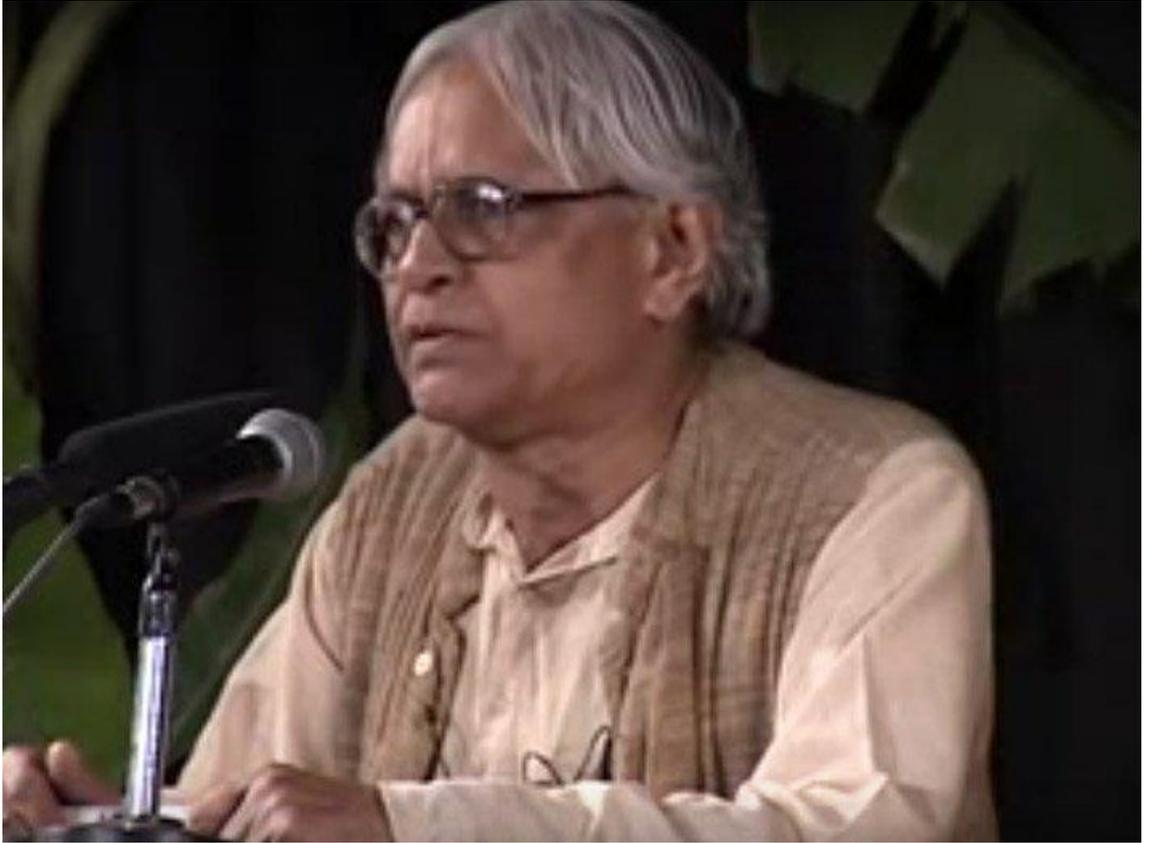


“‘Cultivate the timeless’, is something I wish to suggest to you”

Excerpt: Philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi on ‘Indian Spirituality and the West’

Ramchandra Gandhi | December 10, 2020

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The inimitable Ramubhai delivering the Nirmal Smriti Vyakhyan at IIC, New Delhi (Photo from the YouTube video)

Ramchandra Gandhi: Talks and Writings

Edited by A. Raghuramaraju

Orient BlackSwan, xxxiv+274 pages, Rs 995

Epithets like ‘maverick’ were coined precisely for people like Ramchandra Gandhi. Trained philosopher, spiritual seeker, public intellectual – none would describe Ramubhai (1937-2007) fully. His way of seeking spirituality in unlikely sources while maintaining a healthy scepticism for most of the obvious ones, his way of joining dots and linking up seemingly disparate ideas, his offbeat humour and self-deprecation: there would be no way to put it all together in an anthology of formal essays. A. Raghuramaraju put together one collection, ‘Seven Sages’ (Penguin, 2015). For a better measure of Ramubhai’s mind, another collection was due – and it has now been published. It includes several of his public talks – on spirituality, on Hindi author Nirmal Verma, among others. In that ‘adda’ mode, he can’t help but hop from one idea to another, since his vision attends to more connections than we assume. Also included are a parable, a witty piece for the journal of the St Stephens College, the text of an interview with Rajiv Mehrotra for Doordarshan, political tracts, and much more. Daniel Raveh’s foreword and

As a sample of the rare intellectual treat on offer in this volume, here is an excerpt from an edited version of the lecture Gandhi delivered on Modern Indian Spirituality at California Institute of Integral Studies in July 1988:

Indian Spirituality and the West

Swami Vivekananda first came here [the US] in 1893 to Chicago and, of course, made a very big impact. I think that is when in a big way if you like in an American way, the West confronted Indian spirituality—of [the] nineteenth-century variety. The West had read, through its Indologists, about many things. But even Max Muller and others, the great Indologists of Germany, were writing rather snide things about Ramakrishna Paramahansa, also, you, know, in a very funny kind of way. There is a book by him [Muller] on Ramakrishna Paramahansa, of course, it is a good book, but he is writing under the pressure of structural racism and imperialism, I am afraid, I am sorry to have to inform you. Read the Preface, and he says, 'But of course, he is not like those other terrible examples of ... etc., etc., etc. ... you know... he is a good guy, in other words, [...] read him', that sort of attitude. So even the great Max Muller is not without the kind of prejudice which creeps into cultures where there is structural prejudice, and there is such a thing in India. We can be terribly uncharitable about the West—that is because there is a reverse racism that operates in India, one has to be very careful. I find this in a lot of lesser sadhus, but I don't find this in a Gandhi, I don't find this in a Ramana, I don't find this in a Ramakrishna. But I'm afraid you'll find quite a lot of this in the caricatures who often arrive here, and whom you often run into in India. So, when we talk of Indian spirituality in the West today, it isn't as though we are talking about the great saints and saints of recent times having this [...] with the exception of a few: Vivekananda. Krishnamurti, the consummate traveller: I have [...] run into him at airports and thought he was the president of the United Nations or something like that. A great pity he was never the president of the United Nations but could have easily passed for that, or a philosopher of the West. He looked a lot like Bertrand Russell, I think, in his old years with that shock of white hair.

So, with the exception of J. Krishnamurti—and Mahatma Gandhi travelled a lot, of course, he looked reasonably ridiculous to many people in his loincloth and so on, especially to the King of England, I think—but you have heard the story the other day, when he was asked—this is for those who didn't hear it the other day, and not for those who were here the other day—but when he was asked if he was properly clothed for the King's party, he said, 'Of course, I am, the King's wearing enough for both of us' [laughter]. So Mahatma Gandhi was, of course, a Westerner. He really was, in his very impressionable years, from 19 onwards, for several years, he grew up in London. And he can almost be seen, I think I pointed this out, as a member of the crank Society of Vegetarians of London [audience response unclear], and he would be perfectly at home there, and they would find him perfectly normal. And of course, all of them would be found deeply abnormal by everyone else [laughter/audience responds].

So Mahatma Gandhi is a familiar kind of eccentric. He almost passed for a kind of hippie, one of the early dropouts, who was very familiar with the West and travels a lot. He's like that. And J. Krishnamurti, he's a sort of a ... not a ... he's a sort of 'establishment revolutionary'. There are many like him one runs into. Very properly clothed, but absolutely revolutionary in what they say. No eccentricity in behaviour, in mannerism, in fact, a cultivated conservatism, of speech, and of dress, and so on. But of course they only had to open their mouths and you knew it was a bomb that they were throwing [at you] [laughter/audience responds]. So that's another way to revolution, I think. It often works better than ... sort of ... manifest happiness and deep conservatism of doctrine. So, I think people were familiar with these two ... but, the traditional Indian sages, who were truly the bearers of Indian spiritual consciousness without being [traditionalist]—Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa—they never left India. So in a way, this is a hypothetical question—except in surrealist imagination: I can see in the sky over New York, Ramana Maharshi shaking hands with Groucho Marx or somebody like that, and blessing the city beneath but only in surrealist imagination, and therefore [really] more deeply. So I would put my first request to you, [which] is to take the traditional sages of India, who were not traditionalist, absolutely as seriously as the ones who turn up here, easily, by plane or ship, or repeatedly, whatever, and are perfectly at home with all the incredible pieces of technology that you have. Well, take them seriously enough, but not more seriously than the ones who never visited here, like Ramana, Ramakrishna, and Sarada and Alagamma. And—because there is a deeper one-worldness to Ramakrishna and Ramana—I'm not talking about Krishnamurti and Gandhi, they were exceptions. The fact that they have travelled is not something I hold against them at all. They are, they are

new, there is something very new that they bring. They bring something which might be the idiom of our conversation in a 100 years, Gandhi, Krishnamurti. But Ramana and Ramakrishna are bearers of more timeless, which is also greatly needed. The newer—and America is fascinated by the new, and so she should—but the timeless is also something that America would do well seriously to learn from Indian spirituality. And I don't mean by that a past orientation. There's a false contrast that is often drawn, between being slow and being fast. I meet wonderful people saying, 'Oh! I'm slowing down these days', and they think they are paying Indian spirituality a great compliment. Sometimes they are, by, well, not doing too many things, and by really cutting down on greed, and some wonderful things. But that is, that is ... not the timeless. The timeless is a spirit, is a way of doing things, and nothing. Where past, present and future are all embraced and transcended simultaneously. Where one simply is. One is not here and now, or one was not then and there, and one is not going to be at a future time ... one simply is. And that is the timeless, which alone is timely I think. The timeless is always available, unlike the contemporary, the fashionable, which ceases to be fashionable every two days or so, something like that.

So 'cultivate the timeless', is something I wish to suggest to you, and not in the way of caricature, the way in which the timeless has often been portrayed, as a throwback in time, as cultivation of antiquities, not that. The timeless, there is a timelessness to the contemporary production and lives, and speakings and doings, and also to anything in the past and anything in the present, and any ...can be timeless. Look for those things.

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