

Mystical Survival: The Geography of the Infinitely Near

Dr Paulo Barone

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“Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti”

“Truth is one. The Sages call it by many names.”

[The Sanskrit hymn, *Rig Veda* I.164.46]

This timeless dictum of the *Rig Veda* was resonating in my mind with a peculiar insistency as I waded through this small book written by Dr. Paulo Barone undoubtedly for a very large purpose. I use ‘wade through’ with a cautious delight. This little book of 113 pages has a long title *The Mystical Survival: The Geography of the Infinitely Near*. It is a collection of nine essays based on papers presented by Dr. Paulo Barone at academic conclaves in and out of India.

The nine essays taken together constitutes a painstaking effort to map a cohesive or perhaps a more pronounced direction ‘along interrupted paths and intermittent times towards mutant places which seem to be solid and then reappears as gaseous part of a special geography which is not marked on current maps’, his words (synopsis).

Dr Paulo Barone, in his role as a map maker and explorer of eternal truth, ageless wisdom and universal values known to us as ‘*Sanathana Dharma*’, identifies two core values for deeper excavation through his memories and experiences: Tolerance and Pluralism.

Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism - the three great religions that sprang from the deepest recesses of the Indian subcontinent are uncompromising in their adherence to the core

elements of Tolerance and Pluralism. They make up the distilled essence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The author who cites Raimon Panikkar little further into the voyage of spiritual discovery deftly acknowledges this. The sub title of the book ‘*Geography of the Infinitely Near*’ is no riddle after the reader manages the introduction. At this point I willingly succumb to the temptation of quoting Walter Benjamin, “memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (Benjamin, 2006: 17).

Dr Paulo Barone commutes between two human settlements - Milan and Varanasi. Milan is a thriving metropolis with a history of memorable encounters with science, art and literature. Varanasi is the human habitat of ‘spiritual luminance’ and is the oldest living city in the world and the spiritual capital of the Indian subcontinent - home to three great religions Hinduism Buddhism and Jainism.

I should be forgiven for not traversing all the territory that the map-maker Paulo Barone discovers and marks. As he himself states in the introduction “the unpublished map of this singular territory, to be drawn up, must go as far as to almost be confused with it. It’s mapping out begins from the most unthinkable and remote localities, in the small marks of each person; it proceeds by replacing their primitive borders (personal histories) by means of distant images...” (p.12). He concludes the introduction with reassuring words:

Much as it is variable, I remain convinced that the map is oriented in only one direction. It is searching out Benares, the nebulous heart of things, our singular *golden parasol*. It is a *passing* map. (p.12)

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Why in search of Benares in the city of Varanasi? To each of us Benares offers a different idea, a brighter promise and a new experience. The waters of the Ganges can be tranquil or turbulent. The sun rise over the eternal city remains neutral to the prayers offered from ancient 'Ghats'. The thousands of shrines on the high banks of the river will remain impassive while one seeks to discover Existence, Consciousness and Delight or what the sages called '*Sachithanada*'.

Paulo Barone embarks on his journey in search of a mystical survival after making this rather complex proposition in his introduction. In it, he also makes a reference to Edward Said's landscape in ruins remark albeit in passing. It is no exaggeration to call it the city of the past, present and the promise of the future. It is indeed the city of eternity and continuity.

Then why does the author Paulo Barone see a landscape of ruin in it? (p.08). Then he proceeds to discover a second image of a 'compelling cherry flower about to fade and a third image as described by the poet Bharevi in Lotus pollen (Bharavi, *Kiratarjuniya*, Verse, 39). The ruin, the falling flower and the golden parasol according to the author makes an indivisible 'triptych-ruin'. In this triptych, he discovers the elements that make up the 'original machine' (p.08). The author despite the tortuous path taken arrives at a pivotal point where he abandons the Eurocentric perspective of the landscape – 'a visual dimension of space'.

The Benares he is in search of is a 'singular golden parasol' that cannot be reduced to visual dimensions. The City of light and the fountain of Hindu philosophy regard itself as a luminous space. Its luminosity exemplifies wisdom. It eradicates the darkness of ignorance. In this luminous space sin cannot be washed away in the Ganges or by prayer offered from the Ghats and Shrines. Immortality is possible only through wisdom and understanding. The City of light is not visible in darkness. The City of eternal wisdom through which the river of life meanders through does not defy the laws of physics. It

however is the home to the *principle of non-contradiction* (p. 31).

