

# From Television To A Spirituality of Liberation

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**T**he Book of Esther opens up with an account of a banquet, the Persian king Ahasuerus hosted for all his dingitaries. A glimpse of the king's wealth and the taste of good food were offered to the common people of Susa as a privilege from the king. As a fitting finale to the banquet, a royal command was issued to 'produce' queen Vashti so that her beauty could be displayed to the audience. She refused to comply, with far-reaching consequence not only in the palace, but throughout the kingdom.

The narrative introduces a hierarchically structured class, where social ethos and self-understanding revolve around the king; the king is not only the point of reference, but also the 'sacred core'. Every element in this class is knit together around this 'sacred core', who defines what is social relationship, human dignity and liberty, and the possibilities and modes of personal fulfilment. This class resists any identification with anything outside since that might deprive them of their sacred core. Certain criteria are legitimized exclusively on entertainment utility, and the 'sacred core' orders conformity to it. Integrity and tolerance rest upon this utilitarianism. Anyone outside this legitimization is 'disorderly and lawless.' To those outsiders justice is offered as a favour and concession. The banquet is a ritualistic initiation of hegemony over the experience of every individual in the kingdom.

**Ritual as a Medium:** Throughout history man has been at pains to comprehend the complexity of his experience. The complexity not only eluded his grip, but also permeated into even the minute realm of his perception of reality. Moreover, man tried to understand the whole of his identity in relation to the perception of his experience.

The complexity of human experience requires to be understood in the context of the relativity of experience. Man participates in his experience in space and time. The involvement of space and time makes each experience unique and unrepeatable, and constitutes towards the formation and validation of memory. Further, since man is capable of situating his experience in the milieu of a comprehensive whole,<sup>1</sup> he has a praxis to assess and establish a

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dialogue between experience and the reality around him. Yet, the inexpressibility of his experience persists. However, inspite of this inexpressibility, man cannot but communicate his experience, and he tries to perceive others' experience.

Human experience is qualitative<sup>2</sup> primarily because it is in constant dialogue with dynamic reality. This dialogue, in the context of a community, provides guidelines for understanding, analyzing and internalizing not only reality but also experience. On this dialogue social concepts are constructed, developed and verified. This process plays a significant function in legitimizing certain criteria and recognizing them as absolutes. This referral point not only compels us to expel everything that are self-destructive, but also leads to the formation of self-awareness by transcending meaning within the context of every day experience.

Human experience is a mystery. In order to be communicated, this mystery needs appropriate symbols. These symbols, rituals, for instance, are reminders of man's mortality and limits, while also functioning as dynamic motivation to transcend mortality and limit in order to make a common dream come true. They encourage to ask, challenge and question the loyalties, and criticise each other and themselves.<sup>3</sup> Hence there is not only a realignment of life centered around self-giving, but also these symbols heal the wounds of unpleasant encounters. This attempt to find coherent, overall and consistent pattern underlying experience is also a collective yearning to transcend the immediacy of the now and the here.

**TV Mediation of Experience.** Whichever be the media available to society, it influences the societal understanding of experience. The media regulate and mediate between reality and perception and assigns to each member of the society a place or slot in this mediated reality. Hence, media mediates between the reality and contemporary human experience and has an implication for the future.

As has been in the case of any media innovation, TV has ever since its inception, been subjected to a wide array of criticism. The most serious charge against TV is that it is here to order our lives. In industrial countries, TV claims an average of 30 to 68 viewing hours per week. That means before one attains the age of 18 years, he/she would have spent a minimum of 20000 hours in front of a TV set.<sup>4</sup> This problem is not confined to the developed countries. With the new development paradigms of catching up with and easy access to satellites and the cable network, India and other developing countries too have fallen a victim to this media invasion. Every hour spent in front of a TV set is going to dramatically restructure the society.

Peter Horsefield observes that TV watching turns out to be a substitute for rituals, abstinence from which inflicts a guilt feeling for not being up-to-date with the reality.<sup>5</sup> This reality is perceived as devoid of sacrifice, limitation, or discipline. Moreover, TV becomes the security and guarantor of the system in the turmoil of breakdowns. This centralised rituals reduce the meaning of experience into immediate gratification achieved 'here and now'. This egoistic gratification of the urge for materialistic acquisition leaves hardly any scope for responding to irregularities and injustices. Anyone striving for justice and equality is the cause of breakdown and TV is quick to assure that the custodians of law and justice have brought these 'anti-social elements' under control.

This ritual invades the primacy of the viewer's experience and alienates the viewer from his/her praxis. For instance, such concepts as freedom, intensity, responsibility, etc., are extracted out of their experiential contexts and associated with the consumption orientation. Such notions as dangerous, nasty, etc., are something to be aspired for. This creates ambiguity in the viewer's perception of reality, and the autonomy of his own experience is invalidated, that is, the TV-regulated experiences turn out to be interventions from 'beyond' into the viewer's situation, and effectively deny the viewer the autonomy for self-determination.

