

*Black Lives Matter*  
.... *Tat Tvam Asi*



Sehdev Kumar

**T**he 8 minutes and 46 seconds, on May 25, 2020, may just prove to be the shortest and the most tantalizing period in our history in turning the human conscience around in invoking the most ancient and eternal questions yet just once again:

“What does it mean to be human?”

“Who are we?”

“What is the human family?”

*Tat Tvam Asi* – Thou Art That.

Who is *That*?

Even as George Floyd choked to death, squelched under the knee of a white policeman in the city of Minneapolis in Minnesota, watched by four other policemen, one of them of Asian origin, the haunting words of another man from Minnesota, the poet-singer Bob Dylan, came to me here in the international city of Auroville, ‘the City of Dawn’, in India, blowing as a fierce wind from across the globe:

How many roads must a man walk down  
Before you call him a man?

...

Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannon balls fly  
Before they're forever banned?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind...

Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist  
Before they're allowed to be free?  
Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head  
And pretend that he just doesn't see?

.....

Yes, 'n' how many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take 'til he knows  
That too many people have died?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind

That was in 1963, the same time and year as Martin Luther King was laying out his ‘dream’ for his oppressed people in Washington in a country unparalleled in the human history for its celebration of freedom and fairness:

*Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi – from every mountainside.... Let freedom ring.*

*And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring – when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – black men*

*and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics – will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:*

*‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’*

*ii*

**I**n the midst of this turmoil that was rapidly brewing all over the globe, I was enrolled in a month-long study session of The Bhagvada Gita. This great book has intrigued me for many a long year; its elegant philosophical messages have left me confounded time and again. The connection between certain metaphoric inner skirmishes and the outer battles of blood and gore continues to tease me. Sadly, so often, I have found The Gita evasive and opaque.

And now, quite unexpectedly, this seemingly little event on the other side of the globe made me wonder yet again:

Who am I?

Who is the Other?

What is the nature of the Supreme Being?

I didn't know George Floyd; he was an utter stranger to me, a person of another country, another creed, another... everything.

And death occurs everywhere every minute, every day. Isn't death all part of life?

Why should I be bothered about this stranger? About his death?

I have a young black friend here in Auroville. And for a moment I thought what if this friend were so wantonly choked to death because of the colour of his skin.

What then?

‘Who is The Other?’ I wondered yet again.

Who is a Stranger?

What is Mine?

And that is what led me to learn a little about the experience of being a black American, and about the ever-intriguing mystery of *tat tvam asi*, and when and how *that* may be revealed to me.

*iii.*

**T**here is no other word in English language that is so endowed with such myriad meanings and interpretations as ‘human’.

“What does it mean to be human?” we ask in our literature and philosophical treatises, in our moments of suffering and celebration.

We associate it with ‘being humane’, ‘humanizing’, or even ‘inhuman’ and ‘dehumanizing’, and we proudly call the achievements of civilizations in arts, literature and culture as the ‘Humanities’ and celebrate their ‘humanizing’ influence on our ever-unfolding beings.

We speak of the human spirit, of human dignity, and we so often proclaim to have been made in the image of God.

In 1860, as venomous clouds of Civil War over the question of abolition of slavery in the US were about to burst, the words ‘crime against humanity’ entered the lexicon of English language at the American National Republican Convention, where, under the watchful eye of soon-to-be-elected President, Abraham Lincoln, it was declared: “... We brand the recent re-opening of the African slave trade, under the cover of our national flag, aided by perversions of judicial power, as a crime against humanity.”

Since then, in these 160 years, the term ‘Crimes against Humanity’ has taken on an expansive legal meaning, referring to gruesome brutalities against a group of people of a different race or colour or religion or creed or ideology or ethnicity.

Under one pretext or another, sadly such crimes have been committed in many places, not infrequently even by those who proclaim to be ‘civilized’; their savagery puts one to shame time and again, as we are left to wonder yet once again: “What might it mean to be human?”

What is human history, many ask, but a battlefield littered with corpses of those who could not accept each other as free human beings, as equals on the banquet table of life.

What did the Australians of British descent do to the indigenous populations of the land who had lived there for thousands of years? What did the Europeans – the British, French, Spanish, Dutch, Germans and the Portuguese – do to the indigenous populations in the Americas? In Africa?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

*“Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see God, or good, or human dignity in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is different colour, whose faith is not my faith and whose truth is not my truth.”*

Can this be true of all places and countries: India, China, Japan, Russia, Nigeria, Brazil? Do we dare to look around in our own backyard, in our own history, and see how the humanity of others has been crushed, time and again, under one pretext or the other?

iv.

