

## Redefining progress: Let's make ~~things~~ people better

"I like devotees, but I am sometimes dismayed to see how anti-progressive they are," Amit began, as soon as we sat for our talk.

He stopped abruptly. Perhaps it had suddenly struck him that the person he was talking to was also one of those 'devotees'.

I smiled reassuringly, "I had also felt like that a dozen years ago." Glancing sympathetically into his hesitant eyes, I prodded, "Go on."

After our last talk on the moon mission, I could guess what was on his mind.

The dismay of Amit's heart poured out. "To hear the space mission being called a waste of time is intolerable to me. So many intelligent, hard-working scientists toiled for years to help humanity conquer space. And India, after being on the sidelines in the space race, has finally emerged as a major player, by the enormous efforts of our scientists. All Indians are proud of it, yet some devotees call this – the crowning glory of India's scientific accomplishments – a waste of money and time."

As I contemplated on how to answer, my mind spontaneously went back to a fateful meeting some thirteen years ago, a meeting that had changed my life's direction. Perhaps sharing that incident was the best way to start the answer. I started telling the background.

"Amit, I too loved space research, so I understand how you feel. Since my childhood, I was fascinated by the sky, especially the night sky. After one of my neighbors bought a telescope, I would spend whole nights with him gazing at the stars, wondering what secrets it held and how I could discover them. When I was studying engineering, in my third year, I decided to change my career, do a post-graduation in astrophysics and pursue scientifically my childhood fascination."

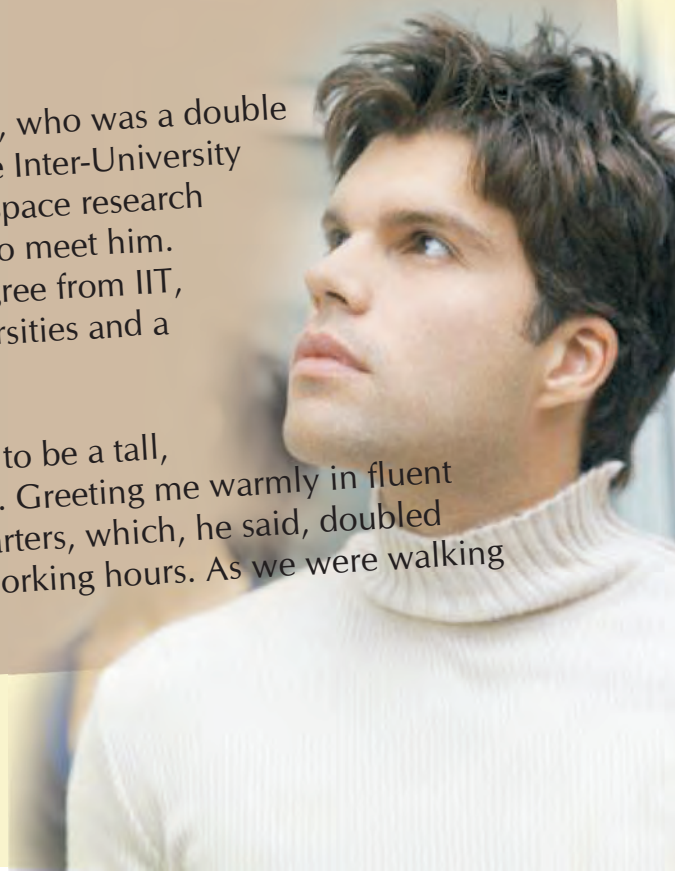
Amit's eyes opened wide with amazement to hear this: "What happened then?"

As I continued the narration, I started mentally re-experiencing that devastating meeting.

### A SMOKY EYE-OPENER

One of my classmates told me about his brother, Rabi, who was a double PhD, working as a scientist at IUCAA. (IUCAA, or the Inter-University Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics, is a premier space research institute at Pune, India.) I was excited, almost awed, to meet him. He had achieved what I was dreaming of: a grad degree from IIT, two doctorate degrees from eminent American universities and a respectable position in a leading research institute.

When I met Rabi at the IUCAA campus, I found him to be a tall, fair, bearded, bespectacled young man in his thirties. Greeting me warmly in fluent American-accented English, he invited me to his quarters, which, he said, doubled sometimes as his workplace, thanks to his flexible working hours. As we were walking through the labs



filled with captivating pictures of distant reaches of the galaxies, I couldn't but wonder whether I was dreaming. Suddenly, something jolted me out of my dream. Rabi lighted a cigarette nonchalantly as we walked. I was taken aback, but I put aside my emotion and concentrated on hearing what Rabi was speaking, "I am working on black holes." That caught my interest, for black holes had intrigued me since I had first heard of them in my third standard.

