PSYCHOANALYSIS, CULTURE, AND RELIGION

essays in honour of

SUDHIR KAKAR

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LET ME TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT HINDU TEMPLES AND RUNAWAY TROLLEYS

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On those several occasions when Sudhir Kakar has been a Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, I have had the opportunity, over the decades, to be his academic colleague. Just as memorably I have played tennis with him, indoors and outdoors in New Delhi and in Berlin (although not yet in Goa or New York where he also migrates these days). And I can testify that he is as graceful, elegant, princely, skillful, and effective on a tennis court as he is in his writings, in his interactions with students, and before the international court of his peers where his writings have helped revive the field of cultural psychology and reinvigorated the psychoanalytically informed study of cultural symbolic products (collective representations such as popular literatures, films, oral traditions, healing practices, spiritual teachings).

The particular collection of scholars (and the quality of their essays) contributing to this celebration of Sudhir Kakar's life and work are evidence of both the global impact of his publications across several disciplines (psychological anthropology, developmental and clinical psychology, South Asian area studies, religion, psychoanalysis, creative writing), and of the love and affection of his friends and colleagues for the person as well as the writer.

If you embrace the universal truth that the knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular, then you are likely to recognize that in life and in scholarship the choice for embodied and situated human beings (such as ourselves) is between incompleteness, incoherence, and emptiness. Such a choice may seem tragic but in any case (tragic or not) it is inevitable.

Given that choice set—incompleteness, incoherence, or emptiness—some scholars select incoherence. With a well-developed sense of the absurd, they seem to assume that it is an intellectual shortcoming or failing to write clearly, cogently, and straightforwardly about things that are inherently ambivalent, poly-semantic, blurred, ambiguous, hybrid, or conflicted. Those who opt for incoherence sometimes seem committed to a principled resistance to the demands of critical reason for clarity and consistency in one's 'representations' of the really real. Indeed, to opt for incoherence is to give up on the very idea of representational fidelity in one's attempt to portray a different way of life. It amounts to a rejection of the idea that one can actually take the perspective of another person or people, and render intelligible their subjective or mental world—their wants, feelings, beliefs, values, and mentally motivated actions. That principled embrace of incoherence is sometimes called radical or sceptical postmodernism.

Faced with the unavoidable choice between incompleteness, incoherence, and emptiness, others opt for emptiness, seeking to find the essential nature of human beings by achieving a distant or purely object-like (and hence dehumanizing) perspective on their subject-matter (which, given the nature of this option, should probably be called their 'object-matter'). To opt for emptiness (what has been called

* This account and interpretation of a great moral legend from Orissa (now Odisha), India, recapitulates and updates an essay written for the Orissa Society of Americas Souvenir, which was distributed to participants at the 40th Annual Convention of the Orissa Society of the Americas, July 2009. I wish to express great gratitude and many thanks to my friends, collaborators, colleagues, students, and patrons in and from Orissa over the years, especially Manomohan Mahapatra, Gagan Dash, Rama Dash, Saradindu Mitra, Laka Misra, Prasanna Hota, Rama Hota, Usha Menon, S.K. Menon, Biranchi Pahan, S.K. Misra, and Nilamani Senapati.
‘the view from afar’) is to make all differences between individuals and groups or languages and all unseen things (thoughts, feelings, wants, desires, values) disappear through analysis, so that all that remains of the really real at the end of the day is a formalism or some very abstract structure. This is sometimes called ‘deep structuralism’: as for example, in the work of the famous French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who once famously took the Oedipus cycle of Greek myths (which recounts the poisoning of kinship relations in a royal line and the devastating consequences of the sins of the father for subsequent generations of children and grandchildren) and ultimately bleached it of psychological and moral content and reduced it to a mathematical formula.

