

May you win a lottery ticket!

My back ached as I boarded a bus in Barcelona for the two hour ride to Tavertet to meet Raimon Panikkar, whom some consider to be the most important living philosopher in the world. A torn muscle that I thought had healed had flared up again with the weight of my shoulder bag. The journey took me through sparsely populated mountains, which occasionally dropped sheer, as if a colossal effort at mining had vertically shorn the rock. I breathed deeply, taking in the vigorous landscape; each inhalation spurred the aching back muscle, as if to stress that beauty was better savoured with a squirt of pain. This was my second visit to Spain to meet a long-time friend (if I could call him friend, considering he was thirty years older), one of the few people I would unhesitatingly acknowledge a debt to.

Panikkar lived in a mountain village many hundred metres high, looking down on a valley, with a river winding through. A small stone church, going back to Roman times, perched precariously on the edge of a cliff. Detachment from the hurly burly was essential to Panikkar, although he was fully aware of the stirrings of humanity. For Panikkar human beings transcend their limitations through 'knowledge', a word signifying experience and love. Men and women are called to be sages, "wise tasters and samplers of reality".

But, Panikkar would add, pulling out his trump card, that knowledge has little to do with modern science. In fact modern science is at the heart of our global crisis. In saying this he was not advocating a return to pre-modern times, but alerting us to a dominant form of knowledge that is removed from our deepest selves, where the mind is separated from the spirit, where knowing does not make us any wiser. Modern science is the fruit of one single culture, and technocracy, which is more than applied science, leads to the dominion of the machine. Technocracy creates a 'fourth world', which is independent of humans, nature and the gods.

The technocratic human is no longer a biped, but a being on wheels, no longer a knight but a coach driver, no longer a gardner but a button pressing, remote-controlling creature who is a minimal cog, one that is easily replacable in a grand network of information. She is no longer unique, is a mere function dependant on other functions, is a conduit for information which is unable to communicate in any meaningful sense. The individual becomes the technique, and reality becomes virtual. The choice is today between planetary technocracy or another way of living that is in tune with the rhythms of the earth, the sun and the moon. The choice is between acceleration and rhythm. One cannot haveboth.

In 1988 I had gone to meet Panikkar in Kodaikanal, where he spent several months each year doing his writing. As was often the case, we did most of our talking on long walks through the mountains. Lean and agile as a mountain goat, Panikkar liked to trek for several hours in fairly rough terrain. On one of these walks while discussing the limitations of modern science, he stopped suddenly and exclaimed, " The splitting of an

atom, opening the womb of nature, is a cosmic abortion of catastrophic proportions!" Years later, the words continue to reverberate in my head like an ominous mantra.

I reached Tavertet early in the evening. Maria, Panikkars wife, opened the door for me and called her husband on the intercom to say I had arrived. She had aged considerably since I last saw three years ago. She had suffered from cancer, undergone chemotherapy, and had a good bit of her intestines removed. A novelist of some repute, she had decided rather late in life to marry the sage scholar. Maria was the anxious type and looked melancholic all the time. It was a chronic melancholy that writers are often addicted to. But unlike many writers she was a generous and tender-hearted person who was deeply effected by human suffering. We talked about the daughter they had adopted a few years earlier from Pondicherry, who was now almost twenty and about to do a course in teacher training. Maria was always attentive to her and was worried at the prospect that she might not live to see the girl through her education.

Pannikkar emerged from his study half an hour later and greeted me effusively with a hug. He was clad in khadi kurta and green dhoti." I didn't know you were here," he cried, " I would have come down immediately." Those of us who knew were careful not to interrupt him in the middle of a paragraph he was writing. We respected the hours he kept. His day started early, at five in the morning. By noon he had spent several hours in reading, writing and meditation. After a brief rest in the afternoon he would continue working till five. He then took a brisk walk if the weather was all right. He answered the phone three evenings in the week. He did not use a computer, and therefore could not be reached through electronic mail. Most often he could be contacted only by fax.

Born of a Hindu father and a Christian mother, Panikkar sees himself as fully Hindu and fully Christian at the same time. When asked how this could possibly be, he replies, "Does a mother find it difficult to love her two children at the same time? Need we live only with one God, one country, one democracy, one science, one language and one culture ?" Panikkar's father, Menekkath Allampadath Ramuni Panikkar, had gone to England from what is now Kerala to continue his studies. Ramuni Panikkar had had the experience of not being allowed in a first class compartment at Ottapadi station. The humiliation remained with him, and in England he became active in The Indian Guild for Science and Technology, a cover organisation that struggled for Indian Independence. An ill-prepared plot against the life of Lord Curzon went awry in the early stages itself, obliging Ramuni to flee to Spain, which was then a neutral country. Spain became his home thereafter, and he eventually married a young woman from Barcelona, who was to become Raimon's mother. "My father gave up the struggle and set up a leather factory. He was at peace with himself with the arrival of Gandhi on the Indian scene. He new that the Nationalist movement would take on a qualitatively different turn thereafter, one that he had come to respect."