In the first essay "Vishva Darpana: East West Atlas, Notes on the Image of the World/ the Rest" (pp. 13-24), he dismantles Rudyard Kipling. Instead of attempting to make the twain meet the author makes it a confluence. In this essay his lament or rather his diagnosis of our predicament finds a natural setting in bustling Milan and in sedentary Varanasi with remarkable ease. He writes 'we allow meaning to inherit only in the accurate gesture of a handshake or expression in some one's eyes and still suffer the affliction of a general sense of exile' (p.32).

The author is deeply influenced by Raimon Panikkar. I am no avid reader or follower of this great Indo Spanish savant. Yet, navigating the rapid currents of the author's tireless reasoning, I was compelled to discover Panikkar afresh. It was not in vain. He is matchless on the subject. He says "philosophy could be understood as the activity by which man participates consciously and in a more or less critical manner, in the discovery of reality and orients himself within the latter" (Panikkar,2000: 1-3).

In this essay, he makes some startling discoveries. He refers to 'illusions produced when only a moment is extracted from a complex process and rendered absolute while the rest is obscured' (p.15). This essay does not make easy reading. The complex thoughts are presented in equally complex lines. Yet, your patience is soon rewarded. He begins the essay with a peg on James Joyce's *Ulysses* where Joyce uses the since famous phrase "light crumpled throwaway". The author decides that it is an "appropriate image of the contemporary world" (p.13). It is no easy journey but it has exciting prospects. Walter Benjamin and James Joyce are invoked arriving at life liberated '*Jeevanmukta*' (p.19). The 'crumpled throwaways' become 'remainders', and the reasoning is intricate. To see the Irish writer and the Jewish Marxist in the luminous setting of Varanasi is fascinating. As the author concludes, "[i]t is a specially made 'empty jar,

an Atlas dedicated only to 'remainders' capable of holding them without asking anything of them in a semi liberated, semi redeemed state". To exhibit Barone suggests that "the East-West Atlas must work like a laboratory" (p.19).

The essay 'Dagdhabijabhava: The State of the Burnt Seed' (pp. 25-38) begins with a description of a visit by Rabindranath Tagore to a Danish School. Tagore, it is said, had exclaimed, "Why do you teach so many subjects? One would suffice: Hans Christian Anderson" (p. 25).

Tagore was a creative giant at ease with Western culture. He had a deep insight into Western poetry and science. He was a remarkable Indian sage who combined the best of East and West and a human repository of ancient and modern knowledge. He held his own in a debate with Einstein in 1930 on the then emerging principles of quantum mechanics. The author Barone speculates on the reasons for Tagore's admiration for the Danish writer of fairy tales. Hans Christian Andersen is the acknowledged father of the modern form of fairy tales. He was absolutely enchanting due to his extraordinary gift for noticing and depicting the whimsical and the wishful that mesmerised children and captured the imagination of adults.

The author speculates, "It would indeed be nice to think that Tagore had once read one of Anderson's *fairytales* and had been struck by a sudden, pervasive enchantment, of the sort generally reserved for children, whom he never forgot. Tagore might be said to have *devoured* Anderson's fairytales" (p. 25).

He picks the term 'devour' from an observation made by Walter Benjamin in his "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books". Hans Andersen's ingenious story of 'The Flax' becomes a commentary that is emblematic of the violent fragmentation that characterises the reality in which we live. Then with remarkable conviction he asserts that, "it also accurately represents the ever increasing speed with which modernity has managed to dissolve ancient rhythms and structures" (p. 27).

Appreciation of Tagore's refrain in the Danish school that Andersen's stories provide an adequate education requires me to provide a synopsis of the story *The Flax* by Hans Christian Andersen. Started with a small incident and passing through long but interesting dialogues, the ballad was finally over [*The Flax*, (1849) <http://hca.gilead.org.il/flax.html>]. Just as what Hedge Stake warned. When the flames died invisible elements danced over the embers. Wherever their feet touched, their footprints, the tiny red sparks, could be seen on the ashes of the paper. However, the tiny invisible beings cried, "The ballad is never over! The children could not either here or understand that. Just as well. Children should not know everything" (p. 28).

