The Kwest for Kosmic Komedy
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Readers, noticing our new design of this page, will wonder, What's happening at our Hindu family newspaper? Don't worry. Be happy. Your editors just wanted a new word-canvas. There are other new things in this issue. Our page one flag carries a re-tooled message announcing HINDUISM TODAY'S purpose: "Affirming the Dharma and Recording the Modern History of Nearly a Billion Members of a Global Religion." Also, there are some classy new fonts acquired for our women's and youth page features. Perhaps most importantly, we inaugurate the life and adventures of Karma Kat, our very own comic strip character, which our publisher will tell you more about on page three and which you can see for yourself.

Karma Kat and the Kwest for Kosmic Komedy is important because Hinduism has everything in abundance except money and humor (it has a lot, but never enough). I have it on good authority that certain repressive governments frown on individuals printing their own currency, but they know, deep down, that humor is worth more than money. If you doubt this, just hand a Rs. 5 note or a $1 bill to a taxi driver in your city and watch him laugh, leaving you standing in the rain with the useless paper while he takes his valuable cents of humor for a free ride.

Not that the dharma has no funny bone. There is in fact a rich Hindu comic tradition. That it is mostly ignored may be due to the fact that India and its cultural/philosophical gifts are often approached with solemnity, reverence, even awe. So the playful parodies perish, whacky wisdom is withheld, while mirth and merriment are maligned. This is a loss for us all. In his Anatomy of Satire, Gilbert Highest noted, "If you want to understand any age, you ought to read not only its heroic and philosophical books, but its comic and satirical books." In Indian aesthetics, comedy is called hasya-rasa, and is one of nine "tastes" of which others are heroism, fear tranquility and love.

According to my Theory of Real Levity, humor comes from two opposite sources in the human psyche, one defensive and the other offensive (some people hold that all humor is offensive, but they don't count, or if they do it's never beyond one.) As a defense, humor provides a mechanism for dealing with difficulties, one that is cheaper than Freudian analysis and faster than greased palms (for those unfamiliar with this oblique reference, in India it is traditional to grease all palms so thieves won't steal your coconuts, or in order to get hold of some coconuts yourself). The human spirit, you already know, laughs at its fears, pokes fun at its demons, and pokes puns at its enemies. In India, people who do this professionally are called pundits; those who try but fail are called pandits. By some strange alchemy of the brain - some neural necromancy allowing the left half to not know what the right half is doing - pain is turned to pleasure. Defensive humor has a million faces but a single purpose - to make us feel a little better in the face of a grim existence or a gruel world.

Offensive humor comes from the upper chakras. It is more joyous, more farce-seeing. It is self-reflective, pure in spirit, revealing of some underlying truth. In India, these two kinds of humor are defined as laughing at others and laughing at oneself. In the West they are called satire and humor. Of Indian humor, Lee Siegel, who spent five years studying it, says, "At the core of Indian comedy there is an irony, a revelation of the humanness of the gods and the divinity of human beings. The human comedy has two heroes - the fool and the trickster. The divine comedy recapitulates the human. The trickster and fool and find their wholeness embedded in consciousness as the laughing child, and that child is defied as Krishna. As that God has been examined for the ways in which He reveals the seriousness of humor and its capacity to affirm life, so Siva has been invoked to indicate the humor of seriousness - the ludicrousness of all human endeavors in the face of death." Both Krishna and Siva sanctify humor, but in different ways. Krishna giggles and teases, Siva roars with the ascetic's scoff. Either way, their laughter links heaven and earth.

If you think about it, this is unique in the ever-so-somber world of spirituality. Where else is there laughter in heaven, even among the Gods? In the Semitic faiths, there's hardly a smile in the sacred texts, and heaven is seldom viewed as having a lighthearted side. Yet laughter is so wonderfully human, so natural and somehow necessary for a full and healthy life, whether here or hereafter. It seems right that the Divine would have immense capacity for the joy and fun He built into His creation.

This not-so-serious side of Hinduism is evident among saints and stages. Some

consider it a warrant of egolessness and spiritual attainment, for the greatest souls often have the finest sense of humor. Ramakrishna was full of playfulness and facetious stories. Many of our outstanding swamis today are card-carrying punsters, tickling us with words until we weep with laughter, smiling that know-it-all grin that tells us they know something we don't. Why not? They are liberated, unrepressed, done with sorrow. You'd be happy, too!

In literature, both sacred and secular, Hindu humor is rampant. The Rig - Veda rishis jested about our ordinary human state of mind, full of its endless imaginings and untethered meanderings: "Our thoughts wander in all directions and many are the ways of men: the cartwright hopes for accidents, the physician for the cripple and the priest for a rich patron. For the sake of Spirit, O Mind, let go of these wandering thoughts." X.112.1. In the same Veda (X.121) there are clever metaphysical puns in the Hymn to Who that presage Abbot and Costello's "Who's on first?" In folktales, there is, of course, the magical Panchatantra, one of the world's greatest collections of fables, filled with humanness, repartee, jest and jocularity - all in the name of learning about life. As the true story goes, a Kashmiri king who lived over 2,000 years ago had three blockhead sons. He found they could learn best through illustrations, and gathered master story-tellers to weave entertaining parables about friendship, money, bad conduct and such. Children love these, and if readers have never encountered them, you should. One of the finest translations from the Sanskrit is by Arthur Ryder in an edition by the University of Chicago Press.

The stories of Birbal are another source. Raja Birbal (1528-1583) was a poor but witty brahmin writer who became one of Emperor Akbar's favorites. The tension between Hindus and Muslims in Akbar's non-Hindu court was real, and Birbal apparently had the ability to soften it with levity. Their comic battle was always waged at the expense of his Muslim brothers, though sometimes Akbar himself was the target. One day Akbar lamented to his friend Birbal, "As emperor, I am allowed to meet only wise and learned men. Show me the ten greatest fools in the kingdom." Birbal brought him a collection of morons, figures typical of the fool in Indian literature: the first man, riding a horse, carried a bundle of firewood on his head, reasoning that the bundle would be dropped it in the dark under a tree, but in a clearing where the light would make his efforts easier. Birbal brought eight such fools to the king who reminded him that he had asked for ten. "There are ten," the trickster laughed, "including you and I - the two biggest fools of all - you for giving me such a ludicrous order, and me for obeying it!"

That, dear readers, is our belated offering of cheerfulness for the year 5092,

Pramoda, which means "delightful or bringing joy." Remember to laugh each day, with others and at ourself. Enveloping us completely, laughter can be an embrace with Loving Existence, a self-transcendent sharing of the essence of things, of Brahman's inmost heart, our innermost Self. Humor is like God. You cannot explain it. Either you get it or you don't.

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