship between Man , Nature and God :

Intellectuals, often face a terrific problem in accepting presence of God. They mostly consider God as something abstract and mystic and expect rational explanation to support his assumed presence. But intellectuals would not doubt, atleast, the metabolic relationship as existing between man and nature. The high-profile intellectual like Marx accepts such a relationship. He believes that nature is 'humanised' in man through process of metabolism . Some of the deep-ecologists move a step ahead and try to recognise nature as material as well as spiritual. They hold a view that nature itself is a proof of its heavenly origin. As humans are part of the nature, they also bear this proof.

The concept of 'indwelling 'God in SP philosophy is a spritual version of the above relationship recognised by Marx and other social scientists, besides deep ecologists.

Section - II

The Matshyagandha Experiment :

'Matsyagandha ', as explained earlier, is a legendary name of a fisherwoman. 'Matsya' or fish is also associated with the process of incarnation of God, according to ancient Indian religious scriptures. It is believed that the first incarnation of Lord Vishnu as a God had assumed form of a fish.

This Name - Matsyagandha, is given to all 32 boats operating under a project of SP, developed specifically for the fishermen communities. These boats are also described as "floating temples", on which fishermen do fishing with the devotional spirit. They do fishing as an act of worshipping. Dada calls fishermen as 'Sagarputra' or sons of the sea. He, thereby, makes fishermen aware of their intrinsic relationship with nature (or nature-God). When they work on Matsyagandha, they express their sense of gratitude through offering their efficiency. Therefore, whatever catch they get is taken as belonging to the God and not to the fishermen operating these boats. The value of the catch is used, in part, for the maintenance and reinvestment in the project and also to support needy fishermen.

The SP fishermen, in 6 to 10 numbers are crewed on Matsyagandha on rotation basis. These are small, mechanised trawl boats and undertake fishing mostly in the inshore areas. They usually go on short-trips, for a day or two, and do fishing round the year except a couple of months during monsoon. They, however do repair work during this period of seasonal closure. The SP fishermen - those register their names to work on Matsyagandha boats - are in such a big number that each fisherman gets a chance once in a year. Based on this calculation that 32 Matsyagandha boats work for 250 days in a year with an average crew of 8 fishermen on each, approximately 64 thousand fishermen get a chance to contribute their efficiency as a mark of gratitude towards God, once in a year.

This project, commenced some 15 years back with one Matsyagandha, could increase its fleet to 32, exclusively through the self-help. The aggregate value of catch created under this project is described by Dada as "impersonal wealth"¹³. It is obvious that no individual fishermen out of 64 thousand, could ever feel that it is he who created this wealth.

The needy fishermen, who are supported from the fund, thus created, are identified by the community leaders of SP. But the support is extended as a grace of God ("Prasad") and it reaches the target group in such a way that they never come to know exactly who helped them. The support, when offered as a grace of God, is accepted without any reservation or feeling of

Matsyagandha project, when observed in the above context, may be found demonstrating what a man basically is and what he potentially is able to achieve. This project, → launched by the SP, ~~which~~ accepts man as cooperative, relation-seeker and altruistic by nature. What is required is to make a man aware of his true nature and show the way to work accordingly. Matsyagandha, as a laboratory experiment, has been trying to prove this thesis, though in a controlled environment in which individuals need some extra inputs of the types available within SP system.

If economist like Adam Smith can legitimately expect working of 'invisible hand' of market as necessary precondition for the successful functioning of capitalist system - the SP system - through projects like Matsyagandha - expects the 'invisible solidarity' to facilitate humans to work according to their true nature. Smith's invisible hand is comprised of moral codes of human behaviour. Whereas, SP's secret solidarity assumes intricate relationship existing between man and man, between man and nature and between man and God.

Smith's invisible hand requires SP type institutions to create and support a moral society. SP attempts to show that save a man, the system will automatically be saved.

helplessness. They are not allowed to feel that they are being obliged. It is quite possible that fishermen, receiving such a support, may have already worked on Matsyagandha more than once or may be expecting their turn to come. It should be made clear that the help, so offered, is not confined to the SP fishermen only.

