

Dr. RAVI L. KAPUR (1938-2006): A PSYCHIATRIST AT THE CROSSROADS OF MULTIPLE WORLDS

**Gilles Bibeau
Université de Montréal
Ellen Corin
McGill University**

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Dr Ravi L. Kapur passed away of cardiac arrest suddenly on November 24th 2006, just before going to have dinner in the company of his wife Mala. They had arrived five days earlier at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, in the foothills of the Italian Alps, with both Ravi and Mala having their personal project of writing a book. The day before he died, Ravi had given to the scholars-in-residence a lecture that he had quite prophetically titled: "*Another way to live*". In this talk, he explored the phenomenology of spiritual experience by examining narratives of those who claim to have gone through it; he also personalized the issue in referring to his own attempt at reaching such an experience under the guidance of a Guru. He ended up asking if that sort of experience brings any kind of permanent change ("another way to live") in the behaviours, practices and values in the daily life of the person. Ravi has always been fascinated by that question about which he was penning a book at the time of his death. Mala has inherited the role of transforming written notes into a book.

Paradoxes have given shape to Ravi's life in all areas, academic, professional and personal. He has constantly navigated between India, Europe and North America, perfectly at ease in the thinking of European philosophers as much as in the Hindu classic books, and at home in the Bangalore scholarly institutions to which he was attached and in foreign universities, in North America and in Europe. His doctoral studies in Scotland, his multiple travels abroad, his

constant interest for the crossing of boundaries between science, art, philosophy and spirituality have nourished the intellectual creativity he has deployed in many domains. He has lived on the borders of many worlds, passing between the Anglo-Scottish culture, his native Punjab that he loved so much and his adopted Karnataka universe which has been his home for most of his life. One may say that he has always rejoiced with the poet Rabindranath Tagore about the fact that “the East and the West ever touch each other like twin gems in the circlet of humanity”. And he was convinced that they would continue to do so for the rest of time.

Ravi knew there can be no return to the purity of an Indian past and classic philosophy, if such a state of grace ever existed in a land that has been so many times overrun by waves of successive invaders. He argued repeatedly that the imagination of contemporary Indian scholars should be fed in parallel by a deep anchorage in the intellectual roots of their land and by a sense of belonging to other world traditions, exploring particularly the intellectual traditions of the West. For him, synthesis could never be perfectly harmonious and scholars should be conscious they had to try to produce some consonance across ideas surging from different worldviews.

Ravi’s fate has been to spend all his life questioning, both at the intellectual and emotional levels, the structure of the human condition as did thousands of Hindu thinkers before him, investigating the role of spirituality in the life of human beings and interrogating, always with some anxiety, the place of violence in societies. In his responses to these fundamental challenges, Ravi has combined the resources of reason, spirituality and irony which have been the real fuel, over the years, of his scientific achievements and of his personal life. He also constantly battled against resurgent melancholy that may be linked in his thinking to the radical absence of any God who might have provided ready-made answers.

An enduring fascination for spirituality

Dr Ravi Kapur has always been interested in issues connecting spirituality, psychology and therapy. Between July 81 and July 82, he took a sabbatical leave (awarded by the Indian

Council of Medical Research) and spent a full year as an apprentice disciple (sadhaka) with a Guru expert in Yoga. Ravi had decided to move away from his usual research pursuits, “the epidemiological studies of large populations”, and to concentrate on “the study of only one person, namely himself” (1994a). During his one-year retreat, he underwent an intensive training in yoga and studied carefully, at the phenomenological level, the impact of mental exercises, meditative disciplines and other yoga techniques on his personal mental state.

He wanted to better understand whether or not yoga techniques were actually inducing any psychological well-being in individual practitioners and whether or not these practices brought about in these people joy, energy, harmony, alertness of mind, detachment and eventually an enriched inner life. He knew that answers to such queries could be found only in submitting himself to a long-term personal experience of yoga practices under the close supervision of a Guru. He systematically recorded, on a daily basis, any change in his own mental state, emotions and inner life. After completion of this experience, he tried to identify the consistent patterns which were present in his daily notes and observations of his diary.

Two main reasons may explain why Ravi has been constantly attracted throughout his life by the philosophy (darsana) of the great Patanjali, whoever he was, a person or a school of thought. Firstly Ravi recognized himself in the deep atheism of this thinker whose philosophy establishes linkages between nature (prakriti) and self (purusha), the cosmic and psychological realities, the body and the mind. In Patanjali’s a-religious views, the realization of one’s own infinite Atman in its identification with Brahman is achieved without any reference to religion: the God Shiva, Supreme Yogi, is never present at the horizon. At the end of his essay on “The Idea of God”, Ravi writes:

“I am afraid I am not religious. (...) I do not find difficult to say “I do not know”. It is not that the existential questions do not bother me. They trouble me as much as they trouble anyone, perhaps more. I have spent the last 20 years chasing Sadhus and Sanyasis, trying to understand what lies behind their inalienable belief in God. I admire them for their conviction but I am unable to share their beliefs. My ability to

say, "I do not know", gives me freedom; freedom to think for myself and to take responsibility for my actions" (2002: 20).

Ravi who has always been a passionate seeker of truth was in fact never sure of anything, whatever this thing was. In his account of an encounter with a Swami in Gangotri, he has disclosed with frankness his hesitation regarding the existence of God. To the question: "So do you believe God exists?" raised smilingly by the Swami he had just interviewed, Ravi replied: "Yes, I do". In his exegesis of his own answer, he provided some astonishing comments: "*Whenever I am in these parts and I meet these simple people with strong faith, I also start believing in God. Slowly but surely the belief starts fading away and doubt taking its place as I go back to civilization*" (2001: manuscript). Ironically this commentary was written at the very same moment he was working on his essay about "The Idea of God".

Secondly, Ravi shared with Patanjali the idea that the way to achieve liberation (moksha) from instinctual drives, compulsive desires and fluctuations of mind passes through the experience of a proximate relation to the cosmos, the access to mind and psyche through the mediation of the body, and the passage via practices as an essential detour to produce abstraction and theory. It is only after he had experienced through his own body and mind the pragmatic effects of the yoga way that his Guru allowed Ravi to study attentively the classic texts of the Samkhya philosophy and to meditate the contents of the Yoga Sutras. One should note that Dr Ravi Kapur has been, in his effort to decipher the mysteries of human existence, a convinced follower of the Samkhya philosophy; he never stopped to study this darsana and to practice it all over his life.

