

**Alternative Learning:  
A Voyage for Future Leadership**

**Sanjoy Mukherjee  
Rajiv Gandhi Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Shillong**

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### Abstract

“Where is wisdom we have lost in knowledge?” The alarming proportions of the turbulence and complexity in our present global scenario compel us to take fresh look at our dominant models of management and leadership in search of holism, sustainability and inspiration. The issues are more complex and critical in a country like India with its diversity bordering around gaping disparities. The present paper is an attempt to explore alternative sources and methods of learning for future leadership with insights from classical Indian wisdom literature (The Upanishads, Srimad Bhagavadgita etc.) and messages from great modern Indian leaders like Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. Are we willing to challenge ourselves? If so, then HOW?

*Keywords:* Future leadership, Alternative learning, Indian wisdom, Art of questioning, Self - leadership, Dialogues with the Self, Lessons from Nature, Learning from Life

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### Prologue

“*Ha re re re re re re amay chhere de re de re!*” “Hey! You! There you are! Leave me alone! Will you please?”

On the birth centenary of Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, the Oscar winning film maker for Lifetime Achievement from India, made a masterpiece of a documentary on the great poet and philosopher. The young poet was sent to six schools but hated all of them. The documentary shows the sordid and morbid predicament of the young free bird with a full throated voice in a stifling nest. The scene is that of a classroom with a faceless teacher with a mechanized voice speaking to nameless students.

“Can you see a pot?” (The unseen teacher asks.)

“Yes, I can see a pot.” (A mindless student rots it out)

Robi (Tagore) looks out of the window - the young boy who was groping for the horizons beyond formal education –structured and fossilized! He does not join his voice.

Later in life, at 40, Tagore went on to undertake an unexplored voyage to seek alternative modes of education – in the heart of *Santiniketan* – in communion with nature, in a tryst with silence! It is time we educators pay heed to the wisdom of our own beloved Nobel Laureate poet!

Shall we?

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### **Introduction**

“Where is life we have lost in living?” - lamented the great poet T S Eliot in his famous poem ‘The Rock’. At a time when the global business scenario is characterized by uncertainty, complexity and turbulence we are compelled to take a fresh look at our dominant notions and models of management and leadership worldwide from the considerations of authenticity, effectiveness and sustainability. It is time we raise and debate on some uneasy questions to restore a semblance of sanity in our mental space and salvage humans and organizations from the mad rush for ‘progress’ defined and pursued in material and monetary terms at the expense of the qualitative aspects of human life and our higher aspirations. The title theme of the annual meet of the Academy of Management in 2008 was ‘The Questions We Ask’. Urgently enough, we need to suspend our propensity for finding smart and quick solutions to the complex problems of modern organizations and focus more on asking the deeper questions on the life-world concerning ourselves, our organizations, and our planet at large including all our fellow beings. The present paper is a journey, a search (rather than a research) for alternative, humanistic and holistic management paradigm beyond the conventional methodology of mainstream in a mode of exploration of the Self of the Leader and dialogue with the Self - with inspiration from the Upanishads and the Gita, and Tagore and Vivekananda.

The key question that we need to confront as management educators and practitioners is – Are we ready to challenge ourselves and dominant models of management theories and practices? Unless this first adventure of self-examination is attempted, new ways of thinking ‘out of the box’ or problem solving will ever remain

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a far cry or at best lip service. Engagement in experimenting with alternative sources and methods of learning is the need of the hour. The present paper is a humble attempt in this direction towards exploration of alternative learning for the leadership of future India. While it will frame the critical questions around our dominant management thinking and practice, it will also unfold the gaps and contradictions in our traditional ways of looking at management and leadership along the western models and the inadequacies in conventional management education that can at best shape up a techno-economic entity without much concern for meaning and purpose of life or work and forget about essentially being a socio-technical system.

