SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

Need for a symbiosis

By KARAN SINGH

I won't like to start by quoting the famous creation hymn from the world's most ancient living scripture, the Rig Veda (X.120/17 - Griffith translation):

"Then was no non-existent nor existed; There was no realm of air, no sky beyond it; What covered it, and where? And what gave shelter? Was where, unhathformed depth of water? Death was not then, nor was there ought immaterial; No sign was there, the day's and night's divider. That One thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature. Apart from it was nothing whatsoever. Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness This All was indistinguishable chaos. All that existed then was void and formless: In the great power of Warmth was born that Unit. Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning. Desire the primal seed and germ of Spirit. Sages who searched with their hearts' thought discovered The existent's kinship with the non-existent. Transversely was their severing line extended: What was above it then, and what below it? There were begetters, there were begotten more. Free action here and energy up yonder. Who verily knows and who can here declare it. Whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The gods are later than the world's production, Who knows then whence it first came into being? He, the first origin of this creation, Whether he formed it all or did it form it, Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, He verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not."

Insights on cosmology

It is indeed astounding that modern developments in science, particularly cosmology, seem to echo some of the insights of our great sages and sages which have come down to us for thousands of years through the long and tortuous corridors of time. It is almost as if, like the background emanations from the Big Bang, the faint echoes of our ancient spiritual luminaries can still be heard in the background of all our post-modern discourses on the human condition.

Some years ago, when I was Ambassador to the United States, I was contacted by a young scientist, Prof S Chandrasekhar in Chicago, and asked him as to how it was that the sages of the Vedas and Upanishads had two astounding insights which have emerged in modern science only very recently. The first is the concept of Анантакоти Брахманда - billions of galaxies or universes. The second is the concept of billions of times through which creation passes, the single day of Brahma being 3.632 million years with a night of equal duration, so that a year of Brahma closely corresponds to the age of the planet earth. He really had no explanation and when I suggest ed that perhaps this knowledge might have been enhanced states of consciousness, he said that was quite possible.

Consciousness

From cosmology, let us then move on to consciousness. In the Indic traditions consciousness is not merely an ep-phenomenon of evolving matter, rather it is the prime principle which calls forth these millions of worlds. The great icon of Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Cosmic Dance, beautifully portrays this kinetic univers e in which all things, from the majesty of the great galaxies down to the persis tent agitation of sub-atomic particles, are in a state of flux. The drum in Shiva's left hand represents creation - the original source of all things, it is like, or per haps a continual series of Big Bangs, while the fire in his right hand represents the ultimate destruction in the great cycles of time. However, if there were only the Big Bangs and the Big Crunches, there would be little space for you and me. Shiva's other two hands, therefore, point to the possibility of individual realisation amid the cosmic chaos in which we find ourselves. One needs to be rooted in a gesture of benediction, telling humanity not to fear, while the fourth points to his upraised foot as the path of liberation not.

The whole question of consciousness and its evolution is one that has attracted some of the best minds in the world, including the great evolutionary psychologist, Sri Aurobindo. In India we have developed over the millennia systems of yoga which are among the deepest and most profound and integral exploration of consciousness ever essayed by the human race. While we also develop ed groundbreaking cutting edge technology in such fields as metallur gy, medicine and mathematics, Indian civilisation took a turn probably unique in the history of thought. Only this creative mind turned the searchlight inwards towards the source of consciousness and has been an entire science based upon this creative introspection. In his classic work on the Yoga-sutras, the sage Patanjali has given us a seminal textbook for exploring the deeper recesses of our being.

Post-Freudian movements in psychology in the West have also gradually developed these deeper insights, notably with C G Jung and the post-Jungians, and moving on to transpersonal psycholo gy. The study of consciousness has now become a fully respectable and challenging area for intellectual exploration. I have personally had the privilege of discussing the nature of consciousness with some of the finest minds ever to emerge in the 20th century - Stanislav Grof with his extended cartogra phy of the mind, Rupert Sheldrake with his theory of morphogenic resonance, Ilya Prigogine with his special theory of the dissipative structures, and of course, the great biologist whose book Surivial of the Fittest is in every library, who brought the mysteries of the cosmos into the minds and hearts of millions, Arthur Clarke, the astonishingly creative space author and many others. Indeed the study of consciousness is now among the most fertile fields for research and experimentation.

Years ago, when I was Minister for Health and Family Planning, I had started here in Bangalore in the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS) a programme entitled 'Project Consciousness' in which I had assembled some of the most creative scientific minds in India as well as involving Pandit Gopi Krishna whose books on Kuudalini awakening are known throughout the world.

Matter and spirit

Unfortunately, in the process so often happens, the project was wound up almost immediately after I left the ministry evidently consid ered a mild eccentricity not worth pursuing. It has always struck me tragic that we in India, with our unique spiritual and intellectual background in this field, should still be lagging behind. Had the project continued over the last quarter of a cen tury we could well have produced the first great model in the field of Consciousness research.

Albert Einstein's famous remark that "science without religion is blind, religion without science is lame", makes a very important point. Before him, the Cartesian Newtonian-Marxist paradigm of thought postulated an unbridgeable dichotomy between matter and spirit. This concept dominated Western civilization for centuries and did produce spectacular results. However, with the wave of post-modern revolution brought by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, quantum mechanics and extra-galactic cosmology the concept of a now changed considerably Science itself is one in its great creative periods where old barriers are breaking down and some of us - perhaps a trifle optimistically - are beginning to chart the outlines of a convergence between science and spirituality.

Global renaissance

I use the term 'spirituality' advisedly, because religion carries a lot of baggage, much of it positive but some of it negative also, deeply rooted by interfaith organisations around the world including the Temple of Understanding of which I happen to be Chairman, whereas spirituality transcends theological divisions, and cuts across barriers of race, creed, religion and nationality. The seers of all the great faiths of the world have, in their utter most creative minds, awakened are known throughout the world. We need to develop a benign symbiosis whereby alone can become the cornerstone of a new global renaissance, an integration between harmony of conflicting concepts. We need to develop a benign symbiosis between the various elements of our personality - the inner and the outer, the quietist and the activist, the feminine and the masculine and in the broad est dimension between science and spirituality. It is my sincere hope this symposium will help to move in this direction. The need and the importance of a symbiosis whereby alone can become the cornerstone of a new global renaissance, an integration between harmony of conflicting concepts. We need to develop a benign symbiosis between the various elements of our personality - the inner and the outer, the quietist and the activist, the feminine and the masculine and in the broad est dimension between science and spirituality. It is my sincere hope this symposium will help to move in this direction.

(Text of the inaugural address delivered by the author on Wednesday at the International Conference on "Science Beyond - Cosmology, Consciousness and Technology in the Indian Traditions", held in Bangalore)
A symbiosis is an evolved interaction or close living relationship between organisms from different species, usually with benefits to one or both of the individuals involved. Symbioses may be ‘obligate’, in which the relationship between the two species is so interdependent, that each of the organisms is unable to survive without the other or ‘facultative’, in which the two species engage in a symbiotic partnership through choice, and can survive individually. 

When we discuss the relationship between science and spirituality, it is important to distinguish between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is a way of being grounded in a certain experience of reality that is independent of cultural and historical contexts. Religion is the organized attempt to understand spiritual experience, to interpret it with words and concepts, and to use this interpretation as the source of moral guidelines for the religious community. God has no religion.

It is a declaration of 16 values and principles for building a sustainable, just, and peaceful world – a perfect summary of the ethics we need for our time. To conclude my brief discussion of religion, I would like to add a few words about rituals and the notion of the sacred.