In my review I take pains to provide the synopsis of Andersen's story *The Flax* as it is necessary for me to explain how I understand Tagore's mind when he announces that Hans Andersen's stories as providing a wholesome education. The fables in the *Panchatantra* (reprint 1991), the stories in the *Jathaka Mala* (reprint 2003) and the *Fairy Tales of Hans Andersen* (re-print 1993) all provide a great pool of accumulated wisdom that constitutes a perennial philosophy. They are all adventures in the human story. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan says of Tagore "in interpreting the philosophy and message of Rabindranath Tagore we are interpreting the Indian ideal of philosophy, religion, and art, of which his work is the outcome and expression" (Radakrishnan, 1919: 12-15).

Here, I must digress. In order for me to appreciate the thesis of Paulo Barone I must take this avenue of citing an extract from the famous conversation between Tagore and Einstein. The conversation between these two eminent scholars was central to the nature of reality. *Jathaka* Stories, Fables of the *Panchatantra* and Hans Andersen's fairy tales are all part of the human entity which according to Tagore is "depending for its reality upon our consciousness" (Conversation between Einstein and Tagore, *New York Times*, August 10, 1930).

In next essay 'The Ant-hill Fraternity' (pp. 39-44), the author uses the formation and functioning of the Anthill the abode of the industrious ants to present a world view. He commences the discussion by a reference to the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi's composition '*La ginestra*' or broom plant. According to the author, the poet Leopardi considered the broom plant as the only form of life surviving on the slopes of Vesuvius, which destroyed a human civilization that was Pompeii and Ilocano in 79 AD. Leopardi wrote the poem while residing in a villa on the hillside of Vesuvius. It was to be his moral testament as a poet. *La ginestra* ("The Broom Plant") is contemplated by the poet as the flower of the barren slopes of the volcano. It describes desolation and the poet alternates between enchantment and melancholia of a starry night. It describes the nothingness of the world, the orphaned man and his precarious existence and the capriciousness of nature. These are not intended intentional evils but are continuous and constant. This commentary is followed by his thoughts on mankind, history and nature. The hapless plant *Ginestra* lives on in desolation typical of the Vesuvius without surrendering to nature. Here it personifies the ideal man who rejects illusions about himself and does not plead for help from the heavens.

Leopardi is not well known in the English-speaking world. Yet, he certainly could enter the ranks of the greatest enlightenment period thinkers. He perceives the flower of a broom plant growing on the arid slopes of the volcano Vesuvius as confrontation with the delusions of his time, which believed in a 'magnificent progressive fate' – and those who failed to recognise the malignity of Nature towards humans. Paulo Barone reads another dimension to his poetry. He believes that the 19th century poet was concerned and commented on the extreme ease and rapidity with which things vanish and the relentless fragility to which they are subject and the illusive nature of edifying visions. Leopardi in his poetry refers to tribe of ants, carved out of soft soil, with vast labour. The poem gives a sense of a 'concluding remark' saying that "it's

for no other reason than that mankind is less rich in offspring" (Grennan, (Tr.) (1997) *Leopard's Selected Poems*, 'La Ginestra'). The task of philosophy (*filosofia dolorosa ma vera*) is to educate humanity first to openly recognize the ills of life and then to mitigate them through participation in the culture of time. It is the message encoded in 'La Ginestra' (the Broom Plant). Leopardi calls for a great alliance of all human beings a 'social chain (social catena) that unites all against the brute force of nature. Leopardi refuses the idea of Divine Providence and all the silly ideas of his proud and simple century. Our author Barone impressed with this philosophical view encapsulated in the *La Ginestra* but locates his thought somewhere in explaining the illusive nature of edifying visions.

Barone says the analogy with the anthill is well known in India. He cites Brahmavaivarta Purana Krisnajanma Khanda as remembered by Heinrich Zimmer in his *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (1972). In the Upanishads we discover Indra swollen with pride. He decides to build a palace that will testify to his great powers. However, the construction drags on. The head carpenter discovers that this would take a life-time. Surely, Indra must be persuaded to be a little modest in his dreams of grandeur. He consults Brahma, the God of Creation. They decide on a strategy. A mysterious person appears one day and Indra proudly proceeds to show the guest around. The visitor is impressed and declares that it is the finest abode any Indra has ever built. Any Indra? Indra was confused. I am the only Indra. Am I not? The visitor obviously a messenger from Brahma the creator points to a procession of ants walking in orderly formation over the palace floor. "Those ants," the messenger says, "are all former Indras!" It is the way of the world. A god in one life time can be reincarnated as an ant in another. One must avoid being too comfortable in one's own esteem as one never knows as to what kind of karma one is building upon in the present life.