### **Looking East for Wisdom**

In this paper, we shall try to share a few quintessentially Indian ways of looking at and acting on the world – management or otherwise. An attempt will be made to reveal certain pertinent insights on leadership and management from sources ancient as well as modern beyond traditional literature on leadership and management. Relevant references will be made to classical texts like the *Upanishads* and *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* as well as lives and messages of modern Indian thought leaders like Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda who were also institution builders with an indelible and enduring impact not only in India but worldwide. Learning from Dialogues and Conversations,

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Nature and Silence, Arts and Poetry will be among the alternative learning paths that we shall try to explore in this voyage. Enlightened thought leaders from the west like Leonardo da Vinci will also be highlighted in this regard.

All this will aim at creation of an enduring ecosystem in society, business, economy and governance with an ever widening inclusive approach covering all possible aspects of life and work. Our aspiration will be to build a possible 'Business Ecosystem' that creates space and conditions for harmonious coexistence of diverse constituencies under the guidance of inspirational leaders with holistic and long term perspectives and enduring humanistic values.

“Unless men increase wisdom as much as knowledge, increase in knowledge will be increase in sorrow.” These words of caution from Bertrand Russell portray the current reality, painfully enough. We need to question and challenge ourselves, our existing beliefs and models, explore fresh perspectives and values and evolve actionable practices for a better and ethically enlightened future. Otherwise we may be condemned to reach a predicament succinctly depicted by Socrates in his cardinal message: “For man, an unexamined life is not worth living.”

Let us begin this voyage to the East with the five thousand year old Indian tradition and wisdom as enshrined in the Upanishads.

### **Wisdom of the Upanishads for Future Leaders**

“Thousands of occasions for joy,

Thousands of occasions for sadness -

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The ignorant are their victims,

The wise remain unperturbed. “

- Vyasa in the last verse of *The Mahabharata* (Lal 2006:431)

The Upanishads constitute the quintessential wisdom of India in the form of a conversation or dialogue between the Teacher and the Student/s. These texts date back thousands of years. The conversations were initiated by the teachers of ancient India to help the students evolve into great leaders in future with a comprehensive view of the world a holistic approach to life. In this context we shall delve into a few pertinent insights from some of the Upanishads for a deeper understanding of life and work through questions that are critical and often uneasy without any quick-fix solutions.

### **Isha Upnaishad: Learning to Set the Priorities**

In times of turmoil, what should we uphold – matter or spirit? What should we strive for - profits or ethics? Such questions often haunt the leader’s mind. There are certain common misplaced apprehensions around Indian spiritual wisdom that it propounds an esoteric, other-worldly pursuit divorced from reality. The quintessential wisdom of the Upanishads and many other original Sanskrit texts never advocated such an illusory view that unfortunately fosters a world-negating attitude and lures us to delve into a domain of magic as if defying all logic. This also portends the danger and fallacy of shunning material progress as irrelevant to and incompatible (often, as if, in conflict) with ‘real’ spiritual aspirations! On the contrary, the Upanishads boldly present to the world an all-embracing view of spirituality and advocate a harmonious pursuit of both the

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material and spiritual dimensions of our existence for a richer experience of work and life in fullness. *Ishopanishad*, the oldest available Upanishad complete in eighteen verses, deals with this problem upfront, dispels the myth of a ‘non-material’ notion of spirituality and offers a feasible and practical resolution in two of its verses in close succession.

In the ninth verse of this text it has been clearly pronounced that if we pursue material knowledge (*avidya*) to the exclusion of spirit, our life will enter into darkness. The next line of this verse is even more sharply articulate and challenging. It spells out with no trace of ambiguity that if we pursue spiritual wisdom (*vidya*) to the exclusion of matter, our life will enter into deeper darkness. (Swami Gambhirananda 1957: 19-21)

This may come as a shocking revelation to the proponents of an ‘other-worldly’ spiritual pursuit. The same Upanishad also offers us a comprehensive resolution of this apparent conflict in verse number eleven. Here, the seer of the Upanishad asserts that if we pursue material knowledge and spiritual wisdom simultaneously in a balanced manner, then material knowledge will help us to overcome the barrier of death while spiritual wisdom will transport us to the land of immortality. Thus, a harmonious blend of these two pursuits is a necessary precondition for the experience of fulfillment in life.

