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Chashma-e-Hunar

By: Vidya Rao

In the first of an occasional column on the arts, artists and the creative life, Vidya Rao writes of her choice for the name of the column and what it signifies.

Chashma-e-Hunar: The eternal spring of creativity and art. That is what I choose to call this column. I will try in these conversations, to speak about the arts and artists and the creative life. And I will weave into these conversations, understandings I have received from gurus, known and unknown, from books, and indeed from my own engagement with these magical worlds.

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I use the word 'speak'; I do not say that I will 'write'. And that is a conscious choice. To think of this column as an act of speech, of conversation, is to bring into what is in fact (and has to be) a written piece, a sense of the oral, of the informal, of conversation and story-telling and indeed of the way in which I myself received *taleem* from my gurus. It is to bring into this written column, a sense of the old style of sharing understandings and imparting knowledge that took place in long, somewhat unstructured sessions. Open-ended, filled with anecdotes and stories and histories that sat easily and comfortably (and often a bit mysteriously-what did she/he mean by that?) alongside the handing down, *seena-ba-seena*, heart to heart, of old compositions, special techniques. And the unravelling of the secrets of the way ragas moved and danced in the voice. It is to also bring into the written text, a sense of a conversation-in-the-making, something in process still, something never fully finalised, open-ended, perhaps even slightly meandering, a constant outpouring. It is to tap (and there's a word for you!) into a sense of the unexpected wonder and mystery of suddenly stumbling upon insights, as wandering through a forested mountain landscape one might encounter a spring of sparkling water.

Let me turn to the title of this column; allow me to share with you the many reasons why I choose this title.

First the title itself: *Chashma-e-hunar*. The language here is Urdu, and these words draw from Persian vocabulary. I could have chosen a title in English-after all that is my language too! A language (along with Hindi) in which I was fortunate to receive an education, and in which I continue to read, study, and write. It is the language that I, as has every once colonised subject, have made into my own-a language cooking within the alchemical cauldron of the sounds, shapes, grammar, syntax, ideas, histories of the myriad languages and cultures of the subcontinent.

I could have chosen a title that uses words and concepts from the rich streams of Sanskrit. For these too inform my thinking, my everyday speech; these too are the beloved supporting pillars of my imagination, speech and art.

The Title, An Urdu Phrase

But I choose an Urdu phrase. And I remember at this moment, the brilliant (and quite maverick) philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi saying: Urdu is the vocabulary of Farsi running on the grammar wheels of Sanskrit! What a wonderful way of speaking about a language and the way in which language is never static-it moves, it runs!-it mixes vocabularies, quirks of grammar, underlying concepts of structure, meaning/multiple meanings, syntax... to create another way of speaking, writing, and indeed, I think, an agility of thinking. I choose Urdu to remind ourselves that we-Indians certainly, but all humans-are a rich, delightful mix of a thousand spaces, places, ideas, even genetic make-up.... We contain a myriad histories and stories. And now I remember Bulle Shah's ecstatic 'not knowing', Rumi's *nami danam*-the complete dissolving of self into a wonderful everything/nothing vastness--*fana*. *Fana*-an idea and concept that is articulated, equally beautifully, if somewhat differently, is held in the Advaitic 'neti, neti', and the Buddhist concepts of *pratitya samutpada* and *shunyata* or dependent arising and emptiness.

Let me think about the phrase. First, the word 'hunar'. This word, drawing from the Persian, means art, creativity, artistry, skill. It suggests the thing (art) and also the practice/performance of art. It points to the fact that creativity and skill, and the flow of these is rooted in painstaking work, unending practice. It suggests that you cannot separate being from doing. Hunar is possible only after years-many would believe lifetimes-of deep and disinterested practice. It is the transformation of 'things learned' into a kind of deep and

living muscle memory, an embodied wisdom.

A Natural Spring

Chashma is the Urdu word (also derived from the Persian) for a natural spring. It is also glossed as 'fountain'. But I choose not to use this latter meaning here, because often 'fountain' can suggest a man-made device. And that to me is not the meaning I want to tap into. Though, the shape of a natural spring bubbling up is, indeed, very often fountain-like. Indeed, Kabir uses the word *favvara*, fountain, when he speaks of the seemingly contradictory states held in the tiny ghat/mud pot of the human body-soul:

Ya ghat bheetar anhad bajai, yahi me uthat favvara

In this little mud pot, the primordial Silence; in it, too the bubbling fountain of manifest life

Chashma is spontaneously bubbling, flowing water-there's a sense here of delight, aesthetic delight, that I might call *rasa swadan*. It is constantly moving, it is never stagnant, as indeed is the mind and heart of the artist. These waters that spontaneously spring forth (literally-there's that word again!) from the heart of the earth are the epitome of purity and they have healing power. Indeed as art has the power to heal all who create or come in contact with it.

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But, while the chashma bubbles forth spontaneously, this does not happen without deep work! I find it interesting that pure, flowing, healing water dances forth from the solid foundations of the earth. This parallels the way the seeming spontaneous, effortless flights of creativity are rooted in the solidity and patience of *taleem* and *riaz*. It cannot be otherwise. And here I would like to turn to the story of another spring called the Hippocrene that tells us of the bursting forth of fluid poetry and art from the wounding of matter. The story tells us that when Perseus killed the Medusa (and today we won't go into how such myths speak of the terror of patriarchal societies of the feminine that needs to be slain/banished/ domesticated by the 'hero'), the blood that spurted forth from her throat became a winged horse, Pegasus. As Pegasus spread his great wings and soared away towards the heavens, his hoof struck the stony barren ground of Mount Helicon. From the 'wound' in the body of the mountain gushed forth a spring, Hippocrene, the eternal and living source of poetry and art.

I remember another story here. The story of the creation of the ravanahatta, a simple string instrument played by 'folk' musicians in Rajasthan. Ravanahatta, meaning Ravana's hand, is a string instrument played with a bow. The story goes that Ravana's deep meditation on Shiva (inevitably, to gain a boon from him) was met, despite all efforts with little success. Ravana sang Shiva's praises-and legend has it he was a great musician-but to no avail. He lifted Mount Kailash, but that too didn't help. Finally Ravana pulled out his own veins and nerves and created a musical instrument out of them. Some versions of this story say, he used veins and nerves from one of his heads; others say these were taken from his hand (hence ravanahatta/hasta, Ravana's hand). And now finally, Shiva granted him the boon he desired. Sadly the boons included weaponry (the invincible Chandrhas sword)-Ravana might have asked for something other than invincibility in battle-but that was just one of the boons, and that's another story altogether; we won't go there today.

Eternal Spring of Art

Instead, I want to think also of the quality of water. For that is what a spring is: water, pure, water that eternally renews itself. Water cleanses. It quenches our thirst. We cannot live without it. And it must keep moving if it is not to become stagnant and, likely then, foetid, poisonous, swampy. A chashma is forever bubbling up, and its very constant state of renewing itself from the heart of the earth is its healing power and its ability to refresh and cleanse body and soul. Water enables us to 'reflect' in the best and non-narcissistic sense of that word. According to the understanding of the five *mahabhutas*, or the *paanch tatva*, the five Elements from which the entire universe is shaped, it is the first and the heaviest of the *paanch tatva*. It is our own first environment-we first took shape and form and breath in the tiny yet vast amniotic ocean of the womb. And the human body continues to be largely watery-70 per cent or more. Water is our source, our final dissolution. It our very existence.

And so, Chashma-e-hunar, the eternal spring of art, is what I hope this column will be. Join me as I rejoice, drink deeply and try to share a few thoughts from this clear, healing, beautiful source of beauty and artistic endeavour.

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