Ravi's deep involvement in these exercises was actually conducted as a sort of self-analytic exercise which was strictly attentive to the changes induced in himself, in his mind, in his psyche and in his body. In his account of what happened during the first months of his apprenticeship, he wrote with frankness: "I was tormented by the discovery of my negative characteristics. I became aware of my physical infirmities, my jealous nature, my suspicious mind which doubted even my own research, (...) of my pathological concern for justice (...)

and my insufficient courage to do something to bring it about” (1994a:32). He also noted with some candor that such realization of who he was caused in him “a lot of depression”.

This increased self-awareness accompanied by depression was followed by a progressive accession to self-confidence which permitted to Ravi “to just watch his emotions without reacting to them”, to become “more tolerant”, to feel “less tired and less sentimental”, to be able “to postpone decisions” till he could examine all aspects of a situation and to “act with determination” (1994a:33). At this stage of his auto-training, his dreams were much more tranquil and peaceful than the one we will describe later on. Ravi was progressively led into a third stage that he has called “the stage of insights” during which he experienced a stronger sense of order, harmony and freedom. He noted that he had the impression of having advanced on the way towards Samadhi: he accepted more easily reality (prakriti) as it stands; he became more aware of his own self with his negative and positive qualities; he got a stronger control on his mental fluctuations; and he acquired a more solid sense of consonance with the universe.

Ravi had plans to go on practicing meditations and other yoga exercises on a permanent basis for the rest of his life; later on, he admitted to have done so only on an irregular basis after 1981-82. During his one-year retreat, he had experienced that self-awareness induces a continuing self-examination with “a greater willed control over the direction in which thoughts move”, “a reduction in impulsive thinking and behaviour”, “an increase in perceptual sensitivity and a greater attention around himself”, and “an increase in will power” (1994a: 33-34). At the end of his experimentation on himself, he felt somewhat liberated from emotional agitations and mental fluctuations, and he entered into a state of relative tranquility and joy which would last, he hoped, for ever.

What has worked for him as a path towards a certain achievement of a clearer awareness about oneself should also work, thought Ravi, for other persons. He remained convinced that Yoga may be used alternatively “as a relaxation therapy, as an exploratory technique, and as a method of personality reconstruction, so that one lives more in harmony with other human beings and the cosmos as a whole” (1994a: 34). In his clinical work, he relied heavily on the yoga techniques for the treatment of persons suffering of different kinds of problems.

The exploration of his own self, mind and reality opened up by the yoga practices has been continued by Ravi, in the following years, in two main directions. Firstly he started going, after 1985, to the Himalayas almost every year, climbing repeatedly the narrow and dangerous paths leading to Gaumukh, reaching the glaciers at the very source of Mother Ganga, paying regular visits to the most sacred Char Dham temples (Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath), speaking with the Sadhus wherever he found them, in the foothills forests, in the Himalayan caves, or walking on roads and paths heading towards one of the sacred locations. He also stayed during long periods of time at ashrams, chatting with swamis, interviewing passing-by sanyasis about their life trajectories and talking with visitors seeking advice or relief in the ashrams.

Secondly, he started reading with more and more assiduity the Indian classic scriptures with the hope of picking up cues for better articulating an “Indian style of thinking” and for better developing the interface between spirituality and psychotherapy in an Indian context. He was particularly anxious to find out what was the relevance, within the context of a rapidly changing Indian society, of all the classic knowledge about nature, mind and psyche stored in the Hindu intellectual tradition. As a dedicated follower of the Samkhya philosophy, Ravi transformed his atheistic spirituality into a sort of inner attitude towards things, oneself and the world, and in a constant quest for constructing a psychotherapy nourished by the Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions.

These two lines of questioning have converged in the research program that we have conducted with Ravi since 1998. During the past eight years, interviews with wandering Sadhus, sanyasis and swamis have permitted to better understand the trajectories that led these individuals to enter into the life of renunciation. We also explored in his company what classic Hindu texts have to say about the path of renunciation. We had planned to organize a Seminar with Indian scholars who are expert in the Hindu representations of the person, mental processes and self in various philosophical and spiritual traditions of India. It is sad that such an encounter has not taken place.

A difficult entry into life

Ravi always felt very proud to have been born, on July 7th 1938, within the then vibrant city of Lahore which embodied in his memories both the splendour and wealth of his unreachable infancy and the symbol of a broken collective history of which he was personally part. He always painfully reminded us that this unique Lahore once ruled by Hindu kings, Moghul emperors and Sikh monarchs had been violently buried under the ashes of an epoch that came to an end with the Partition. Nevertheless the changing fortunes of the Lahore of his birth has never erased the moods of sadness and joy, a certain mode of thought and living and the intellectual and artistic ambience that he has always associated with this city in which was beating the heart of his beloved Punjab. During conversations, he felt often excited in picturing the soul of that great city and in reinventing for us the atmosphere that existed during the time of his boyhood in a world that had disappeared in an explosion of violence. Ravi knew that the land of his broken dreams would never be resuscitated.

In the summer of 1947, Ravi was only nine year old when his parents managed to escape on one of the last trains which left Lahore for Delhi, just before the new Pakistani border was definitely closed. His three elder sisters and the youngest one had already been placed in a safe asylum in Delhi where they were waiting for their parents and their little brother. All belongings of the family were left behind in Lahore, including the family car that the father abandoned at the train station before catching the train. The traumatic experience associated with this exodus was a turning point in Ravi's life: the scenes of bloodshed and sectarian rioting which were displayed during this train trip fleeing to the East have never been totally exorcized by the boy who saw them. The great Partition violence has been an indissoluble part of Ravi's personal journey towards his own self-realization and in his reflection about the tragic and evil side of the human existence.

Questions related to violence emerged and accompanied Ravi during all his lifetime: "Why Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who had lived peacefully together during decades have then begun to kill one another?"; "Why communities have been so rapidly transformed into battlefields of conflicting loyalties and individuals led to the killing of neighbours, friends and even parents?"; "How to explain that the long traditions of tolerance and non-violence have been so

ineffective in containing explosions of religious fanaticism?"; "What sort of poison has dissolved the morality of communities and contaminated individuals to the point of transforming them in killers?". These questions have impacted greatly on Ravi's mind and permeated all his intellectual life which has been dedicated, at least on one front, to the understanding of the human implications of the catastrophic historical event of 1947 in which he had taken part.