### **Prasna Upanishad: The Art of Questioning for Learning and Development**

“Reveal to me  
the wisdom of the *sruti*!  
The wisdom of the *sruti*  
never forsake me!”



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- Invocation from the *Prasna Upanishad* (Lal 1999:8)

A common experience in courses, conferences and workshops is the recurrence of same questions after years of discourse and deliberation. One would naturally ask – Has there been no evolution in our mind at all during this period? *Prasnopanishad* creates a space for a dialogue that dispels this myth of a stereotyped way of raising questions and seeking answers without any impact on human consciousness over time.

In this Upanishad, we find six seekers of Truth going out to the hermitage of a seer to find the answers to their queries. Even before any dialogue begins, the Upanishad spells out the parental and family background of the six young men. However archaic it may sound in our ‘modern times’, this elaboration offers a pertinent message. There is a trajectory of evolution of human mind that has direct relationship to the background from where we come. Hence the nature and contents of the questions we ask differ from one another. There is no single universally applicable answer. Each one of us will find our own answer.

The second lesson that we derive here is that there is no quick and easy answer to these questions as it is not a display of intellectual acrobatics. This is a serious engagement with life that demands time and patience. Hence we find that the seer in this Upanishad asks the six seekers to stay in his hermitage for a year. This will be a period of mutual observation of the master and the seekers as in daily life. The diverse backgrounds of the six young men will then reach a stage of unity amidst differences before the beginning of dialogue. Life in the *ashram* will be of cardinal importance to

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achieve this unity 'setting the tone' and spirit prior to asking the questions. Moreover the students have a direct life-experience of being in intimate contact with the teacher through a process of observation of his lifestyle and disposition. This marks the setting before the actual discourse.

Once the background is set the voyage begins. It is interesting to note that one question is asked by each seeker. The question asked has a relevance to the background from where the student has emerged. It deals with a particular domain of life and our level of consciousness. What is interesting is the way the teacher is transporting the collective consciousness of the students through this journey of discourse. So once the answer is provided the second student asks a question from a different vista of life-world at a next higher level of consciousness and thus the voyage gradually unfolds towards newer vistas of learning. The other significant lesson is that the same question does not come back in the next level of dialogue. Gradually the teacher takes care to evolve the consciousness of the students, step by step, from the level of the material to spiritual culmination.

One finds a cord of resonance when Philip Mirvis of Boston College Centre for Corporate Citizenship records his using of 'consciousness-raising' experiences in his executive development programmes (Mirvis 2008: 173-188).

The path of learning becomes engaging and enjoyable when one knows the art of asking questions.

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### **Insights from the Bhagavadgita – Learning from the Battlefield of Life**

A truly effective leader must often place the team members in a critical situation – not to manipulate but to get the best out of them by awakening their latent power and harnessing their untapped potential. This helps in developing a balanced mindset in people who get better equipped to handle success and failure with equal stead. Life is a great drama of play of pleasure and pain, hope and fear, happiness and sorrow, success and failure. A great leader must evolve as the master of the art of learning from failure to evolve towards perfection in the battlefield of life.

Srimad Bhagavadgita (commonly known as the Gita) is the crystallization of Upanishadic in the background of a battlefield, Kurukshetra, the field of action, (*Kuru* implying action from the root word *kri* and *kshetra* meaning field) where a fierce battle was about to begin. This was the inevitable culmination of the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata where India saw the emergence of one of the greatest leaders in human history.

Here the leader chose voluntarily not to participate actively in the war and playing became the charioteer of the protagonist Arjuna. Entering the battlefield, Arjuna asked his charioteer to position his chariot in between the two columns of war so that he could have a full view of his contestants in the enemy camp. The Blessed Lord, Sri Krishna, mentioned as Sri Bhagavan in the original text, never uttered a word. Like an obedient driver he placed the chariot in front of the two senior-most veterans in the enemy line.