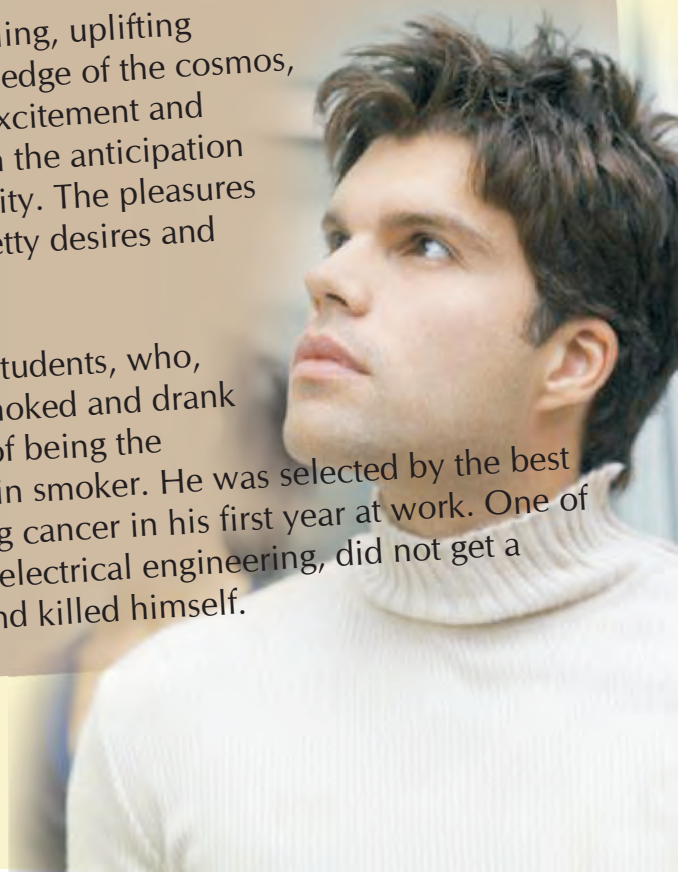
We reached his quarters and the door swung open to reveal a scholarly-looking, fair young lady with thick glasses. "She's my wife, Razi. (Rabi and Razi, I later learnt, were 'cool' versions of their traditional names, Rabindranath and Raashi). We met in America during our college days. She's done her PhD in Mathematics and we are working together at IUCAA." Over snacks, we talked for hours about their work and their life. I was pleasantly surprised to see how friendly they were. Perhaps my classmate had told them that I had bagged the top rank in GRE in Maharashtra that year and so they saw me as a promising future colleague. Whatever the cause of their friendliness, I thought, let me just relish the moment. But one thing spoiled the relish; the cigar never left Rabi's hand. As soon as one got over, he would immediately light another. He seemed a chain smoker. Perhaps noticing my repeated glances at the cigar in her husband's hand, Razi said casually, "You know, he smokes too much. I have told him to decrease, but he just can't." Her facetious tone and the mischievous look in her eyes puzzled me, but it didn't prepare me for what came next. Razi opened her purse, took out a thin female cigar and started puffing. Seeing my shocked, Razi said in mock defense, "I don't smoke as frequently as he does." Our meeting soon ended.

I couldn't sleep that night. No, I was not gazing at stars in the sky. I was trying to make sense of the stars that had fallen in the sky of my heart.

## FALLEN STARS

Since early childhood, I had seen science as an ennobling, uplifting search for the higher truths of life. I had felt that knowledge of the cosmos, as acquired through science, would enrich me with excitement and fulfillment. Scientific research would fill my heart with the anticipation of imminent discovery and the thrill of satisfied curiosity. The pleasures of the scientific quest would raise me far above the petty desires and demands of the body and the mind.

My dream was attacked during my college days. Co-students, who, I had to grudgingly admit, were brighter than me, smoked and drank freely. A final-year student with the enviable record of being the topper in all his eight semesters in college was a chain smoker. He was selected by the best MNC during campus interviews, but died due to lung cancer in his first year at work. One of my professors, a brilliant author of several books on electrical engineering, did not get a coveted prize in a paper presentation competition and killed himself.





I was appalled. How could those who saw through the enigmas of science not see through the illusions of bad habits? How could those who marched through complicated mathematical problems succumb to life's routine problems? I got no answers to these perplexing questions, yet I determinedly held on to my dream. But that evening's meeting had shattered my dream. Why could those who were relishing the intellectual pleasure of space research (which, to me, represented the highest of all scientific pleasures) not give up the self-destructive pleasure of smoking? Rabi and Razi were nice, clever people. They were not the typical foolhardy street smokers and drunkards that I had encountered in my childhood town. How could people who were so acute in their scientific work be so obtuse in their real life? It was a long night, probably the longest night of my life till then. I tossed and turned in my bed, struggling in vain to make sense of the senselessness.