Sudhir Kakar is neither a sceptical postmodernist nor a deep structuralist. He does not seek the view from afar. He writes too clearly and he cares too much about the content, details, and intimacies of what people and peoples do, feel, and say with their words and symbolic actions. Perhaps, he might be described as an affirmative postmodernist or a soulful humanist. Given the choice between incompleteness, incoherency, and emptiness, he has always opted for incompleteness, while staying on the move between different ideological and spiritual perspectives, different world views, different cultural traditions, and different personal voices. His book *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors* is a classic in that regard. His numerous and various attempts to move inside and then outside the minds of everyone from famous Western psychoanalysts (such as Erik Erikson and Sigmund Freud) to revered Hindu saints (such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa) are monumental illustrations of what it means to stay on the move for the sake of a more complete understanding of human beings, that is to say, of varieties of universally spirited yet historically situated persons.

In many ways, Sudhir Kakar is a storyteller (and a very good one at that) and also an interpreter of South Asian popular culture. Hence, the best way I know to honour him is to tell an Indian story and put it to use to draw some lessons about the human condition. The moral legends of Orissa, India (where I have conducted field research in anthropology on and off since 1968) are many; and in my view, one of those stories, really a moral legend, is among the greatest ever told anywhere in the world.

A Great Moral Legend from Orissa

Is it permissible to kill one person in order to save 1,200? What if the one person is an innocent child? What if the one person is your own son? What if the one person is you? What if the 1,200 are not abstract hypothetical persons or unknown strangers living in some faraway land but rather specific people who are known to you and are members of your own in-group or community who trust you and have been loyal to you for many years? Are you for the 1,200 or are you for the one?

For any readers from Orissa the question I just posed (are you for the 1,200 or are you for the one?) will immediately bring to mind the legend of Dharmapada. Dharmapada was a 12-year-old boy whose name means ‘the path to righteousness’ and can also be translated as ‘at the foot of duty’. He was the son of Bisu Maharana, the Divine Architect, who, according to local legend, designed and built the Sun Temple at Konarak. The Divine Architect undertook the building project at the request of the King and under the threat of a mass execution of his workforce if the temple was not completed exactly on time (12 years, not a second longer) by exactly 1,200 artisans (not one person more nor one person less). (Even today ‘Maharana’ is a common surname in the Badhei artisan jati or caste community in Orissa.) In a moment, I will retell the story (although in abbreviated form) based on a version originally told to me in the early 1980s, while I was conducting comparative anthropological research with Dr Manamohan Mahapatra and others on moral reasoning in the old town of Bhubaneswar in Orissa and in Hyde Park, Illinois in the US. And I will try to explain the significance of the Oriya legend of Dharmapada for contemporary research on moral psychology.

So, returning to the original question: ‘Is it permissible to kill one person in order to save 1,200 lives?’ That very abstract or formulaic

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way of putting the question is associated with an influential school of moral philosophy called 'utilitarianism', which is based on the principle that a moral choice ought to aim to minimize aggregate harm and 'do the greatest good for the greatest number'. One lesson I have learned from years of research on moral judgement and reasoning is that despite the appealing simplicity of the utilitarian principle—'1,200 or one?—it is an artificial and dehumanizing way to describe a moral choice. Why? Because that way of formulating the question makes it seem that the moral choice is a 'no-brainer' (1,200 is obviously a bigger number than 1) and is simply a matter of arithmetic, or calculating and maximizing a 'utility', of being able to count the number of lives that would be lost or saved (although, if strictly applied, the calculation may become pretty cumbersome or even immobilizing, especially if a moral choice depends on calculating aggregate utility on a global or universal scale, and requires that a moral decision takes into account all the direct and indirect consequential effects of one's action into an indefinitely long future).

Notice too that the very formulation of that question ('1,200 or one?') presupposes that all individuals and peoples should be treated as morally equivalent, regardless of whom they are. That sparse and narrow framing of the choice forces you to think about the 1,200 and the one as abstract individuals or strangers devoid of specific personal identities and without actual moral careers or histories of benevolent or malevolent conduct. In order to offer an answer, you are required by the slim framing of the question to view the 1,200 and the 1 from such a great distance (that 'view from afar') that you can no longer see the particular features of any of them: you have no choice but to ignore variations in their moral character; you are provided with no information about their past, current, and prospective contributions or value for your community; you have no choice but to overlook how you and they (he or she; old or young) might be related to each other by moral bonds of kinship, guardianship, friendship, patronage, or communal identity and solidarity.