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These were Bheeshma, the grandfather and Drona, the guru of both the camps in the art of war and weaponry. And then it led Arjuna to a moment of crisis.

What really was the crisis in the Gita? In our journey through life, personal as well professional, we often face situations which present to us alternative courses of action. This results in the experience of conflict in our mind-space whereby we find it difficult to arrive at a decision. The crisis in the Gita as described in its first chapter is a crisis of decision making. Hardly did Arjuna know that by this exuberance of confidence will invite him so much trouble! The Blessed Lord used his discretion to place the chariot in front of two stalwarts of the enemy camp – Bheeshma, the great grandfather and Drona, the revered teacher (of the art of arms and war!) for all the brothers in the two opposite camps Moreover Arjuna was the dearest to both of them among all the others. The fire and vigour of Arjuna began to dim at the very sight of these venerable and beloved veterans. This led to his physical as well as psychological collapse to such an extent that he laid down his arms and declared to his charioteer that he would not fight. The crisis of Arjuna is commonly experienced by most of us in the battlefield of life.

It is a conflict of values arising from directions and guidelines from two sets of human faculties – the rational and the emotional. For our understanding of the world and relating to it, the exercise of both these faculties becomes necessary. However, under the influence of the dominant thrust on cognitive methods of learning, we often score rather low on emotional competence in our modern times. To add to this, there is a misconception that emotional problems can be adequately overcome by sharpening our

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intellectual acumen. Unfortunately this is far from truth! The crisis of the Gita serves well to dispel this myth at the very outset. When our emotional disposition is in conflict with the dictates of our reason, neither of these two sets of faculties is of help to resolve the dilemma.

The Gita provides us with a unique and profound principle of resolution in this regard. The root of the problem, according to the Gita, is not to be found in the battlefield of Kurukshetra but within the inner world of Arjuna. We are all Arjunas in the arena of life. Here the conflict is actually between 'my reason' which directs me to fight and 'my emotion' which dissuades me from taking up arms against the near and dear ones. The cue to the resolution of this conflict, according to the Gita, lies in the common denominator 'my' or more specifically and deeply in the realm of the 'I'. The 'I' or the Real Self of Arjuna which got trapped and constricted in the spatial and temporal domain of Kurukshetra, must be liberated and experienced in its fullness and glory in order to come to terms with this dilemma. The purpose of this discourse was to bring back Arjuna's consciousness to the centre of his 'I' or Self and experience the full knowledge and potential of the 'I' prior to engagement in action.

The Gita offers a three-tier sequential methodology for the resolution of this conflict (Mukherjee 2007: 111-113). Each stage actually implies a progressive evolution of human consciousness into a superior level of knowledge. The ascent to enlightenment as shown in the Gita is essentially an adventure of human consciousness from the grossest to the subtlest planes of existence.

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### **Search for the Self - the Key Questions**

The most important element of leadership learning is how the Leader in the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord Sri Bhagavan helps Arjuna come out of this fiasco. The Lord makes entry in to the conversation in the second chapter of the Gita with a thundering question – From where did this problem arise in you, O Arjuna and enveloped your consciousness in alarming proportions? (Swami Gambhirananda 1957) The Lord does not give a quick answer to Arjuna’s problem but prevails upon him with a rebuke to go to the root of the problem which lies deep within the self consciousness of Arjuna that got constricted in that limited context \of Kurukshetra with two respected and beloved stalwarts in from him! Then, for the next twenty verses, we find the Lord unfolding the glory of the Self as Eternal and Immortal to awaken Arjuna to his real nature. Unless this living connection is re-established between Arjuna’s present state of consciousness and his infinite potential within how will he derive the power and energy to fight the battle? The rest of the text is a voyage into exploring different paths of awakening of the real Self through knowledge, action, devotion and spiritual practices. When we come to the last chapter of the Gita, we find the Lord is concluding his conversation with two final questions to Arjuna – Have you heard me with single pointed attention? Has it removed from your mind the doubt that enveloped it in the beginning?

