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[untitled]

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Panel: Fantasy and Reality
During the 1980’s a film actor-turned-politician ruled one of the largest States in India until his death. In the last years of his life he suffered from various ailments, and was completely speechless for more than a year. That handicap did not deter him from ruling mainly because of his cultivated gestures. For example if a secretary took a problem to him, while he lay in bed, he would, it seems, point his finger in a particular manner towards the ceiling. Then the secretary would interpret and reinterpret that gesture and translate it into action. Obviously, he had an immense number of gestures for the immense number of problems. In the recent past a chief minister got a former chief minister arrested on charges of corruption. When the former chief minister came to power again, her single agenda was to avenge the previous one. So, she also got him arrested - also in the glaring lights of a camera crew particularly arranged by that arrested man. Not only that, he had even appointed a man who could mimic his voice crying, “They are killing me... oh, save me. save me.”

Who denies that India has the largest democracy in the world? Yet it is a unique democracy where a democratically elected ruler can easily become a dictator. Before such a dictator, the dictators of Latin America merely look like unsophisticated dwarves.

In the same State a group of Brahmins could not resolve a dispute among themselves. They were priests, worshiping at the temple of Lord Varadarajaswamy. The temple also had an elephant which carried the God once or twice a year, maybe to show Him the outside world or to allow Him to breathe some fresh air. As a vehicle of God, the elephant certainly deserved the narnarns, or religious marks on its forehead. But unfortunately, the priests who had belonged to two different sects had two differently shaped marks although they looked very much like vertically drawn lines. Which one should the elephant wear? They quarreled over the issue for some years and finally went to the Supreme Court with the belief that the apex court had the utmost authority over God. The Court declared, much to their satisfaction, that the elephant could wear one kind of mark during one year (and the other the following year. Poor elephant, it had to suffer two kinds of torture.

Now let us turn to our ancient times. Among the innumerable texts of epics and Puranas, I would like to particularly mention one text called Bhagavata. Both the epic Mahabharata and its canonized sub-text Bhagavadgeeta are mere parts of this vast work. In this text, Lord Krishna, a naughty boy at first, goes on, through several incarnations, to become a lover, a warrior, a political philosopher, a schemer, a man of great wisdom, in short the very soul of the universe itself. Apart from his legitimate wife Radha he also had sixteen thousand illegitimate wives or lovers, more incredible than the Great Wall of China, either because there were very few men or there were no ardent
feminists in those days. No wonder, if those unfortunate women were condemned to several hundreds of years of solitude. I suspect Gabriel Garcia Márquez must have read this Sanskrit book, maybe in some simplified Spanish version, before he wrote One hundred years of solitude. Otherwise, how could he imagine characters like Ursula, Pilar Ternera or Remedios the Beauty who abounded in that classic? How could his own creation, the gypsy Melquiades leave behind a manuscript in Sanskrit that narrated the lives of several generations of the Buendia family?

In India it is a tradition to attribute all the vices and wicked thoughts one can possibly think of to our Gods. As you know we do not have one God but several hundreds, as there are vices even though they are always in conflict with each other. Not only do we have Gods of love and benevolence but also Gods involved in violence, treachery, cheating and debauchery. Of course, we are not naked because we are civilized. But our Gods, more civilized than us mortals, are always naked because their nakedness is Divine. It is something like savaging the civilized!

It is also interesting to think of Vatsayana who, living several centuries ago, imagined hundreds of sexual positions that are so vividly carved out of stone and consecrated in our sacred temples. His book Kama Sutra not only describes the sexual pleasure in detail but also women of various sexual appetites. Westerners, of late, have been very much attracted to this book, and maybe some of them are even trying out those positions, I am sure, quite unsuccessfully. Had he lived today, Vatsayana would have certainly won the Nobel Prize for this work alone. Isn’t it fabulous that he gained abundant carnal knowledge by remaining a bachelor, practicing celibacy throughout his life?

According to V.S. Naipaul, himself a great fabulist, the only Indian novel worth his little attention was written, unfortunately, in my language Kannada. That is Samskara by U.R. Ananthamurthy. A classic statement on the conflict of tradition and modernity on the one hand and nature and refinement on the other, this novel portrays an orthodox Brahmin scholar, who is faced with a problem. It is a problem of finding suitable funeral rites for an excommunicated man in the Hindu scriptures. He finds none, although texts like Dharnasindhu contain appropriate solutions. Obviously, the author commanded his character not to know that text, precisely because he knew that if his character knows, the novel would not progress past ten pages. I consider this a fantastic leap the author has taken. One can achieve fantasy only when one is capable of making the obvious obscure.

Generally the events of fantastic stories are absurd and impossible, because in them out of the ordinary or supernatural factors intervene. The intervention of such factors may be partial or total. It is partial when an ordinary, daily, familiar situation is suddenly altered by the eruption of agents that do exist in human nature. Being an Indian, I feel
that it is not so difficult to write in fantastic mode. All I need is a little imagination to reinvent my country which is indeed phantasmagoric. When the world that surrounds you is fantastic, you have to find your own way to be real. Make your characters stand upside down, show them a convex mirror so that they appear normal, take a few animals that talk of human nature, laugh when you want to cry, with playful, extraordinarily penetrating intellect and brilliant imagination transform your own actual experience into something real... After all what is fantastic? As Flannery O'Connor once said, a story is fantastic because it is real. Or it is so real fantastic. If I have not already written such a story, it is high time I wrote one.