Recent research in moral psychology reveals that ordinary folk have a far more complex (because of being true to life) view of their moral obligations and are not consistently abstract, numeric, and utilitarian in their judgements. Consider the following version of the so-called trolley problem, which is a type of hypothetical question that has become quite popular in contemporary research in moral psychology.2

'A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people but a bystander can throw a switch that will turn the trolley onto a side track, where it will kill only one person.' This is called 'the bystander condition'. When the choice is so described, most people in the world who can count will answer that it is 'permissible' for the bystander to throw the switch, killing one person in order to save five lives.

It is not entirely clear what ordinary folk mean by the concept 'permissible' when presented with the trolley problem in psychological experiments or whether they mean just one thing. Psychologists tend not to be linguists or take much interest in the implicit or tacit semantics or pragmatics of the verbal questions they ask as long as they see some pattern in the responses they get. Nevertheless, the English word 'permissible' might mean any of the following things: 'permitted by law'; 'not punishable by either God, nature, conscience, or other human beings'; 'not damaging to your reputation'; 'not morally incorrect'; 'likely to be viewed with approval by God, nature, conscience, or other human beings'. What we do know is that most people say that the bystander in the bystander condition has 'permission' to throw the switch.

Now consider a second version of the trolley problem. 'A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people but a man who is standing on a footbridge over the track can push another man (whose body is large and heavy enough to stop the train) off the bridge, so as to stop the train and kill only that one person.' This is called 'the footbridge condition'. When the choice is so described, many people

2The 'trolley problem' thought-experiment was apparently originally devised by the philosopher Philippa Foot, although as we shall see, analogous thought-experiments exist in the oral traditions of ancient civilizations such as India. Many variant forms of the thought-experiment have been devised by experimental psychologists. See Philippa Foot, *Virtue and Vice: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Even Wikipedia has an entry on 'The Trolley Problem', which is one way to access some of the literature on the topic.
in the world (even those who can count) do not think it is 'permissible' to push the man onto the track, killing one person in order to save five lives.

What is going on here? Is this apparent inconsistency of choice in the two runaway trolley situations a problem with everyday moral judgement, a failure of, or affect-driven irrational interference with, moral logic and human rationality in the application of the utilitarian abstract counting principle? Or could it be that the inconsistency is merely apparent and signifies a problem of a different and deeper sort, perhaps a failure of utilitarian moral theories to understand the true nature of moral judgement in everyday life? Some lessons I learned from my research in Orissa and from the legend of Dharmapada may help us answer those questions.

Here in a narrative nutshell is the legend of Dharmapada, as I first heard it being told in the Old Town of Bhubaneswar.

As I recall, Sudhir Kakar not only loves to analyse (and produce) cultural symbolic creations. He has a special fondness for collective representations, which begin this way: Let me tell you a story. So let me tell you a story.

Long ago, King Narasimhadeva I employed the Divine Architect, Bisu Maharana, to construct the Konarak Sun Temple. For astrological reasons, both the selection of the site of the temple (at a remote location near the Bay of Bengal on the coast of Orissa) and the timing and nature of the construction process had to be exact (1,200 artisans working alone and in isolation must build the temple in exactly 12 years). Indeed, their lives were on the line: according to the conditions set by the King, the risk of failure of the project would be the execution of the entire workforce. The Divine Architect, confident of his abilities and the skills of his 1,200 artisans, took up the challenge; thus, Bisu Maharana left his family behind for 12 years and he and his workmen went into isolation at the remote construction site.

On the night before his departure, the Divine Architect’s wife became pregnant and nine months later she gave birth to a son. The son, Dharmapada, was a prodigy, a genius who quickly and easily mastered all the books in the family library. (He was, so-to-speak, the ‘Mozart of architecture.’) He grew up hearing majestic tales about his great father, the Divine Architect. He longed to meet his adored yet absent father but of course, that was forbidden by the orders and conditions of the King. Nearly 12 years went by before his mother would allow him to leave the family home and venture off to seek his father at the distant temple site by the sea. As he set off on his journey to Konarak, Dharmapada’s mother gave the boy two marks of family identity to carry with him so that his father would recognize him—her wedding ring and a distinctive fruit from the family garden.