During all the years of his adolescence, Ravi had recurrent nightmares during which he saw people being slaughtered in front of him and scenes of killings. He was then attended at his bedside and calmed down by the presence of loving elder sisters. He tried to escape such repetitive emotional strain in recurring to two strategies. Firstly via cleavage and silence around the painful secret he was bearing: Ravi refused for ever to talk openly about what had happened during the train trip to Delhi; he stayed away from films or books dealing with the issue of Partition; and he never had the opportunity to visit, even after the Pakistani border has been re-opened, the Lahore of his infancy that he always wanted to see again. He was hoping to do so for the 2007 Meeting of the psychiatrists between the two Punjabs.

Almost 40 years after Partition, Ravi was visited again by the nightmares of his adolescence:

"I am walking on the road with friends. Four people catch hold of others walking on the road and mercilessly chop them with cutlasses. The bits and pieces of bodies are strewn all over. The others on the road just look and go away. I try to scream but my friends stop me, saying it will not help to scream. When I point out that what was happening was terrible and the killers must be punished, I am told that it would not help me to agitate because no one will respond. There is also a threat in the air that if I say anything I shall be the next victim. The assassins smile after the act – even laugh loudly and I cry with impotent rage" (Kapur 1994:32).

Ravi had this dream at the beginning of his yoga apprenticeship in 1981. One finds here the paralysis of a man who appears totally frozen and powerless in front of assassins who threaten to kill him. A certain fear of "others" had infiltrated Ravi's psyche: it took him much time and

high doses of mental energy to purge him of his distrust of others, to exorcise his inner ghosts, and to recreate a sentiment of confidence and hope in humanity. He learnt to cauterize such painful memories by dissociating himself from a number of recurrent haunting hallucinations and succeeded finally to move, at the emotional level, beyond the evil madness associated with Partition. But Ravi never obliterated what had happened: the millions of victims and perpetrators were worth remembering, and dead persons, as well as their oppressors, became for ever part of Ravi's biography. The refusal to forget has not prohibited Ravi to reconnect quite successfully with life, in expressing his 'joie de vivre', a good sense of humour and some irony.

Secondly, Ravi undertook, on a more active front, the most emotionally disturbing research project he ever conducted in his career. He selected several groups of extremist militants of the Naxalites type, who have engaged themselves in killings and assassinations as a way either to defend their political movement or to promote their communalist cause. Ravi collected life histories from the mouth of committed militants in Punjab, Andhra, West Bengal and Assam, described the circumstances that led them to join an extremist group and investigated the impact killing other people had on them. He found that these militants whose hands were stained with blood were neither bandits in the Dacoit style nor crazy people running Amok. They were neither born killers programmed in some way to hate, to murder and to assassinate.

Ravi demonstrated that the great majority of these extremist militants were quite "ordinary individuals", not to say normal, that most of them had not the weak personality profile, as it is generally postulated, and that they were not particularly predisposed to an easy manipulation by their group leaders. In their narratives, these militants told Ravi that they were exercising violence as the ultimate strategy to correct discriminatory situations that they perceived as on-going collective injustices done to their community; they also said their conviction that they represented the will of their community and that they were supported by many in their recourse to militancy for establishing more justice in the inter-community relations. The use of violence was presented as the only way available to them for forging a change in collective situations described as unacceptable and unjust. Their objectives were clearly stated as political and economic; very few said they had been acting in the name of religion.

This research project had strong political implications. The publication of its results may have triggered people's imagination in the context of an Indian society that remained profoundly affected by the massive killings at the time of the Partition. The Hindus-Muslims riots around the Babri Mashij demolition in December 1992 and the Mumbai serial blasts of 1993 had also resuscitated among political leaders and in the population at large the sentiment that volatile religious and communalist hatreds may be reignited and that terrorist activities were underway in different parts of India. Although the 'violence project' initiated by Ravi Kapur had been supported by the government and that ethical clearance had been given, he was not allowed to disclose his findings in the form of a book. The government officials were therefore the only people to have read this document. Ravi always felt frustrated, and sad, at that censure. Only the paper that Ravi titled 'Violence in India' (1994b) ever entered the public domain.

One may complain today that we do not have in hands the book Dr Kapur has written about life histories of extremist militants. This book might have helped us understand certain dynamics that may be at work in the suicide bombers in Irak, Afghanistan and elsewhere, in the Rwandan genocide in which "ordinary" Hutus have killed with sticks and machetes Tutsi neighbors and family members, and in the terrorist attacks in which seem to be engaged individuals who cannot be declared crazy or illuminated religious zealots. In most of these tragedies, the issue appears to be the response of a 'minority terrorism' to a (perceived) 'majority terrorism', a linkage that Ravi has substantiated in his study of extremist militancy. Perpetrators of violence who kill innocent civilians appear driven, in Ravi's study, either by political incentives or, but less often, by religious fanaticism.

The strengthening of the democratic foundations of the State may be protective, argues Dr Kapur, in correcting discriminatory (either real or perceived) situations that breed terrorism's recruits; in Ravi's discussion, the promotion of secularism is presented as imperative but no one, insists Ravi, should hope that secularism will provide a patented cure to eradicate terrorism and communalism. Forces of militancy and extremism will only be weakened, according to Dr Kapur, by addressing inequality and inequity between the various constitutive

groups of a society, and by creating conditions that will permit to all citizens, whatever their religious belonging, to become stakeholders in the society. The killers that Ravi has interviewed were, in their majority, quite ordinary individuals who appear to be profoundly frustrated by the situation in which they saw or imagined their community. In our age of blind terrorism, such a “banality of evil” is not particularly reassuring.

Encounter with three meaningful figures on his way to psychiatry

Ravi spoke rarely about his father who was a relatively wealthy GP highly regarded in the professional and social circles of Lahore. He spoke even less about his mother. His father who worked as a practicing doctor till 83 of age and who died at 93 has raised his unique son in a Spartan manner: the son should be the first at school (Ravi always complied with such a requirement); he should not lose time in trivial activities; and he should always engaged himself in serious matters as a way to prepare himself for his future life as a professional. During the Delhi years of post-Partition, the eldest sisters have been the ones who have often cared for their beloved little brother.