In spiritual literature on conversations between the master and the disciple, the leader and the follower, we usually find the disciple is asking questions that are answered by the master. But this is the uniqueness of the Gita! Here the great leader not only begins but also concludes his dialogue with questions. This is indeed a rare phenomenon! This is

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because the real the journey for Arjuna is only about to begin once the battle starts in Kurukshetra where he will have to find his own answers! All great leaders do not spell out the answers to followers. Like true teachers, they help us ask the right questions so that we can find our own answers!

### **New Horizons in Management Thinking and Learning**

Access to these insights from classical Indian wisdom may not necessarily emerge from our conventional learning prevalent in modern management education that enhances our acquisition of scientific and technological knowledge through quantitative tools and techniques. Hence we find strong and serious critique of our existing methods of learning coming from stalwarts in the management academia (Ghoshal 2005; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005). The search has also begun to find ways that connect "...our heart and head [that] does not split knowledge into dualities of thought and being, mind and body, emotion and intellect, but resonates with a wholeness and fullness that engages every part of one's being." (Kind et al 2005). Unless we open ourselves to receive insights from other sources of learning beyond the corridors of business schools, we may continue making the mistake of 'solving the wrong problem precisely' using the scientific / technical perspectives while the systemic perspectives will keep eluding our domain of vision and concern. The resulting pseudo-solutions for our economy and life-world have been poignantly portrayed by Ims and Zsolnai (2006) in the opening chapter 'Shallow Success and Deep Failure' of their edited volume 'Business Within Limits' in which they have advocated a radical shift in our world-view based on Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics. A somewhat similar paradigm shift has been outlined by Michael Ray (1992)

who proposed that vision must replace profit as the key aim of business. The main pillars of a wholesome business transformation process, founded on human values for a sustainable future, have also been presented by Chakraborty (1995) in his concept of the 'Business Ashram'. Stephen Covey (1992) had also envisaged a shift in the ruling management metaphor from stomach to spirit, with emphasis on leadership character beyond techno-managerial competence towards learning to develop a 'quality mind' (Chakraborty 1995) or 'quality consciousness' (Chatterjee 1998). Michael Gelb (1998) has drawn our attention to the principles of learning and creativity laid down by Leonardo da Vinci, the multi-faceted genius of European enlightenment for living a life in fulfillment in harmonious relationship with the environment. Weick (2006) has advocated a completely new approach to learning through 'heedful relating' by cultivating the art of mindfulness. Growing interest in spirituality at work is becoming evident from the steady rise in publication of articles on Spirituality and Holistic Management by scholars in leading business journals (Biberman, Whitty and Robbin, 1999; Tischler 1999; Bell and Taylor 2004, Cash and Grey 2000; Mitroff and Denton 1999; Pruzan et al 2007 etc.) The concepts of Synchronicity (Jarowski 1998) and Spiritual Quotient (SQ) (Zohar and Marshal 2000) are significant developments in this direction.

Now all this points towards the need to delve into certain non-conventional sources and methods of learning (Mukherjee 2007) for igniting the fire and spirit of passion and inspiration in individuals and organizations by way of expansion of human consciousness beyond the here and now along the lines of the messages of the Upanishads.



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### **Exploration into New Vistas of Learning**

#### **Nature - the Great Teacher**

Learning from Nature was an essential component of education in many ancient systems, especially the Indian tradition and culture. Unlike some other modern civilizations, the Indian civilization grew and thrived in the ambience of Nature. The forests of India (*tapovan*) were the sylvan surroundings for holistic education. Observation of Nature and learning from the workings of Nature was integral to our classical system of education. Nature offers us profound messages relevant to us even today if we care to keep open our eyes and ears – our doors of perception.