I had recently read Otavio Paz's "In light of India" where the writer mentions the thrill of discussing ideas with Panikkar. They were good friends and although Paz does not mention it in his book, it was with Panikar's concurrence that he resigned as the Mexican ambassador to India in the wake of the massacre of the students in Mexico city in May

1966. Before that, when Paz was embroiled in the scandal of carrying on with the wife of a senior officer in his embassy, whom he would later marry, it was to Panikkar that he turned to for non-judgmental friendship. Paz was a writer I greatly admired, somebody I would have given my right arm to meet, and whose death had filled me with sadness. His little book, "On poet's and others" is as much a prose poem as a book of criticism, which few other modern critics could even remotely hope to achieve, not least, those with the pretension that obscurity was in itself a value. But Paz was a poet, not a philosopher, and unlike Panikkar, he could not give me the insights to wade through the turbulence of contemporary existence.

"Paz opened out India to Latin America," I told Panikkar. " The first important Latin American intellectual to do this. A considerable achievement. We are used to being mediated by Europe and the United States. Rarely does the South learn directly from the South. Paz was an exception."

" There is no underestimating his contribution, Panikkar said, "but his experience of India was largely aesthetic. For example his depiction of the sanyasis is largely in the language of poetical metaphor. He missed the mystical side."

In the summer of 1989 Pannikar and I met in Paris at the house of Marc Levy, a Jewish friend who was an astute observer of political events in France. Marc lived close to Place de Clichy with his wife and two little sons. The conversation veered round to the importance of conflict in the resolution of problems. At the time I headed an institute in Paris that was concerned with studying social movements. I was full of the importance of dialectics in promoting social change. A landlord and a tenant had to clash for a just resolution of the problem of landlessness. Likewise, one idea clashed with another to produce a superior idea. In other words, thesis and antithesis had to cross swords for a new synthesis to emerge. This was dialectics, the way progress was made, how history charted its course. Panikkar disagreed with me. He believed in dialogue, in the Chinese notion of yin-yang, where reality was not divided into polar opposites, where the yin contained the yang and the yang the yin. Panikkar believed neither in reform nor revolution. For Panikkar another word for revolution would be deformation. He beleived in something more radical, what he called transformation. Transformation was the result of dialogue, not dialectics.

Mathieu and Olivier, the two children of Marc, played restlessly through the discussion, trying to attract our attention. Pannikar turned his attention to the children and asked them if they could stand on their heads. The boys giggled saying they couldn't. In a jiffy Panikar was on his head, ramrod straight, as if it was the done thing in the world. Not only had he captured the interest of the children, but the older Levys were suitably impressed. That was what Pannikar wanted, killing two birds with one stone, entertaining the children and showing off to the rest of us.

Joan Reixach, the former mayor of the village, ran the only restaurant around, Can Baumes, where Panikkar and I ate the next afternoon. He lived in a prosperous house adjacent to Panikkar's, yet managed an eating house where he took orders, cleared tables

and served the food, and all this with the deferential smile of your average waiter. Panikkar was abstemious, deciding on a small green salad with tomatoes while I went for grilled fish and vegetables. Spanish cuisine did not strike me as very exciting, except for two rice dishes, the paella and *arose negre*. The paella was a variety of seafood biriyani and *arose negre* was rice cooked in squid ink. *Arose negre* translates as 'negro rice', charming, but with the casual undertone of an earlier age of racism.

I asked Panikkar if he saw no hope of rescuing our present civilisation. " The only solution is to dismantle what you call 'our' civilisation." He said, gesticulating vigorously. "Look at the facts. We need thirty million soldiers on the face of the earth to keep this global order going. In the United States one out of four people keep a gun, and twentyseven thousand people are killed each year for private vengeance. More than a thousand million dollars are repatriated each day from the third world through debt servicing and unfair trade practices. The prices of raw materials are very low and industrial products very high. For every dollar invested in the third world five are taken out. There are more hungry people today than ever before, although there is enough food around to feed three times the global population."

" It is a question of attitude," he said, gesticulating vigorously, "and a matter of what you consider to be important in life. As long as we allow the myths of monoculture to dominate, there is little hope. Monism, likewise, was not made for the human race as the experience of *advaita* makes clear. I must go on repeating that there is no salvation as long as we think in terms of one science, one God, one religion, one country, one language and one democracy. Cultural disarrangement is the answer. We have to reject the dominant culture of today that has made us overlook our cultural and spiritual universes where other forces, apart from money, used to guide us. We are today so dependant on this piece of paper we call money- to mediate our relationships, to give us worth, to buy us love. It's an illusion to think that a piece of paper can fetch us happiness? In the south of Spain, when the gypsies want to curse some one badly they say, ' May you win a lottery ticket!'. For them it's a curse to be rich. The gypsies should know. They have few attachments, moving from place to place."

Pannikar believed in poverty and his life had been a rendering of this vision. He had stalked the dwellings of scholarship like a joyful monk, celebrating life while keeping a loving distance from it. He believed in the poverty of the spirit, in the need to do with a minimum of material bric-a-brac so as to be lucid and clear, to separate the grain from the chaff. " People are often confusing poverty with misery," he said. How very true, I thought, although my experience of India was misleading. I remember the times when I was in a tribal village or urban slum one day and in a Parisian metro the next. Poor people in India appeared to possess great dignity, despite the intolerable hardship that poverty imposes. But there was something in the eyes of many poor people in India, a quiescence, a softness, that was not present in the commuters in a Paris underground, rushing to and fro work, with death in their eyes.

But I realised later that I had tended to romanticise the Indian poor. I remember the disarming smiles and liquid eyes of Raja and Srikanth, two villagers I had got to know.