The only son of the family has been pushed by the father towards medicine despite the fact that Ravi appeared rather deeply inclined towards literature and theater, and that he wanted to become a playwright. With some reluctance, he complied with his father’s wishes and studied medicine at Amritsar (the sacred city of the Sikhs), knowing that he will be eventually left free to do what he wanted after being a fully-trained physician. During his medical training, the rebellious Ravi is told to have flown *incommunicado* on many occasions to Delhi where he wanted to plunge into the artistic milieu of the capital, to immerse himself into the Mrinal Sen leftist cinema, to watch art exhibits, to meet creators and to connect with a lifestyle he felt being part of himself. Each time, he was brought back to the medical school by an authoritative father who urged him to finish his medical studies. The father-son relationship had a chaotic underside that permitted to Ravi to play, at least temporarily, with the fluidity of his multiple identities. His discomfort with the world and eventually with his parents shaped Ravi’s self-definition in his continuous struggle against self-indulgence and against the fear of mediocrity.

Towards the end of his training years spent at Amristsar, Ravi (he was then around 24) met Doctor J. S. Neki, a creative psychiatrist who has developed an Indian style of psychotherapy and who was one of the first to describe the psychotherapeutic paradigm put at work in the Guru-disciple relationship (Neki 1973). There is no doubt that Ravi was strongly impressed by this turbaned Sikh doctor who opened for him, within medicine itself, an appealing avenue that made sense for the anxious and ambivalent man he was in these days. Dr Neki has been the master who has pushed Ravi into psychiatry. It is quite indicative that the very first paper Ravi has published was co-authored with Dr Neki in 1963.

About thirty-five years (it was in 1998) after Ravi had his decisive vocational encounter with Dr Neki at the medical school of Amristsar, the two authors of this paper have been introduced by Ravi to this then aged doctor Dr Neki whose way to be a psychiatrist had meant so much for the professional career of our friend. We were told in advance by Ravi that Dr Neki had withdrawn from the worldly activities and that he had totally engaged since many years in a spiritual quest. We encountered an old man still very alert in his thinking, deeply ecumenical in the ways he was approaching the issues of identity and the role of spirituality in the shaping of psychological problems. Over the dining-room table of his small Delhi apartment, visitors might see a large picture of the Last Supper, an icon which was telling much about the openness and respect of our Sikh host for other religions. Our conversation with this old bearded man has turned around the place of spirituality within the practice of psychotherapy, an area which had become, in the meantime, absolutely central in Ravi's life. On this occasion, we were also taught a philosophical lesson during which Dr Neki told us what he thought is really central in the Hindu thinking.

A very special place should also be given, in Ravi's heart and life, to Dr N. C. Surya, a distinguished Indian psychiatrist who was the Director of the All-India Institute of Mental Health when Ravi happened to know him at the beginning of his psychiatric training in Bangalore. First as a teacher and later as a colleague and finally as a friend, Dr Surya has been, particularly when Ravi was searching his own way within psychiatry, and has remained

over the years, a constant source of inspiration and encouragement for him, and sometimes of irritation, but only of that kind which produces renewed and more productive exertions. Doctor Surya has actually been a sort of spiritual mentor, a paternal figure and a model that Ravi has kept deeply in himself throughout all his life.

In the approach to community psychiatry that Ravi has later developed at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), he borrowed much from that exceptional professor who taught him that social, political and economic changes were no less important than the provision of institutional services to improve the level of mental health among the impoverished populations of India. Later on, Dr Surya started questioning the Marxist-inspired development model of societies to which he had felt himself attracted and which had nourished his first theoretical approach of the socially-oriented psychiatry taught at Bangalore. Ravi was in disagreement with the Marxist frame put forward by his mentor although he was convinced that the social, economic and cultural dimensions of the daily life of populations should be taken into account for the development of any community psychiatry.

Ravi was particularly impressed when Doctor Surya returned to the practice of meditation and to the study of the Vedas, notably the Bhagava-Gita, the Puranas and other classic Hindu texts, in which he said he found many profound observations and ideas about the human mind and experience as well as about the normal and abnormal psychology. Quite suddenly, Ravi's mentor and paternal figure abandoned his prestigious academic position at Bangalore and surrendered all his possessions to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, in which he went to live with his wife and family till the end of his life. In the Ashram in which he continued to practice psychiatry, Doctor Surya became more and more interested by the relevance of Hindu religious philosophy for the cure of current problems in mental health. At this time, Ravi has apparently envisioned to walk in the footsteps of his mentor and to join eventually an Ashram with his own family. In reality it was much too early in his professional and personal life.

Doctor Surya had studied the Heideggerian conception of Being-in-the-world and the contribution of K. Jaspers to phenomenological psychiatry, during his psychiatric training in Germany. Ravi who was very much aware of this underdeveloped part of Dr Surya's

psychiatric thinking was actually led to explore phenomenology through contacts with the Dasein-analytic school of Medard Boss, a Swiss psychiatrist who had worked in India. Dr Boss had trained Dr Erna Hoch, a WHO consultant who has worked many years in NIMHANS. Ravi discovered with great enthusiasm the existentialist psychiatry she was practicing and it is with her that he really had a chance to deepen his own knowledge of phenomenological approaches to psychiatry.

A third figure, that of Doctor Morris G. Carstairs, has been influential in Ravi's life trajectory. Born and raised in India, Dr Carstairs was a social psychiatrist who trained in British social anthropology. Ravi developed a solid friendship with this colleague who had carried out an anthropological study of high caste Hindus in Rajasthan (1959) and who supervised, later on, Ravi during his doctoral stay at the Department of Psychiatry in Edinburgh University. In his ethno-psychiatric works, Carstairs had pictured the role of the Guru as a genuine indigenous therapist and examined carefully the role of Sadhus in the Indian society, two topics of major interest for Dr Kapur. The particular version of social and cultural psychiatry that Ravi came to promote in NIMHANS has gained much from the scholarly research cooperation Ravi has established with Dr Carstairs, at the very beginning of his career. In one of the next sections, we will discuss the contents of the socio-psychiatric research project they have undertaken jointly in studying "the great universe of Kota", Kota being the village name in which was conducted an anthropologically-oriented epidemiological study of mental health problems.

Doctors Neki, Surya and Carstairs were all three figures of high profile in the Indian psychiatry: each one has accompanied Dr Ravi Kapur during his lifetime and helped him, each in his own way, to better find his personal route in the development of research programs, in the design of public mental health plans and in his clinical style.