After a long trek, Dharmapada arrived at the construction site and saw the grand Sun Temple. He also saw several of the artisans. Much to his surprise, they were despondent. They told him that the temple was complete except for the capstone, which kept falling off. There was a mysterious and disastrous problem with the design of the temple, which the Divine Architect had been unable to fix or even detect. Unless the problem could be solved by midnight, all of them, including the Divine Architect, would be executed by the King.

The boy walked around the temple and quickly spotted a minor and easily correctable flaw. 'Take me to the tent of the Divine Architect', he exclaimed! The artisans brought the boy to the tent of the Divine Architect where the great Bisu Maharana was going out of his mind trying to figure out what went wrong. 'This boy says he can fix the temple', the artisans announced, thereby sending the Divine Architect into a rage over the arrogance of a child presuming to tell him how to design a temple. He dragged the boy by the ear to the temple site. The boy pointed to the flaw, which the Divine Architect immediately recognized and then corrected. The capstone was successfully placed on the temple and the work was complete, on time.

First there was great celebration of success but then slowly an anxious and dreadful silence fell over the crowd of artisans. One of the men approached the Divine Architect and said: 'Sir, it is great that we completed the temple on time but if the King finds out that we did this with the help of this boy he will kill us anyway. There is but one way out of this dilemma. It is 1,200 or one. The boy must be killed; and since you are our leader and the Divine Architect, you must kill him.'

'But he is an innocent child', the Divine Architect averred, horrified by the proposal. 'Nevertheless, sir, it remains 1,200 or one.' The spokesman for the artisans impressed on the Divine Architect the inexorable utilitarian moral calculation and urged him to kill the boy. Reluctantly, the Divine Architect agreed to end the life of the one person so that 1,200 lives might be saved.

Night-time arrived. With blade in hand, Bisu Maharana entered Dharmapada’s tent intending to kill him. Standing over the boy’s bed, he slowly raised the knife and was about to slay the sleeping child when he noticed the wedding ring and the fruit from the family garden. He realized that this brilliant boy was his son; and he awakened Dharmapada and embraced him with joy and tears. Father and son were united to their mutual delight.

The Divine Architect, together with Dharmapada, approached the 1,200 artisans. 'This is my son Dharmapada', the Divine Architect proudly told his artisans, in anticipation of a great celebration. Yet, the 1,200 were unmoved by this discovery. They pressed forward with their utilitarian logic. 'A moment ago
when you did not know the precise identity of this boy, you were willing to kill him to save us all. Be consistent Sir! What difference does it make if he is your son? The fact is it is still 1,200 or one! Distraught, the Divine Architect became immobilized in the jaws of this moral dilemma. He began to go mad, damned if he did and damned if he did not.

'Basaba badheire déyee, na purare Déyee' is the famous Oriya expression (here written in English orthography), which in English translation means: 'Are you for the 1,200 artisans or are you for your son?'

Notice, quite significantly, that the Oriya formulation is generically ambiguous, permitting at least these two interpretations. Does it mean that one is faced with a simple (and 'no-brainer') formulaic utilitarian choice between 1,200 lives and one life, which is a formulation that demands its own self-evident utilitarian conclusion; or, alternatively, does it mean that one is faced with a real moral conflict between two different role-based obligations, a dilemma in which Bisu Maharana is forced to choose between his protective occupational duties as the Divine Architect towards his artisans and his protective familial duties as a father towards his son?