Through supporting a particular symbolic system, TV interprets and explains experiences through the presentation of visuals and narratives. These visuals and narratives determine the pattern for what is 'normal' and 'acceptable' behaviour.<sup>6</sup> And any thing that fails to fit into this mould is void. The plurality of experiences are reduced into a single universal model; experiences shrink into abstract concepts without any cohesion. And this experience fails to go beyond the illuminated screen catering only to entertainment and humour.

The application of these symbols offers a picture of reality, basic values and identity. This presentation is authentic as normal. This normality portrays the 'right' social image, roles, standard of needs, human dignity and relationship and on this criteria legitimizes certain cultures and historical events. TV, thus, does not expose what the reality is, but how reality functions and what good this reality is. This reality is functional now and here and, hence, is a negation of both the past and the future.

On the other hand this ritual initiates the viewer into a reality defined and determined by consumption, effectively exploiting man's search for perfection. Consumption is the instant answer for man's search, and without this one simply doesn't make it up to perfection. This answer is the means for healing wounded encounters, to attain a self-awareness and hence prominence over others. This so-called

ideal relationship depends upon the 'right social image' one can assume through acquiring the 'right' product.' Hence, the relationships, as far as TV is concerned, are as stable as the prominence of a commodity in a competitive market.

Playfair observes that TV is a powerful medium for a few to colonize and distort the direct experience of millions, substituting the same with 'surrogated' indirect experience.<sup>7</sup> The 'distortion of direct experience' is evident when it comes to portraying the struggle of the subjugated for equality. TV is quick to sensationalize the 'second-hand experience, bombarding the viewer with the same in the comfort and security of his/her home. This helps the viewer to identify comfortably with such realities as the sufferings and deprivations which ask for his/her concern. The viewer grows passive to this second-hand experience and justifies the institutionalized violence of the system as the normal solution to the conflict. This is reaffirmed with the news readers' assurance that the bureaucracy has swung into action bringing the situation under control. This process not only negates the experience of the subjugated, but also creates a culture of intolerance against any structural change.

TV provides 'the right social image' with which the viewer enters into a vicarious relationship, which ultimately transforms itself into a criterion. With this criterion, violence and anti-social activities are justified as legitimate means for a cause. These images provide the explanation for what is good, right, admirable, evil and to emancipate reality imitating them. This imitation of the images distracts the viewer from consciously apprehending his experience. In other words, the viewer identifies who he is and what he wants out of life according to the projected role models with hardly any sensitivity to his/her daily experiences.

'Let my people go'. Ultimately, negating the past and the future, TV refuses any vital reference conducive to transcendence. The objective motive offered by TV promotes a life without transcending the present. Rather, it creates a competitive egotism which provides a false sense of power to the viewer. This sense of power encourages him to live with the status quo and defend it. The very characteristic of this status quo is that it privatizes experience. Those collectively experienced realities become the mode of entertainment and humour. Identifying with the human struggle becomes a private affair that is confined to one's TV room. Above all, the mode and the response to human deprivation are determined by a powerful few. The end-product is not different from what Eagleton identifies with the cultural effects of capitalistic monopoly. The capitalistic domination is brought out through dominant cultural norms and values. This domination privatizes experience and severs off the dialogue between

the experience and the images that regulate social life. This process culminates in the passive submission of the powerless and prevents any opportunity for the formation of 'counter ideologies'.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, a spirituality of emancipation becomes inevitable in this context of this 'colonization of experience' that never says enough to acquisitions, competitions and the consequent fear of failure and despair, slavery to structure, the social indifference to unjust exploitation and subjugation, and the alienation into legitimizing destructive behaviour.

Experience is integral to this spirituality since, the former is both the referral point as well as the element of emancipation. This makes spirituality dynamic and inclusive, struggling to comprehend the complexity of human experience, realized in relation to a 'lived experience of God in history'.<sup>9</sup> The human experience of God integrates the whole of human history into the transcendence of meaning and contributes towards an inward search, not isolation, but as part of a wider societal entity. This search supports spiritual expressions through such symbols as rituals, viewing emancipation not only as the gift of God but also as the very nature of God,<sup>10</sup> achieved through consciously striving for it. Thus, the experience of God becomes integral to humanity in this striving for emancipation.

## Conclusion

From the first chapter of Esther there unfolds gradually another story, the story of a powerless community. This story is of the self-perception of their experience, of life emerging out of the memories of subjugation, and of transcending experience in response to God's nature (4:12ff). This account of transcending makes the past experience intelligible today. It is this account that makes this community distinct and their emancipation unique. It is the vivid memory of possibilities and potentials realized in solidarity with God. Solidarity with God is manifested as solidarity with the people of common experience, with the conviction that God is on the side of the powerless.

This is also the story of emancipation into the autonomy of 'destiny, history and freedom' ritualized in the feast of Purim. The feast of Purim is the commemoration of the past and a reflection on the present life context. This derives meaning out of experience and a symbolic initiation into the realm of God's grace and personal fulfilment. This ritual reinforces the conviction that God's nature is an inevitable motivation for emancipation.

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