Bangalore as a radical turning point in Ravi's life

After completing his medical studies, Ravi who had decided to specialize in psychiatry went to the All-India Institute of Mental Health (later named National Institute of Mental Health & NeuroSciences), in Bangalore, the only existing training institute in psychiatry that existed in

India in those days. He did not know at that time that Bangalore would be the city in which he will live and work for the rest of his life, in the very same garden-surrounded house in the Koramangala district which has been his home till the very end. Ravi has found in this hi-tech geared and rapidly modernizing capital city of Karnataka at least three key things which have been at the very core of his life.

Firstly, Ravi discovered love in the person of a young lady at the time she was enrolled in a Program in Medical and Social Psychology; he was sharing with her a number of university classes. Malavika Karanth with whom Ravi fell in love and who became his wife soon after has collaborated in many of the research activities undertaken by Ravi, particularly in the Edinburgh-Manipal Psychiatric Research Project in which she played a key role in her capacity of expert on the Kannada language and culture. Ms Mala Kapur has become a highly-regarded clinical psychologist with specialty in the psychosocial development of children.

One of the very first papers Ravi ever wrote was actually an article dealing with the use of projective tests that he co-signed with Mala (1967). Many other articles and chapters of book were co-authored by Ravi and Mala during the following two decades. Such an intellectual collaboration between husband and wife has been made possible by the fact that both shared common approaches on a number of fundamental issues: (1) Mala investigated the Ayurveda in order to find out how ancient India dealt with the child care while Ravi was exploring the classical books of the Samkhya tradition; (2) she promoted a culturally-grounded pedagogy in rural schools and ended up writing an essay titled “Where there are few teachers” precisely when Ravi was trying to design new types of primary mental health services for populations having no or little access to professional psychiatric services; (3) Mala developed training programs for educators in which the role of creativity and imagination was a key element in the education of children and adolescents, a perspective that Ravi was also taking in his study of the creative process among scientists.

Through her fieldwork in rural schools of tribal populations in Karnataka, Mala discovered the importance of entering into the cultural world of parents and children, particularly of

those who have to survive in a very difficult socioeconomic environment. Mala's continuous interest for the socio-cultural dimension of educational practices has helped Ravi to consolidate his own approach of the local cultures in Karnataka. In addition to all that, the fact that Mala is an occasional fiction writer was certainly very appealing to a man who always dreamed to be a novelist or a playwright.

Secondly, Ravi established a deep relation of complicity with his father-in-law Shivarama Karanth who happened to be, as Ravi was as well, a committed agnostics who produced literary works imbued with a spirit of scientific quest and a liberal humanism. Ravi also shared with his father-in-law the same great passion for literature, philosophy and ethnography. Malavika Karanth's father was a very renowned novelist and essayist who wrote over 100 books in Kannada, the Dravidian language currently spoken in Karnataka. He walked from village to village all over Karnataka in order to collect stories, legends and customs from the mouth of the villagers themselves. The ethnography incorporated in the encyclopaedias, lexicons and traditional dance-dramas produced by Shivan Karanth was certainly an incentive for Ravi who was pushed to start the study which resulted in the writing of "The Great Universe of Kota". Mala's father has translated this book in Kannada and managed to get it published.

Thirdly, Ravi found in the intellectual environment of Mala's family a legitimization of his own repressed artistic, musical and literary talents. Music became for him a kind of mantra for survival that he has nourished in taking music lessons from a master. He might have been also tempted to write fiction but this never materialized. Literature, theater and cinema remained nevertheless a passion for Ravi who always enjoyed discussing the most recent novels and films. He also always enjoyed beautiful writing. Even in research reports, he demonstrated a great sensitivity to the beauty of things, an aesthetic attitude that should be translated, in his view, in an inspiring writing. The following example illustrates well the effort he always put in producing nice and sensitive writing. The episode goes as this. He had reached Gangotri at 9:00 pm the evening before and had been unable to find any accommodation outside the local government dispensary in which he spent the night, overwhelmed by cold,

altitude sickness and rats. Next morning he got up before dawn and discovered Gangotri that he described, in his notes, with the following words:

“I woke up when it was still dark and when I went out for toilet, a mixture of sleeplessness, tiredness and icy cold breeze made me want to back home. But, soon there was a glow in the east and the rocks which were now becoming visible started acquiring a golden hue. As the Sun came up, it started shining on the mountain peaks, the snow reverberating things like a mirror. One could see Ganga trickling down to the feet of these mountains and as I saw the river I also noticed the huge roar which it was making, falling down the rocks in Gangotri. The sound of the river was a continuous backdrop to the days we spent in this beautiful place”.
(2000: manuscript).

In search of a ground for the Indian community mental health movement

In 1966, Ravi Kapur was the first Indian psychiatrist to be selected for a Commonwealth Medical Fellowship that led him to Edinburgh for a post-doctoral training in psychiatric epidemiology. Ravi and Mala had married in the meantime and they flew to Scotland as a young couple with two young children; they stayed over during the next five years. During that period, Ravi learned the techniques of epidemiological research and practiced them in a PhD study of factors associated with the failure among students of the Edinburgh University. In February 1970, Ravi and Mala Kapur were back to India. They immediately launched the Edinburgh-Manipal Psychiatric Research Project that took place in the Kota village, a coastal community located north of Mangalore and 18 miles of Manipal.

This project was situated in continuation with three major research projects in psychiatric epidemiology that contributed to found the then emerging field of community psychiatry: the Stirling County Study which was underway in Canada under the guidance of Dr Alex Leighton; the Psychiatric Disorder Study among Yoruba launched conjointly by Dr Lambo and Dr Leighton in Nigeria; and the Midtown Manhattan Survey done by Dr Srole’s team. Dr Kapur and Dr Carstairs developed socio-ethnographic and culturally-sensitive psychiatric

instruments which were designed in order to capture the characteristics of the coastal Karnataka society. In that research project, they aimed at measuring the impact of change and stress on the mental disorders of individuals amongst the three main cultural groups (Brahmins, Bants and Mogers) living in the Kota community.