The Analysis :

The SP experiment of Matsyagandha, is analysed within the framework developed in the earlier section, may address some of the basic issue related to CPR use and management. Though the framework is based on the spiritual approach, which itself is not free from the severe criticism and doubts.

[i] Whether romantic and over-blown ?

McCay's comments - though not made exactly against the spiritual approach - raises serious doubts about the conversation value of grand appeal to the divinity, mostly on the ground that it sounds "romantic in the sense of being overblown". But McCay's own judgement about romantic perspective suggests it being more acceptable than Hardin's tragic skepticism. Because, this perspective puts greater faith in human nature and its potential.

(ii) ' Will-to-do ' or commitment :

Matsyagandha experiment shows the way to replace weakness of will¹⁶ by a strong commitment. The creation of impersonal wealth requires impersonal altruism to influence behaviour of an individual. Simple altruism¹⁷ may be equated with sympathy. Sympathy could be egoistic which can not help producing impersonal wealth on continuous basis for a sufficiently longer period of time. Sen wants commitment rather than sympathy for the action to be non-egoistic. He further relates commitment with the sense of obligation.¹⁷ Dada uses the word gratitude. Matsyagandha experiment proves that sense of gratitude leads to stronger commitment which produces impersonal wealth in a most non-egoistic way.

(iii) A new system of preferences :

It is possible to analyse Matsyagandha experiment within the system of preferences and link it to the micro-economic theory. But this experiment suggests altogether a new version of preference system. Hardinian type tragic consequences of CPR use are mostly explained with the help of traditional revealed preferences theory.¹⁸ How personal preferences of individuals can bring hazardeous consequences to all is ably explained through theoretical models which popularly use the cases like Prisoners' Dilema¹⁹(PD)

Sen argues, in the above context, that to use simple preference system of PD type is an inadequate explanation of human behaviour. A player in such a game, if assured of the cooperative behaviour by other player, may prefer to go by a contract and try to optimise the outcome. The Assurance Game (AG) preferences are certainly better than the PD preferences. But the assurance problem is difficult to solve when players are many and in a situation of information asymmetry. It often produces unaffordable transaction costs in carrying out the contracts.

The SP system, through its experiment like Matsyagandha, suggests very clearly that player of the game can reach a stage of optimality with the help of what Sen has described as other Regarding (OR) preferences. In such a case each player follows a "general will" unconditionally. But this requires a strong commitment to be made in favour of the general will.

Unconditional commitment to support general will makes a player consequence neutral. In other words, he does not need any proof to confirm that the consequences of his action will bring positive outcomes.

(iv) Preferences become choices :

When one is prepared to make strong commitment in favour of OR preferences, such preferences become choices. Simple preferences

(of the type implicit in revealed preference theory) are always linked to options, and options in turn, are linked to consequences. The simple system of preferences weakens the will-to-do. Choices are consequences neutral, as they are product of the strong commitments. They, therefore, are something more than preferences, or preferences graduated into choices.

Matsyagandha experiment of SP system may better be seen as curious - new - example of individual preferences transformed into choices. It shows how a strong commitment makes a man consequences neutral. What is really new in the SP system is the source of commitment. In this system the source of commitment is the sense of gratitude expressed in favour of universalisable truth - the God - the reference point to which their judgement are subscribed.

(v) The issue of rationality :

The mainstream economists may still raise an issue of rationality of choice or commitment . They may obviously face a difficulty in accepting something as rational and yet assumed to be consequence ~~neutr~~al.

It is evident from the experience of Matsyagandha experiment that when SP fishermen make a commitment in favour of producing impersonal wealth, it is never based on their own perception about what is rational or irrational. Their commitment derives strength directly from the truth of choice they make. To them this truth is so obvious and self evident that they do not find any valid reason to think in terms of consequences of their choices. In fact, their individual preferences are replaced by the collective choice. It exceeds far beyond the narrow preceptions of mainstream economists who are prone to think in terms of individual gain-seeking and associated economic rationality.