Among the contemporary great Indian masters, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Nobel Laureate poet left behind a colossal legacy of philosophy and practice of learning from Nature. Far from the madding crowd and urban setting of the city of Kolkata, he pioneered the cult of learning from Nature in modern education through the creation of a university, *Vishwa Bharati* (Global India) in the silent and serene ambience of Nature.

His own life is a testimony to this voyage into this creative learning process. A few examples from his life remain as a vivid illustration.

The dynamic interplay of darkness and light, night and day offers valuable lesson to us for harnessing our latent creative potential, relating harmoniously with others and understanding life in its fullness. The sun is the highest source of energy in the world of

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Nature. The poet Tagore would begin his day by watching the sunrise, a ritual that had remained with him throughout his life. Rabindranath (who was named after the Sun God) had always displayed unusual sensitivity to Nature, a simple and intimate communion.

Sometime in 1882 he was pacing the terrace in his Kolkata residence where a strange sensation came over him, induced by the glow of the sunset combined with the awareness of the twilight. “I would see at once that it was the effect of the evening which had come within me; its shades had obliterated my *self*. While the self was rampant during the glare of the day, everything I perceived was mingled with and hidden by it. Now that the self was put into the background, I could see the world in its true aspect. And that aspect has nothing of triviality in it, it is full of beauty and joy.” (Robinson 1989:24)

On another occasion, a stronger vision occurred in him as the sun was rising through the leafy tops of the trees. “As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance .... This radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with universal light.” (Robinson 1989:24)

Nature, with her bountiful splendour and different colours and vibrations, also teaches us how to ‘see the world’ in the proper perspective with its immense diversity multiple dimensions. Tagore also found the lessons from Nature coming of great help to understand and deal with life especially in moments of crisis. In April, 1884, Kadambari,

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Tagore's sister-in-law (wife of one of his elder brothers) committed suicide at the age of twenty four for reasons unknown. She had been Rabindranath's playmate since he was seven, his constant companion and sternest critic. Her death brought unbearable grief but also a maturity of understanding that Tagore came to welcome.

“..... That which I had held I was made to let go – this was the sense of loss which distressed me – but when at the same moment I viewed it from the standpoint of the freedom gained, a great peace fell upon me ...” (Robinson 1989:25)

“The all pervading pressure of worldly existence compensates itself by balancing life against death, and thus it does not crush us .... Death had given me the correct perspective from which to perceive the world in the fullness of its beauty, and as I saw the picture of the Universe against the background Death I found it entrancing.”  
(Robinson 1989:25)

Let us listen to Wordsworth in his famous poem, *The Tables Turned* – a must read for all teachers and leaders:

“Books! ‘tis a dull and endless strife,

Come, hear the woodland linnet.

How sweet his music! on my life,

There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! How blithe the throstle sings!

He, too, is no mean preacher;

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Come forth into the light of things,

Let Nature be your Teacher.”

The hills of Shillong, the capital of the state of Meghalaya in North East India, still cherish memories of the great poet creating his dramatic masterpiece ‘Red Oleanders’ (*Rokto Korobi*). This is an ode to freedom as enlivened by a damsel of nature, Nandini who brings a new lease of life and fresh air in a whole kingdom trapped in its own chains of rigid structures and dreary discipline. Shillong bears testimony to this celebration of life by poet. It reminds us of T S Eliot in his poem ‘The Rock’: “Where is life, we have lost in living?” The pinewoods of Shillong still ring with the melodious voice of Nandini like the triumph of joy in Vienna woods by Beethoven in his ninth symphony ‘Ode to Joy’!

Shillong is also the setting for the creation of Tagore’s immortal love novella ‘The Poem Finale’ (‘Sesher Kobita’). The lovers happen to meet each other when their cars collide in one of the uphill roads of Shillong amidst smiling fogs and clouds that made their vision blurred at that moment. Then they meet and enact a play of ethereal romance that was never to take fruition into life companionship. When we feel the touch of true love, perhaps we need to suspend our planning and calculations just for the sake of giving it all! As the lady love Labonnyo says in her last parting poem to her beloved *Amit*:

“The more you have received my offering/ the more you have made me grateful to you!”