Dr Ravi Kapur had planned this project in 1968-69, along with Doctor Morris Carstairs and Mala Kapur, at the time of his post-doctoral stay in Edinburgh. Once in India, two bases of operation were established, one at the All-India Institute of Mental Health, in Bangalore and the other at the Kasturba Medical College, in Manipal, from which the research activities were conducted. It took almost 3 years to collect the socio-anthropological and psychiatric data. On her part, Malavika Kapur was actively involved in co-designing with Ravi and Dr Carstairs the Indian Psychiatric Interview Schedule (IPIS) and the Indian Psychiatric Survey Schedule (IPSS) (Kapur, Kapur and Carstairs 1974a;1974b). Ravi who acted as Field Director of the research team was back in 1973 to Edinburgh University to conduct the data analysis and to write up the report which has been rapidly transformed into a book.

The IPIS and IPSS which were used for the assessment of the prevalence of psychiatric problems among the three sub-populations of Kota have been translated in Kannada, under Malavika Kapur's supervision. Besides the translation, Mala was also responsible, in cooperation with others, for the testing and application of the two instruments. The IPSS was conceived as an instrument designed to investigate the presence or absence of 125 psychiatric symptoms, with a special emphasis being put on the commonly found symptoms among Indian people. The phrasing of questions was done in a language meaningful for villagers who were in their majority illiterate. The research team was aware, from the very beginning, that cross-cultural research in psychiatry presents particular traps they wanted to avoid in assuring themselves that their instruments would have some intra-cultural validity. In their book, they write: "Each culture has its own criteria of reality, and a symptom regarded as indicative of mental abnormality in one may not be so regarded in the other" (Carstairs and Kapur 1976: 11). They mention, among other examples, the case of spirit possession that certain populations do not read as delusion.

A number of key questions have preoccupied the researchers along the whole process: what is the relative importance of environmental factors in the causation of mental disorders? How to get access to the therapeutic itineraries and to describe the quest for therapy (to whom people go when they seek treatment) within a community in which coexist multiple parallel healing systems? Is a standard checklist of symptoms sufficient for differentiating, in a community survey, between minor and major psychiatric problems? How to set criteria for identifying persons who are in need of specialized psychiatric services and the ones who could be treated in relying on the community traditional healing resources?

Answers to these questions were seen as fundamental for the investigators who were using the Kota study as a source of data for helping them to propose, at the level of the whole country, realistic therapeutic and preventive programs for mentally diseased persons. Ravi and his colleagues have provided, through the Kota study, solid data for guiding, in a critical way, the Community mental health movement which was then underway in India.

It was not easy to develop ethnographic instruments that would permit, firstly, to describe the community in its own social and cultural terms and secondly, to collect data that should allow to link the socio-cultural specificities of the three sub-populations and the prevalence of psychiatric problems in each one of them. The ethnographic tools were locally developed, phrased in the language of the people to be studied and methods of inquiry were tested for their validity in another village of the same linguistic area. An extensive ethnography of the Kota Panchayat is presented in the chapters 3 and 4 of *The Great Universe of Kota* (1976: 26-57). The religious beliefs and practices of Brahmins, Bants and Mogers are described as well as the functioning of the caste system and the differential family patterns (with a particular attention to the change from a traditional matrilineal system to a patrilineal structure) that prevail in the community. Despite the fact that Bants and Mogers call themselves Hindus, as it is obviously the case for Brahmins, and that they say to believe in Karma and reincarnation, Carstairs and Kapur note: "Except for the Brahmins, who worship the major gods of the Hindu pantheon, most of the Kota villagers are primarily worshippers of lesser spirits, or Bhutas, whose names and attributes of supernatural authority are recognized only within a

restricted local area” (1976: 38). Economic activities (agriculture, fishing, commerce), level of scholarly education, and residence patterns are also described in providing many details.

Results about the “social distance” between the three castes present in Kota indicate that “the Brahmins, though more modern than the Bants and Mogers in several respects, show the least willingness to mix with the lower castes. The younger and more educated Brahmins expressed a greater willingness in this regard than the older and less educated Brahmins; but their social distance were still less than those of the Mogers and the Bants. Age and education do very little to alter the attitudes of the Mogers and Bants” (1976: 57). About the degree of modernization across groups, they found that “education is the single most important determinant of modernity. The high modernity scores of the Brahmins seem to be due to their being more educated than members of the other two groups” (1976: 57).

In their survey, researchers discovered that twenty-six traditional healers (Ayurvedic Vaid, temple priests, Bhuta specialists) were actually practicing in Kota which had a population of ten thousands, such a number representing a fair therapist-patient ratio by any standard (Kapur 1975). Different conceptual systems of disease interpretation and treatment were offered to the population; it was found that 75% of people suffering from severe mental illness were taken for treatment to the traditional folk healers while people with milder problems were either taken in care at the family level or not attended. The quest for therapy was actually forming complex itineraries, with persons circulating between the multiple systems, including the Western modern system which was also represented in Kota. The study indicated that “More highly educated villagers showed a greater readiness to consult modern doctors than did the less educated; but surprisingly the women, in spite of being less educated than the men, and in most respects more conservative, actually consulted doctors more often than did their menfolk” (1976: 69).

The comparative study of mental disorders among the Brahmins, Bants and Mogers was the main focus of the investigation conducted by Ravi’s team. The IPSS was applied to a sample of 50% of the adult population in each one of the three castes. It should be reminded here that researchers had renounced the desire of categorizing psychiatric morbidity under diagnostic

labels and that they have rather chosen to organize their data around the psychiatric symptoms. In the survey, 32% of men and 40% of women were found to have one or more symptoms and the great majority of these cases were handled, with a various level of good caring, by families and healers. For whom specialized services should be designed? In Ravi's mind, the answer was quite clear: only people presenting five symptoms or more should be eventually seen as potential candidates for specialized psychiatric treatment.

In the Kota study, 6% of the total population was presenting 5 symptoms or more on the scale used by the researchers: these were the people who had, in Ravi's view, the highest need for help and treatment. Carstairs and Kapur write: "If resources are meager in a country, one could limit one's attention to the top 6%, but if resources are more plentiful, one may include all those scoring 4 on the Need scale; this would give a case rate of 15%. This rate would incidentally include all the psychotics, all the epileptics, 68% of the depressives, 54% of the anxious, 42% of the other neurotics, 50% of those with possession and 23% of those with somatic symptoms" (1976:128). These rates were obviously worked out from the hierarchical classification of symptoms researchers have used in their survey.