Section - III

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of Matsyagandha experiment of SP, as presented in Section II, prompts us to make some concluding remarks :

(i) Whether a divine comedy ?

Through the title of this paper borrows the words 'divine comedy'

from Dante's famous epic, they are used to show approach of the whole movement of SP and basic objectives of the projects launched by this movement.

In the above context, the Matsyagandha experiment of SP has been viewed in this paper in terms of possibilities of staging a divine comedy by those very players who have been held responsible as causing the tragedy. The term divine is used to suggest the basic nature and potential of human beings. Whereas the term comedy is used within its encyclopedia definition. Comedy is also defined as a social drama staged by individuals as social rather than private beings with corrective purposes. If humans are open to correction, this very process leads to the end contrary to that of a tragedy. Hardin's commoners are not open to corrections and do not develop institutional mechanism of the type necessary to avoid the tragedy. In this sense, Matsyagandha project of SP may be viewed as an institutional mechanism guiding humans in correcting their mistakes and avoiding the tragic consequences.

(ii) The Conservation Value :

The Conservation value of any resource management model, particularly in the area of natural resources, greatly depends

upon how one looks at the resource. The SP experiment of Matsyagandha visualises relationship between fishermen and the sea in altogether a different context. Fishermen are viewed as sons of the sea (Sagarputra) and they are supposed to have a deep sense of gratitude towards this basic source of their survival. They therefore, are not expected to exploit it but to offer something back, as well. This kind of attitudinal change is basic for the conservation purpose. Matsyagandha experiment, in this sense, can be considered as a laboratory for bringing attitudinal change in a traditional society. Resource conservation models in absence of change in attitude of resource users may not succeed. It may safely be argued that if any resource conservation or management plan is given to the SP fishermen, involved in Matsyagandha experiment, there are greater chances of its success.

A classic example, to support the above point is one of the most recent SP projects, namely, water-recharging. SP peasants are named as Bhoomi - putra (Sons of the mother earth). Dada awakened these peasants about need to show their gratitude towards the mother-earth by giving - back part of the water they have been drawing. This has brought tremendous attitudinal change among SP peasants. With the result. large - scale water recharging movement has become phenomenal activity in hundreds of village communities of Western India.

There is, therefore, greater scope for resource conservation through Matsyagandha project. What is required is to develop an appropriate plan of conservation and give it to the SP - fishermen.

(iii) Universalisability of the SP - experiment :

The Matsyagandha project contains certain Values which are universalisable. The religious and cultural inputs have always attracted traditional communities of the both - developed and developing societies. There are certain inputs of this kind which, if internalised, may bring, attitudinal changes required for the purpose of conservation of a given resource. SP movement has shown the way in which such values can be identified and internalised as part of the human behaviour. This raises our optimism about what a man potentially is.

Notes and References

1. Hardin, G., " The Tragedy of the Commons " in Science, 13 Dec. 1968 and Kimber, R., The tragedy of the commons reappraised, Keele Research Papers, Dept. of Politics, Keele Uni., 1983.
2. See for an overview of the classical, neo-classical and modern perspective of resource economics : Emmerson, D., Rethinking Artisanal Fisheries Development : Western Concepts, Asian Experiences, World Bank Staff Working Paper no.423, Oct. 1980, Ch II PP 14-22; See for the modern version of economic man: Becker, G., The Economic Approach to Human Behaviour, University of Chicago Press , 1976.
3. Mostly anthropologists have confronted neo-classical economists around the hypothesised economic rationality of individual behaviour. See, for detailed review of their approach : Acheson, J., " Anthropology of Fishing " in Annual Review of Fishing, No. 10, 1981.
4. See for details : Srivastava, R.K., "Swadhyaya Movement : Its Meaning and Message " Paper presented at a seminar of the United Nations University at Rome, Sept. 1986.