Some of my own research on moral reasoning in the old town of Bhubaneswar suggests that doing one's role-based duty is a high moral ideal among many groups in Orissa, and that an ethics of community and an ethics of divinity play a significant part in everyday moral reasoning. My colleagues and I have proposed a 'Big Three of Morality' (Autonomy, Community, and Divinity) and have suggested that a utilitarian calculus focused exclusively on the assessment of aggregate harms and benefits for abstract individuals is not the only way to sensibly reason about what is right and wrong.3

So how does the great story of Dharmapada come to an end? Over the years, I have discovered that most of my American students are unable to predict the conclusion of the Oriya legend on the basis of the plot summary I just provided. They almost never anticipate the final dramatic scene in the story. Dharmapada, recognizing his father's genuine moral conflict and observing his father's incapacitating psychological distress, climbs to the top of the Sun Temple and jumps off. He voluntarily engages in a sacrificial suicide in order to save his father from having to make an immoral or sinful choice between two types of violations of duty—a situation in which you are damned if you do and damned if you do not because whichever of the two sins you commit (failing in your duty to your son or failing in your duty to your artisan workers), you will suffer karmic consequences. In the end, the virtuous soul of this 12-year-old boy goes to heaven and is made sacred; and Dharmapada, who is on the path to righteousness, becomes the legendary heroic Oriya exemplar of a dutiful son.

I recognize the temptations some psychoanalytically inclined interpreters might experience given some of the siren images in this story. If one is in love with the hermeneutic potentials inherent in the Freudian ideas of phallic rivalry and the Oedipus complex, one might feel an irresistible desire to view the son's sacrifice as some kind of defence against his own capacity to so easily usurp his father's position. The boy had already had his mother to himself for nearly 12 years; he even bore her wedding ring. And while Bisu Maharana might be the Divine Architect, the boy managed to upstage his father (who could not keep his capstone up) by finding a flaw in his designs. (The Sun Temple, I should mention, is renowned for its erotic sculpture, although no one really knows the reason for the erotic themes.) Nevertheless, I will leave that type of interpretive key in the hands of some brilliant psychoanalyst of the vicissitudes of erotic desire. I myself wish only to make one final point with this brief retelling of this great moral legend; and it is

3See, for example, Richard A. Shweder, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Joan G. Miller, 'Culture and Moral Development', in Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb (eds), The Emergence of Morality in Young Children (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 1–83; and Richard A. Shweder, Nancy C. Much, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Lawrence Park, 'The "Big Three" of Morality (Autonomy, Community, and Divinity) and the "Big Three" Explanations of Suffering', in Allan M. Brandt and Paul Rozin (eds), Morality and Health (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 119–69. Work in moral psychology on duty-based, role-based, or in-group community-based judgements by Jon Haidt, Jacob Hickman, Lene Arnett Jensen, Joan G. Miller, and Nancy Much are all illustrative of this mode of moral thought.
about the cognitive (rather than emotive) content of everyday moral judgments and the utilitarian calculus.

In conclusion, let us imagine a couple of other variations on the trolley problem. In the standard footbridge condition of the trolley problem, we are not actually asked if the heavy sturdy man on the bridge should sacrifice himself to save the five strangers on the trolley. One suspects most people would say ‘No’. They might admire him for doing so. They might wonder how he could be so superhuman as to do so; or perhaps alternatively, they might wonder if he was just out of his mind in some way. But they would say ‘No’.

But let us imagine a version of the trolley problem called ‘the Dharmapada condition’. ‘A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people but a very sturdy 12-year-old boy whose body is heavy enough to stop the train is standing on a footbridge over the track next to a man who is also large and sturdy. Both see what is going to happen and assesses the situation. The sturdy man himself does nothing. As for the boy, instead of pushing the older sturdy man off the bridge he decides to himself jump off the bridge and in front of the trolley, thereby stopping the trolley, saving the lives of five strangers, and dying in the process.’

Is it ‘permissible’ for the boy to jump to his death, rather than opt for one of the two other alternatives, doing nothing or pushing the older sturdy man off the bridge? Here as elsewhere, the word ‘permissible’ does not quite do justice to the moral character and complexity of the situation. But at the very least, whatever the complex emotions that must have been experienced at that moment by the older sturdy man who witnessed the boy jump but did himself elect to seek the greatest good for the greatest number and decide to jump off the footbridge to save the five lives, we at least can be filled with awe and greatly admire the boy for his act of heroic sacrifice, even if we do not believe he went to heaven. (What complex emotions would that older sturdy man experience in the face of the boy’s sacrifice: astonishment, dismay, embarrassment, shame, guilt, sadness, remorse, resentment?)