Are we willing to *Give*? Are we daring enough to *Love* like Labonnyo?

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Tagore offers to us an invitation – an invitation to *search for truth and life, joy and freedom, love and death!* At the dawn of any search we must ask questions – however uneasy or even burning! But one should not rush for the quick easy answers as we often sadly witness today in the arena of professional education!

Tagore was admitted to six schools but could not ‘sustain’ any of them even for a few days as the education was structured, monotonous and lifeless! Finally at the age of 40, he created a university at *Santiniketan* (Abode of Peace) in the heart of nature. The poet could listen to the call of the wilderness for sustainability and spiritual transformation. In his play *Achalayatan* (The Stagnant Chamber) the poet portrays the worst possible predicament as we witness in modern education. But he also gave the clarion call to freedom: “In which dawn did you give that call? / No one will ever know.

When shall we dare listen and respond to the call of the wilderness so that think, live and act differently?

It may be mentioned that Leonardo da Vinci, the stellar figure of the European Renaissance, offered us seven principles of Learning and Creativity that resonate a lot Tagorean insights! For example, Leonardo highlights the importance of cultivating ‘*sfumato*,’ or ability to handle uncertainty and paradox in life. In a turbulent business and global scenario, who can question the relevance of his wisdom even after 500 years?

### **A Leader Extraordinary – Tryst with Fire and Storm**

Naren or rather Bile (Narendranath Datta) was storm or turbulence personified from childhood in the premises of the Datta household in North Calcutta. Never obedient to seniors, ever an enigma to peers (his local friends) , he would relish his father’s *hookas* or

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throw away mother's clothes from the windows to the beggars on street even while he was locked up in a room. But when the time of crisis came, his friends would run away at the sight of a snake. But he would remain seated, immersed in meditation while the snake rustled away leaving him in peace. Trained in the art of physical mastery, he would combat the white man for speaking ill of Indians. He showed the promise of a Life Extraordinary!

“Wherever he went he was the first.” (Rolland 2010:3)

Narendranath was a born leader, never ‘made’ – only refined and directed by his great master Sri Ramakrishna.

A good leader accepts the situation at hand and tries to find a way out. But a great leader is ever in discomfort with the commonplace and the hackneyed reality. Naren began his quest for the beyond with burning questions on the existence of God and purpose of Life – only to be answered clear and direct by Sri Ramakrishna, who was to become his master though in appearance, upbringing and otherwise his direct antithesis. But this was not by any devout dedication but through a series of questioning of his master. And then came the hour of consecration when dedicated his life entirely to his master.

By the way, Narendranath was projected as the leader of tomorrow by his master – not by himself!

A great leader emerges out of stormy crisis from various fronts – death of father, deprivation of mother from family property, futile search for a job. But he had the

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fortitude to stick to his master's promise that he would never be plagued with basic sustenance. His primary preoccupation became an immersion into the self deep in meditation. It was for his master to turn him towards the world with the message of service, love, education to humanity. He was destined to be a leader –a banyan tree for one and many.

Storm as in crises for him was lifetime companion – severe hardship in Baranagar Math after the death of his Master, hunger and uncertainty during his *parivrajaka* (wandering monk) life in India, anxiety about funds for the America trip, spending sleepless and shivering night in Chicago rail station, lampooned and maligned by opposition in the West and even from his close quarters back home.

But the fire in him was never to extinguish.

Vivekananda stood for the principles of acceptance and assimilation of diverse opinions, values and cultures. A true global leader in thoughts, words and action, he became a fiery inspiration to men and women from the east and west from myriads of background – businessmen like Rockefeller and Jamshetji Tata, European women like Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita) and Emma Calve, scientist like Acharya J C Bose and many more. His style of communication was different for each according to the nature and character of individuals. His was an enlightened universal mind a century ahead of his times. But never did he lose his anchor in India. India was his daydream. India was his nightmare, as Sister Nivedita would portray the patriot in the Swami that her master

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Swamiji was a glowing synthesis of the East and the West, past and present, Science and Religion, Spirituality and Service to Humanity.