**A**s the great Statue of Liberty was being installed in the New York Harbor in 1888, a 28-year young socialist Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus, wrote a poem that was inscribed there as a clarion call for millions of people to be welcomed to the shores of America:

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*



Over the next decades, indeed they came by the millions, almost exclusively from Europe – from Italy, Germany, Sweden, Russia, Greece, Ireland – all drawn, in one manner or another, by ‘The American Dream’ of equality, freedom and of unbridled prosperity.

But that is not how the Black slaves from Africa came to America; they were brought there like hunted and captured wild animals from an unknown, dark and distant continent during the great Age of Enlightenment by civilized men who harboured visions of new humanity, of equality and of freedom.

Except for Black slaves who were far from human. They were *never to be* human.

With their very cheap and plentiful sweat and blood, in cotton and tobacco plantations, in coal mines and on construction sites, in battle fields at home and overseas, these are the men and women who created – and continue to create – an unprecedented prosperity for America, and lay the foundations for the American Dream, even as they themselves have been inextricably caught in a nightmare of inequality, injustices and brutalities.

The story of black Americans is as old as the story of America itself since its settlement by the British some 400 years ago. Over scores of generations, oblivious of their religious and cultural roots in Africa, these black men and women, now over 45 million in number in the US, are no more Afro-Americans than the rest of the human race is 'African'. They are all Americans, nourished and nurtured by the American soil and wells, and churches, however poisoned and however segregated.

"I am," my black American friend asserts, "the father of my oppressor and the child of my oppressor."

Despite the formal end of slavery and despite the devastating civil war over it in 1860s, and despite the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s, and despite the election of a black president of the country a decade ago – why, and how, one wonders, the blacks have rarely been treated humanely, rarely as humans, never as equals, never with dignity? On the contrary, to be Black in America, one learns, "is to be always hunted," to always have a knee on your throat, to be always gasping for breath.

For decades, until less than a hundred years ago, a picnic in the South in the US, meant to "pick a nigger to be lynched." To the accompaniment of music, as the white folks danced and celebrated their afternoons over sumptuous picnics, bodies of lynched negros hanged from the trees as trophies.



The nightmarish stories, spread over decades and centuries, of the treatment of the millions of blacks in America is truly horrendous. What happened to George Floyd on May 25 has happened again and again. In 2001, on September 16, a mere five days after 9/11, black church leader Rev. Jeremiah Wright spoke of “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall”:

*The Captives in Babylon asked the question: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” The captives in America answered that question by creating an entirely new genre of music, the Spirituals. They sang sorrowfully, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home.” They sang thoughtfully, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody but Jesus.” They sang defiantly. “O’ freedom, O’ freedom, O’ freedom over me, before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave and go home to my god and be free.”*

v.

**E**very act of abuse and maltreatment of others – of a different race, religion, caste, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, colour, social and economic status, age, abilities and disabilities – is, in a hundred different ways an affront, not only to human civilization but to the great Creator itself. *Tat Tvam Asi* – Thou Art That: a ray of the sun, an embodiment of the Supreme Being, an expression of the Infinite, a celebration of Oneness of all beings. Here and now, in the phenomenological reality in which we are all imbedded through an ever-expanding circle of relations and connections, this magnificent spiritual vision, I believe, must express itself every hour of the day and through tangible down-to-earth actions of love, of courtesy, of recognition of dignity of all. Otherwise all philosophical and spiritual proclamations, however

grand, will be hollow and meaningless, if not also evasive and hypocritical.

Time and again, in our exalted moments, however rare they may be, we have invoked a certain all-encompassing spirit of life and of brotherhood that may reflect our true identity as human beings. In 1956, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in an exhibition, *Family of Man*, of 503 photographs from 68 countries, poet Carl Sandburg sang of this spirit even in the midst of sordid and abject depths of Cold War:

*There is only one man in the world  
and his name is All Men.  
There is only one woman in the world  
and her name is All Women.  
There is only one child in the world  
and the child's name is All Children.*

And here in India, more than a hundred years ago, Rabindranath Tagore dreamt of a world “*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high.*”

Poets and visionaries have always dreamt of a world of freedom and dignity for all. But unless each one of us, in our homes and in our villages and cities, in our classrooms and in our fields, in our thoughts and in our hearts, creates a place of dignity, fairness and justice on the banquet table of history for each one of us, at every hour of the day and night, it will be a little more than an illusory hope.

However widely or deeply we may open our inner eyes – of imagination, of intellect, of spirit – we must never close our eyes of

flesh because they are the eyes of humanity, however flawed, however ephemeral.

These eyes of flesh matter for they can, and do, reveal to each one of us a glimpse of the Infinite.

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He currently lives in the international spiritual community of Auroville in South India. This article, inspired by the recent events in the USA, is based, in part, on a series of lectures on 'History and Future of Human Unity' he delivered in Auroville during February-March 2019.

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