In his critical approach to the community mental health movement which has been promoted in India, Ravi always kept in mind as guiding principles what he had learned during the Kota study of the early Seventies. He disagreed openly with mental health planners who were turning a blind eye to the abundant traditional healing resources available in communities, particularly in rural areas. When a fire burnt to death in 2001 many chronically ill people chained in a Dargah, Dr Kapur went against the liberal and progressive minds who were asking to close down such religious facilities. He then reminded health administrators that these institutions were actually providing daily support to many chronic patients and to their families, and that such sheltering institutions should be offered financial support and supervision rather than being closed down. He had learnt from the Kota study that villagers were, on one hand, loyal to their traditional representations of mental disorders and to their healers, and that they were opened, on another hand, to new knowledge and remedies that proved to be helpful.

In a more programmatic approach, one may read the following in *The Great Universe of Kota*: “Certainly, at the core of any community mental health services there must be experts, developing facilities for intensive care which only a hospital can offer; but out in the field, and particularly in remote rural areas, it is quite a different matter. There, the front-line workers of mental health must learn to co-exist with priests, magicians and other traditional healers in whom the villagers have confidence, while indicating that for some forms of mental illness at least, they have medicines and procedures which can powerfully supplement the ancient remedies” (1976:137). The issue of the articulation between the modern medico-psychiatric system and the traditional therapies has always been at the very center of Ravi’s questioning.

In an unpublished paper (1995c) in which he tells the story of the community mental health movement in India, Ravi criticizes most of the plans put into action in the country, particularly the National Mental Health Programmes (NMHP) which were started in 1982 with the ambitious aim of ensuring availability and accessibility of minimum mental health care for all. Ravi’s critiques hit the NMHP at the very heart: the objectives set are “extremely unrealistic”; the approach is “top-down and does not take into account the ground realities”; a lack of enthusiasm and a “poor morale” have weakened the functioning of the Primary Health Care approach; the absence of solid administrative structure has led to the failure of the NMHP in most health districts of the country.

Ravi has always been convinced that there were various ways to provide cheap, manageable and efficient services for the mental patients of India. For common mental disorders, the role of folk healing, spiritual and religious counselling and ancient techniques (like yoga) should be promoted. Quite provocatively he writes: “Is going to spiritual healers worse than doling out expensive tranquilizers under the pressure of various drug companies?” (nd: 11). For more severe mental troubles, he has repeatedly proposed that specialized professional services should be offered, in training for example GPs, nurses, psychologists and social workers in order to better articulate their activities with those of the psychiatrists, either in hospitals or in the community. Such a proposal has never been worked out in more explicit terms and of course, it has never served as model for building a community-oriented psychiatry in India.

Dr Ravi Kapur has tirelessly tried to promote a socially- and culturally-grounded psychiatry during over four decades. In a critical commentary to the DSM-III, he argued quite eloquently against the conceptual uniformity that such a diagnostic manual of psychiatric decision imposes to all mental health practitioners, wherever they work around the world. He proposed that psychiatrists should rather “start looking for the processes which are behind symptoms and signs for it is in learning for these processes that the meaning of distress experienced by the patient will be assessed” (1987: 44).

Mentor and therapist

During 8 years (1974-1982), Ravi Kapur has been Professor of Community Psychiatry and Head of the Department of Psychiatry at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), at Bangalore. In 1985-86, he was a Fulbright Scholar-in residence at the Department of Social Medicine, Harvard University. After his return to India, he served as J. R. D. Tata Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), at the beginning as Professor of Psychiatry and Deputy Director of this prestigious institution and later on as the Head of the Science and Society Unit (SSI). At the time of his death, he was an Emeritus Professor in NIAS.

In the context of his chairmanship of the SSI, he promoted a research dealing with the creativity process in science. In this study, he compared the mental processes of scientists and artists as they make discoveries or artistic composition with the mystical experiences of Sanyasis. Such a comparative frame resulted in a very original approach for the study of creativity among scientists. During his stay at NIAS, he also tirelessly promoted the place of qualitative research methods in all fields. This led him to an important workshop with papers which were published as a book in 1995.

Dr Ravi Kapur never wanted to found his own school or to have disciples or hangers-on groupies, although many of his former students still remember him as one of the most creative thinkers who contributed to consolidate the linkages between social sciences, psychology and psychiatry in the development of an Indian psychiatry. He will certainly be remembered in the

history of Indian psychiatry as a key figure who has constantly promoted a culturally- and phenomenologically-oriented psychiatry as a way to oppose the dominant biological and neurological approaches which have invaded the psychiatric research and practices all over India.

Ravi is a man who has walked a solitary path in the constant exploration of himself, often dissatisfied with his own achievements and requesting always more and more of himself, and striking a fine balance between intellectual independence and social engagement. The students and the young researchers who have worked with him will remember him as a demanding master who always pushed them ahead with a firm hand. His commitment to the development of an Indian style in psychiatry transformed him into an inspirational thinker who took sometimes the attire of a visionary rebel. Although he interrogated continuously the role of spirituality in the practice of psychotherapy, he has remained a personification of secularism to which he brought a new meaning: he could sing classical Hindusthani ragas or Indian classical music of north India, listen to the poetic Ghazals and read Bhagavad Gita, the Quran and the Bible with an equal interest. He found in all these texts some answers to the questions he posed about the way to be human.

We want to underline the fact that Ravi has been above all a clinician who was fully dedicated to his patients: we may testify that they were calling him anywhere and that he was always ready to chat with them, whatever he was doing at the moment of the call. In his essay on *What is psychotherapy?*, he says what meant therapy for him: *“Life is nothing but a bundle of contradictions and a therapist must realize that there are never going to be final answers to some questions. For example, how much should the therapist involve himself with the patient? If you do not involve yourself you are often not effective; if you over-involve yourself, you get transference problems. A therapist must walk on the razor’s edge between these polarities”* (2003:18). The psychotherapy Ravi has practiced was quite paradoxically informed by the Indian spirituality which tells the patient to “dis-identify with the Ego” and the Western-style psychology which rather aims “at the strengthening of the Ego”. Here again, the therapist accepted to walk on the razor’s edge in combining what certain orthodox minds may judge contradictory.