Now try this variation on the trolley problem. Let us call it the ‘Oriya role-based obligation condition’. A trolley carrying five strangers is heading down a track where you see your son, or your daughter, or your wife, or your husband, or your closest friend in life trapped on the track (with his or her foot caught in the rail). You can see that the trolley would kill him or her unless you throw a switch that would divert the trolley onto a side track where it would head over a cliff killing those on board the trolley. Is it permissible to throw the switch? Given that hypothetical my guess is that many people would say ‘Yes’ (I would throw the switch and it is permissible to do so), although one might find some revealing variations in judgement between individuals and groups. And I would speculate that liberal cosmopolitan utilitarian individualists (those who imagine that social life consists entirely of a global space populated by citizens of the world governed by a universal rule of law) would be somewhat more likely to say that it is not okay to throw the switch. One does wonder: Would they actually stick to the abstract or formal utilitarian principle and judge that it is immoral to throw the switch sending the trolley carrying five strangers over the cliff in order to save the life of their own daughter (or their closest friend in life)? If so, are they right?

That second example brings me closer to the core message I wish to draw from the story of Dharmapada. What we are asked to do by the psychologists who compare responses to the footbridge condition with responses to the bystander condition is explain why most people say ‘No’ in the footbridge condition (do not push the one person off the footbridge in order to save the lives of five) while in the bystander condition they say, ‘Yes, throw the switch and kill the one to save the five’. One increasingly fashionable interpretation among psychologists is to view the utilitarian calculus as the proper norm for moral reasoning in both situations (proper in the sense of being the way any person who decides things for good reasons should reason) and to suggest that the bystander situation allows human moral rationality to go forward unimpeded, while the footbridge condition elicits an emotional reaction that gets in the way of moral rationality (with reason and emotion in competition with each other in some region of the brain).

I would like to close this chapter (which is meant to honour the life and work of Sudhir Kakar by providing a brief exegesis of the legend of
Dharmapada) with an alternative interpretation, namely, that whatever emotions that arise in the footbridge condition are themselves derivative or dependent upon modes of thought analogous to South Asian varieties of duty-based or role-based moral reasoning. It is the type of moral reasoning that can occur where duty-based or role-based interpersonal social norms are in place and activated (the type of implicit social norms that keep two people who enter into a duty-based moral relationship simply by virtue of occupying the same subway platform from each having to worry that they might be shoved in front of an oncoming train). It is precisely the thinness or even absence of any duty-based or role-based obligation to be the protector or benefactor or guardian of some abstract person off there on some side track that turns the bystander condition into a situation where the main norm that operates is a mathematical one (not a moral one) and amounts to little more than the self-evident truth that five is greater than one. In other words, the bystander condition and the footbridge condition are different from each other in relevant ways. On that footbridge duty-based or role-based moral obligations are in play, while in the bystander condition moral judgement has become so attenuated that it amounts to little more than being able to count.

COLOURS OF VIOLENCE IN MERIAH COUNTRY

ethno-political conflict in the Kondhmals

Usha Menon

On the night of 23 August 2008, which, as it happens, was Janamashtami Divas, the Hindu holy day commemorating the birth of the god Krishna, Swami Laxmananda Saraswati, an 84-year-old Hindu renouncer, along with four of his followers, was murdered at his Jalashpeta ashram, in the Kondhmals, by a group of 40–50 armed men. He had been previously warned through a letter purportedly written by Maoists, an extremist group active in this area of the eastern Indian state of Orissa (now Odisha), that he would be killed if he did not stop his ‘communal’ activities—the term ‘communal’ here being used in its rather pejorative Indian sense, and implying, as Kakar has suggested, an ‘exclusive attachment to one’s own ethnic or religious community’ and ‘an active hostility against other communities that share its geographical and political space’. The local police were aware of this particular letter but no action was taken to protect the Swami and his followers.

The present chapter examines the issues underlying the ethno-political violence that flared up in Kondhal district, Orissa, during