Buddhist texts too have relied on the symbolism of the Anthill. There is an anthill

burning day and night. A Brahmin directs another person Sumedha "Take your tool, Sumedha and dig." (*Vammika Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya*, 1, 23). As they dig deep he comes across a door-bar, a frog, a forked path, a strainer, a tortoise, a butcher's knife and chopping block, a piece of meat. They throw these findings away and dig deeper. They finally find a cobra. The Cobra is not harmed but treated with honour. They are baffled by these findings. At the behest of a deity (*Devata*) the riddle is referred to the Buddha. The enlightened one unravels the riddle. The Ant Hill is the body. The Brahmin is the Arahant. The Knife denotes wisdom. The digging is the effort. The door bar is ignorance. The fork in the path is doubt. The sieve is the five mental hindrances; the tortoise is the five aggregates of clinging. The butcher's knife and the chopping block represent the fivefold pleasures of sense. The piece of meat is lust and delight. The Cobra is the Arahant Monk (*Vammika Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya*, 1, 23). The Anthill the product of effort to overcome adversity, consistency in application to life, commitment to ethical conduct by the miniscule insect that is oblivious to its own existence has captured the imagination of both the oriental and occidental exponents of human frailty and human endurance.

In the essay 'White of India' (pp. 45-58), the author enters exciting territory- the impact of India. Here it must be stressed that in his impatience to unburden himself of the vast array of observations, inferences and determinations of his subject he does not seriously consider the limited faculties of the reader to fully grasp his message. The language and the construction of thoughts can at times be arduous. He writes "by far the majority of the numerous accounts of the impact of India (which is the East, but is definitely much more, and East which is never really India, but always much less) reveal a common trait. While the overarching message is discerned, the reader feels a sense of helpless despair that nags the mind. What if the conjecture is incorrect? That said Paulo Barone should be seen as a serious explorer of the 18th and 19th century East-

West philosophy encounters. He deals with what he calls the 'emblematic case of Hegel' (p. 46). Hegel was no student of Hindu Philosophy. His views are confined to his review of Wilhelm von Humboldt's lectures on the *Bhagavad-Gita* at the academy of Sciences, Berlin in 1827. Humboldt praises the *Gita* as the greatest, most beautiful, and philosophical poem in all known literatures. For the purpose of this review of Paulo Barone's book that deals with East West concept of God and Man let us see how the *Gita* and Hegel visualised and interpreted God.

In the *Gita*, Krishna is God incarnate. Krishna, is one (and many), supreme, infinite, all-encompassing, all-pervasive omnipotent, the beginningless and endless, immortality and death being and non-being and beyond neither being nor non-being source of all and especially of all that is excellent, personal, self-revealing, indweller in human beings saviour of sinners, the guardian of eternal sacred duty, destroyer and dissolution. God is the universal father, mother, friend, lover, grandfather. God is manifest in nature and mind, as the sustaining life force, a teacher, illuminating the entire field.

Hegel does not subscribe to this conception of god. If God is to be truly infinite, truly unlimited, then God cannot be 'a being', because 'a being', by definition is already limited by its relations to the others. But if God is not a being', what is God? If finite things fail to be real, what it is to be depends on the relation to other finite things? (Lauer, 1983: 37-40) Hegel's God performs something akin to what is traditionally understood as 'creating'. However, as the Hegelian 'creating' takes place throughout time, rather than only 'in the beginning', it finds itself consistent with what astrophysics and biology informs us about the universe (Lauer, 1983:39). Thus, even Karl Marx- the atheist can describe Hegel as an inspirational guide.

These are random meanderings in which I found myself immersed when trudging along the 113 pages that Paulo Barone has produced. It is indeed the sum of a lifelong quest of discovery. Paulo Barone in his *Mystical Survival*

offers a revelatory prism through which to view the present situations, conditions and in overall the current and evolving conceptions of human thought and interactions. This is an exciting journey for the initiated and a rather mystical journey for the uninitiated such myself. I am glad that I read it. I look forward to an amplified version where he explains his wanderings shall we say as Hans Anderson tells a story to children.

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