- 5 Seth, N.R., "Children of the Same God (A spiritual Approach to Social Transformation) working paper no. 59, Gujarat Institute of Development Research Ahmedabad Nov. 1994.
6. Based on Personal talks with Dada, March 24, 1994, Bombay. Dada explained that there is also rationality in a family which is sought, because it is a family by choice and not by accident. A close inmate of SP elaborated this point and added that (i) the SP family is overwehlmng by its scale (3 million) and (ii) it is over-wehlmng by warmth.
7. Roopke's remarks are worth quoting in this context: " We seem to have proved the existance of God yet in another way; by the practical consequences of his assumed absance", Roopke, W., A Humance Economy : The social framework of the free market, Oswald wolf (Publishers Ltd), London, 1958, P.
8. Majid Rahnema (non dated mimeo),Swadhyaya : The Unknown, the Peaceful and Silent yet Singing Revolution of India (Published in Mark Nacy,(ed), Healing the world,, and Me, Ch. 7,P 115)
9. For an enlighting exposition of the term 'true' subjectively See : Sri Aurbindo, The Human Cycle (Ch V

and Ch. VI) Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1985, PP 37-55. He writes " Subjectivism and objectivism start from the same data, the individual and collectivity :. Sen ~~has~~ tries to resolve the issue of subjectivity versus objectivity by developing concepts of 'Agency' and 'Well-being'. As Sen writes. "A person may well feel far happier and better off as a result of achieving what he wanted to achieve -perhaps for his family, or his community..." Sen, A. K., On Ethics and Economics, Oxford University Press, 1990, P 43.

10. In Marx's own words : " Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate" Marx Karl, Capital : A critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Vol.- I, P. 183. Schmidt has explained Marxian perception of nature with the help of metabolism. As he writes " With the concept of metabolism, Marx introduced a completely new understanding of man's relation to nature ".He explains further, "Men incorporate their own essential force into natural objects(and) natural things gain a new social quality".Thus nature is humanised while men are naturalised " See: Schmidt,A., The concept of nature in Marx, London, 1971.

11. See:Smith, N., Uneven Development : Nature, Capital and the Production of Space, Basil Blackwell, 1984, P. 11; also see : Rees,W., "Understanding Sustainable Development ", University of British Columbia, 1991, P. 18(Unpublished Paper).
12. Majid Rahnema, Op.Cit. 8, P.128.
13. Dada has taken this concept from the very fact of Vedic scriptures being "impersonal" Parallel of this concept is used by Arrow in his paper " Gifts and Exchanges". He explains, while reviewing Richard Titmuss's study (The Gift Relationship: from Human Blood to Social Policy),U.K.'s system of voluntary blood giving as an "expression of impersonal altruism " See : Arrow, K., " Gifts and Exchange" in Edmund Phelps (ed.by) Altruism,Morality and Economic Theory, Russell Sage Foundation, New York 1975, P 28.
14. McCay, B.J., " Culture and the Commons", Prepared for National Zoo, Smithsonian Institution Symposium " Culture: The Missing Element in Conservation, Washington D.C.,April 6 - 8, 1988, P. 7.
15. Ibid, P. 8
16. See : Sen, A.K. Choice, Welfare and Measurement, Oxford University Press, 1983, PP 80-81.

17. Ibid , P.104
18. Samuelson, P., " A note on the Pure Theory of Consumer's Behaviour " in *Economica*, 5, 1938.
19. Sen, A.K., *Op.Cit.* 16. PP 54-83.
20. Ibid, PP 78-80
21. Ibid, P92. Interesting interpretation of choices versus preferences has been presented by the Mother (of Sri Aurbindo Ashram). In her words, "Choice means a decision and an action" Preference is a desire. A choice is made and ought to be made, and if it is truly a choice, it is made without care for the consequences . You will choose preferences in one way or the other , your preference will distort your choice; it will be calculation, bargaining" See : *Collected works of the Mother Vol. 4 PP 1 - 3; Vol 8, PP 405-08, Sri Aurbindo Ashram, Pondicherry.*