‘*Srinvatu Viswe amritasya putrah*’ (Listen! O Children of Immortality!) - was the invocation of the *rishis* of the Upanishads. The voice of Swamiji in Chicago Parliament of Religions resonated; “Sisters and brothers of America...” He was a modern incarnation of the ancient *rishis* in the attire of a monk.

Back home in India he chose ‘*atmano moksharatham jagat hitaya cha*’ (For the liberation of the self and the welfare of humanity) as the motto of the Ramakrishna Mission – ‘*Siva jnane jiva seva*’ as he learnt from his master. To serve man is to serve God in man.

His last life in Belur Math was like that of a child – playing with animals and enjoying with tribal people while giving lessons on Upanishads to brother monks. In fact his was a life child-like leader yearning and learning forever. He learnt from all possible sources including a low caste ‘*bhangee*’ with whom he had a smoke and also a dancing girl in Rajasthan gave him the message of non discrimination among humans.

His funeral pyre was lit on the bank of the Ganges on the fifth of July 1902. The body of the monk inferno Swami Vivekananda was stretched on pyre in his chosen place under the *bilwa brikshwa* (*bael* tree) in Belur Math. His mother Bhubaneshwari Devi was sitting and watching the rising flames from the body of his eldest son. A speck of his saffron robe flew in the wind to Sister Nivedita, the devout disciple of the monk. The



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gracious lady collected and preserved that ‘memento’ for her inspiration to action in the days to come.

Thus was the mortal consummation of the Swami, the Prince among men –the volcanic monk who shook the world with the fiery message of the Upanishads under the spiritual umbrage of his ‘seraphic master’ Sri Ramakrishna and ignited the spirit of India towards freedom.

But the fire still remains alive and aflame in those who are willing and ready to be ignited.

*‘Agne twam hridayam agachha’.*

(O Fire Eternal! Come and set our hearts aflame!)

The words of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the fiery patriot and one of the harbinger of Indian independence, summed up the leadership qualities in a way that is unparalleled:

“Reckless in his sacrifice, unceasing in his activity, boundless in his love, profound and versatile in his wisdom, exuberant in his emotions, merciless in his attacks, but yet simple as a child – he was a rare personality in this world of ours.” (Basu 1194:33)

### **Epilogue**

It was a freezing night in the hills of the Himalayas – the abode of snow. The volcanic monk of India, Swami Vivekananda, was on pilgrimage with a few chosen disciples. His health was failing yet his passion to inspire was aflame. He went into a trance in intense meditation that led him to a vision of the Mother Kali, the Black Goddess - the mighty

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destroyer and Time Eternal, lurking behind the veil of life. During one evening in a state of high fever he wrote a famous poem ‘Kali The Mother’ that concludes thus:

“Who dares misery love,  
 And hug the form of Death,  
 Dance in destruction’s dance,  
 To him the Mother comes.” (Sister Nivedita 2006:108)

He said to her chosen disciple Nivedita (an Irish lady of noble origin): “Meditate on death. Only by the worship of The Terrible can The Terrible itself be overcome... There could be bliss in torture too... The heart must be a cremation ground – pride, selfishness, desire, all burnt to ashes. Then and then alone, will the Mother come!” (Rolland 2010: 117)

Could it be that he was under a spell of ‘negative thinking’ when he wrote the above verse? Or did he want to convey a pertinent message in a different mood that might be useful for all in moments of turbulence and uncertainty?

Business leaders of tomorrow, when shall we learn from Death and Destruction of old orders for creative breakthroughs in our leadership roles and shake the very foundation of our outdated models and worn out concepts, our tunnel vision and fossilized values, by keeping alive and aflame just one precious element within our hearts – the passion to transform to infuse a new lease of life in our organizations and the planet at large?

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