

Skimming the shallows



Jaggi Vasudev's 'consciousness talk' shows little understanding of the function of morality

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JAGGI VASUDEV'S COLUMN in these pages, 'Beyond good and evil' (IE, August 26), is a superficially attractive but ultimately insidious way of understanding the relationship between morality and consciousness. The confusions it contains have seriously distorted modern Indian intellectual, spiritual and political life and therefore need to be subject to more reflection.

There is something to Jaggi Vasudev's starting point. A transformed consciousness can transform our sense of life and allow us to experience living in its fullness, not mutilated by arbitrary restrictions. The problem of consciousness is also the central problem of the Indian tradition. The question of how consciousness can make us aware of the ground of our own being, and overcome the limitations of our current selves, is a worthy quest to pursue. But to conclude from this that the demands of consciousness should supersede morality, is a mistake of the highest order.

It is a mistake partly for historical reasons. For starters, the contrast that Jaggi Vasudev draws between a West in the grip of a repetitive morality and an East that is the source of liberating consciousness is too crude to be taken seriously. As with any large and sophisticated body of thinking, whether in the East or West, there is a constant tension between strands of morality that are rule-bound, and ones that centre on the creation of a higher consciousness. Even within Christianity, the caricatured source of the guilt-ridden morality system, the contrast between Christ and the Pauline interpretation of Christ underscores this tension. In India you have to look no further than the obnoxiously repetitive and hierarchically constricting systems of Manu that make India's intellectual achievements in the realm of consciousness seem like a bad joke. There are interesting differences in different traditions of thought. But the reinstatement of simplistic geographic divisions in the intellectual adventures of mankind is itself a move that constricts the development of consciousness.

In the late 19th century, there was, even in the West, a revolt against the morality system, led most notably and brilliantly by Nietzsche. In fact, a lot of Jaggi Vasudev's critique of the morality system is a watered down version of Nietzsche's critique without Nietzsche's psychological acuity, or his

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sense of the depths of historical sedimentation that form ourselves. Much of modern Indian intellectual history in different forms, whether in the incandescent Aurobindo or the capacious Iqbal, was the search for a form of consciousness that displaced the moralism of morality and provided a critique of conventional religion. It was also an attempt to argue that "evolution" of consciousness, which has been the preserve of adept and accomplished individuals, becomes deployed in the service of humanity, so that there is an evolution in collective human consciousness. The evolutionary and collective language Jaggi Vasudev speaks in relation to consciousness is a product of 19th century historicism, not ancient Upanishadic wisdom, which is paradoxically more individualist.

But this project was a failure, and to revive it in the form Jaggi Vasudev envisages is fraught with difficulty. It is fraught with difficulty in part because of its shallow understanding of what morality is, or what it requires. Jaggi Vasudev is trying to knock down a straw man, without the effort to understand the function morality performs. In terms of motivation, morality, if genuine, always has an element of spontaneity to it; it is based on intrinsic motivation, rather than external fear or habit which is a simulacrum of morality. In practical terms, morality is the terms of engagement with which individuals relate to each other. A health system of morality will regulate our affairs on terms where our status as free and equal individuals is recognised.

In personal terms, hopefully, morality will find the sweet spot between sublimation and expression, on which, even a hardened critic of morality like Freud thought, civilisation rests. A critique of repressive morality systems is not a critique of morality per se, as Jaggi Vasudev seems to assume.

But more seriously, replacing morality with evolution of consciousness is fraught. It actually unwittingly reinstates hierarchies. The whole language of evolved consciousness reintroduces gradations between human beings that no rhetoric of oneness can eradicate. Somehow more evolved forms of consciousness acquire more authority: The adept more

than the layman. Whereas the beauty of modern morality systems was that they made no such demand; the rules we live by are not a function of the perfection of our souls. The arch moralist, Kant's, insight, that what we need is rules that can allow even devils to co-exist in peace, was exactly right. It is not an exalted vision, but it is more effective and accepting of human equality and diversity than the hoary metaphysics of consciousness. Morality's advantage is that it recognises our all too humanness, and does not try to replace it with aspirations to divinity.

But most importantly, the Indian intellectual tradition of consciousness founded on two challenges. With a few exceptions, it was never able to prove its sincerity on the social question: How does the discourse of evolved consciousness relate to the mutilating realities of social power, as embodied in institutions like caste? It gestures at them, but has no social imagination to confront them. The emphasis that morality advances only through advanced consciousness minimises the extent to which the cause of morality is advanced by ordinary human beings struggling in the course of their daily lives for justice.

Moral progress is often not made just by ideas, or transforming consciousness. It is made through the availability of exemplars, who expose our hypocrisies, inspire us by the power of example, and give us civic courage. The problem with modern India has been that, with a few exceptions, most of those who claim access to, or speak in the name of more evolved forms of consciousness, have largely served easy spirituality to the privileged. Our gurus rarely speak truth to power (often they seek their patronage), or support the kind of civic and constitutional morality that would preserve our freedom and equality. Under these conditions "consciousness talk" sounds exactly the kind of thing that makes Indian spirituality the "planetary granary of narcissism," to use the controversial German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk's phrase. Jaggi Vasudev would do much better if he could use his authority to speak truth to power, and not to peddle confused bromides about consciousness being able to replace morality.

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