For Ravi, the essence of psychotherapy was “an affectionate and respectful relationship” and not the “excavation” of the so-called truth hidden behind the patients’ problems. At a more substantive level, he tried to anchor his clinical practice in the Hindu ideas of selfhood and personhood, ideas that should stand, according to him, at the very center of any Indian style of psychotherapy.

The path we have walked with Ravi

As we wrote earlier, we have been doing research with Ravi for the past 8 years (since 1998). When we started our cooperative work with Ravi, we were already engaged in a joint project with colleagues of the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF) at Chennai. With them, we wanted to explore the contribution of culture to the evolution of psychotic persons. We were particularly interested in investigating the ways religion and spirituality could allow a particular elaboration and culturalization of the posture of “positive withdrawal” which had been suggested to be protective in North America for psychotic persons (Corin 1990; Corin, Thara and Padmavati 2004). Ravi has shown a great interest in the possibility that “positive withdrawal” be a proxy for the well-spread notions, across India, of distance, detachment and renunciation which are key elements in the Indian definition of selfhood.

After discussions with Ravi, we decided to focus our study on asceticism considered as a cultural idiom offered to people confronted to a range of limit-experiences, possibly including psychosis. In collecting life trajectories of Sadhus and Sanyasis, Indian figures of ascetics, we wanted to map the degree of flexibility of the language of renunciation, its appropriation or distortion by individuals and its transformative power. In our project, we planned to meet different kinds of persons who were confronted with the limits of experience. In parallel with the study which was continued with our SCARF collaborators, we started with Ravi a research with persons engaged in an ascetic quest for spirituality (Sadhus and Sanyasis) and people coming to consult them.

We conducted interviews with walking Sadhus and Sanyasis, including the ones living in Ashrams. Our intention was to pay a particular attention to individuals situated “at the

borders” of the life of renunciation: at its internal borders, for people living an extreme form of detachment that could be read as a mark of their special status on the pathway to knowledge; at its external border, for extremely marginal and solitary people that we thought could be eventually encountered in pilgrimage centers, in Anna Kshetras (feeding places for walking Sadhus and poor people), or on the roads. We were assuming that among individuals bearing the marks of Sadhuism, some might be eventually trapped in a psychotic-like state, the language offered by Sadhuism being either a way to contain their problems or a sort of escape that made possible a culturally-acceptable marginal life-style. Reality has proved to be much more complex than what our hypothesis suggested.

With Ravi’s departure we realize how privileged we have been to have him as a guide in the clarification of some of our intuitions and ideas in research and in our explorations of the spiritual dimension of India. We will keep for ever the memory of all these years of working together, chatting and arguing, debating on sensitive issues, and enjoying walking in the foothills of the Himalayas. We owe to Ravi an immense enrichment of our vision of life: he introduced us to the inner face of the Indian society and culture; he allowed us to meet exceptional people; he always reminded us the necessity to combine rigour, empathy and creativity. And indeed we shared with him so many ideas, hypotheses and visions, the passion to discover, to learn and to discuss, the refusal to idealize whatsoever, that being the spirituality as a trademark of India, and the rejection of all sorts of exotization. Passionate discussions with Ravi have constantly nourished our encounter and our work, adding to the precious character of our relationship.

Both of us keep vivid in our heart Ravi’s deep commitment for whatever he did, his intelligent grasp of complex matters, and his passionate quest for truth that led him sometimes to explosive positions during debates. We may also testify to his deep humanity that he always showed, for example, when we stopped a Sadhu in his walk and engaged in a deep conversation with him. The following vignette that we borrow from one of his accounts illustrates well his great humanity:

“Three Sadhus came together into the Ashram at the afternoon tea time. They politely asked the kitchen staff whether they could sit down and have tea. I was watching them and liked their comradeship, their laughing and joking. It is never easy to start off a conversation with strangers but I felt it would be interesting to talk to them. So I went over, told them I was a psychologist and was interested in knowing what led them to Sanyasa and in what way they had changed after taking Sanyasa. (...) After one of them had disappeared, I invited the two others into my room, gave them two chairs to sit on and myself sat on the ground” (2001).

You can easily imagine the scene. Ravi is seated cross-legged on the floor while the two Sadhus sit on the chair. Questions could then begin: “So how did you go into Sanyasi”, asked Ravi.

We are fully aware that the atmosphere of trust and respect that Ravi was always able to create explains the quality of the interviews with Sadhus we collected. We had plans to spend the month of May 2007 in the Himalayan foothills (in Shimla) in order to analyze all the narratives, life histories and data we collected together throughout all these years of work in common. We had also decided to take the challenge to write a book “in three voices”, a sort of dialogue, eventually conflictual on a number of issues, between the three of us. We had difficulty imagining that Ravi would not be with us concretely for that work, even if we were sure that his presence would accompany us in the continuation of our common research.

Echoes of a passionate voice

This obituary has actually been written in a setting of the Himalaya which has always been very dear to Ravi’s heart. In this monsoon time, we hear Ravi’s voice everywhere around, in the mountains and in the forests, in the heavy rains and in the mysterious mist that surrounds the place in which we have found a retreat for writing. We think we have been faithful to the memory of our friend in deciding to fulfill our writing plans in coming once again to the Himalayan foothills. Next to our door, lives a great writer of modern India that Ravi loved to read. His poetic words carry much of our feelings in this very moment:

“Time passes, and yet it doesn’t pass; people come and go, the mountains remain. (...) I like to think that I have become a part of this mountain, this particular range, and that by living here for so long, I am able to claim a relationship with the trees, wild flowers, and even the rocks that are an integral part of it. Yesterday, at twilight, when I passed beneath a canopy of oak leaves, I felt that I was a part of the forest. I put out my hand and touched the bark of an old tree, and as I turned away, its leaves brushed against my face, as if to acknowledge me” (Ruskin Bond, Mountains are Kind to Writers, 1996: 197).

After cremation in Bangalore, the ashes of Ravi’s body have been spread at a confluence (prayag) of the Cauvery River, next to the Sri Ranganithaswami Temple, in the vicinity of the bird sanctuary and the wildlife park he enjoyed visiting. He has become part of a nature he has loved with intensity and which was, since long time, a part of him. From the Dravidian South, Ravi’s voice reaches us in the Himalayan North, with the mixing of the quiet tone of the *tabla* and the passionate singing of the classical ragas that Ravi used to sing on early mornings.

Hopefully many others in India and around the world will listen to this voice which has still so much to teach us.

Mussoorie, August 2007

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