### MISDIRECTED PROGRESS

By the time I completed my narration, Amit was pensive. "I have experienced similar disappointments at IIT," Amit spoke after a brief pause. "When I joined IIT, I was excited at the thought of being among the best brains in the country. But at the end of a hostel party, I was anguished to see most of these 'best brains' lying drunk on the floor of our common room."

I nodded, then qualified our observations: "Of course, both of us know scientists and intellectuals who lead sensible, regulated lives. But the number of intellectually brilliant people leading reckless lives is distressingly high. This contradiction – brilliance in professional life and recklessness in personal life – bewildered me for years till the philosophy of Krishna consciousness revealed the answer."

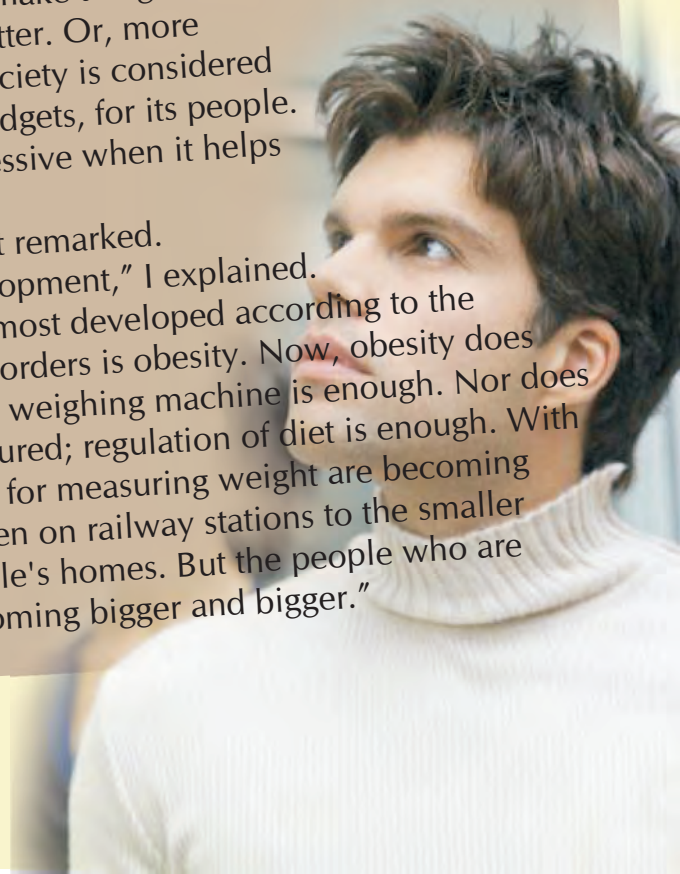
"What was that answer?" Amit asked eagerly.

"Our modern society operates on a fundamentally flawed notion of progress," I began. "This notion of progress is distilled in Phillips' slogan: Let's make things better. The Vedic notion of progress can be expressed as: Let's make people better. Or, more pragmatically, let's make ourselves better. Today, a society is considered progressive when it helps develop things, facilities, gadgets, for its people. In the Vedic paradigm, a society is considered progressive when it helps develop qualities, virtues, in its people."

"That's an interesting way to put the difference," Amit remarked.

"This difference leads to imbalanced, lop-sided development," I explained.

"Let's consider America, the country thought as the most developed according to the modern paradigm. There, a major cause of health disorders is obesity. Now, obesity does not need any hi-tech gadgetry for detection; a simple weighing machine is enough. Nor does it demand any ultra-sophisticated technology to be cured; regulation of diet is enough. With the current one-sided idea of progress, the machines for measuring weight are becoming smaller and smaller, from the huge machines still seen on railway stations to the smaller ones at doctors' clinics to the portable ones' at people's homes. But the people who are measuring their weights on these machines are becoming bigger and bigger."



The mental image of a huge person weighing himself on a tiny weighing machine and being dismayed by the reading was hilarious. We enjoyed it for a moment, then returned to our serious discussion.

"We can see the ramifications of misdirected progress in all walks of modern society from the AIDS epidemic to the school shootings. Hi-tech gadgetry – TVs having scores of channels, vcd players, cellphones having inbuilt cameras, webcams, broadband internet connections – give people easy access to sexually provocative material. The same hi-tech gadgetry beams media portrayals of sexual restraint as old-fashioned and not 'cool'. Result? Millions of people fall prey to AIDS, while many millions more burn in lust, craving for pleasure and dreading its consequences."

Amit added soberly, "From my life in IIT, I know that students use their net connections far more to download porn than to do academic research."

"You remember the school shootout in Virginia Tech a couple of years ago?" I asked, shifting our discussion to the next example.

Amit replied emphatically, "How can any Indian student dreaming of going to America forget that? It was such a jolt, especially the fact that there was an Indian student and an Indian professor among the victims."

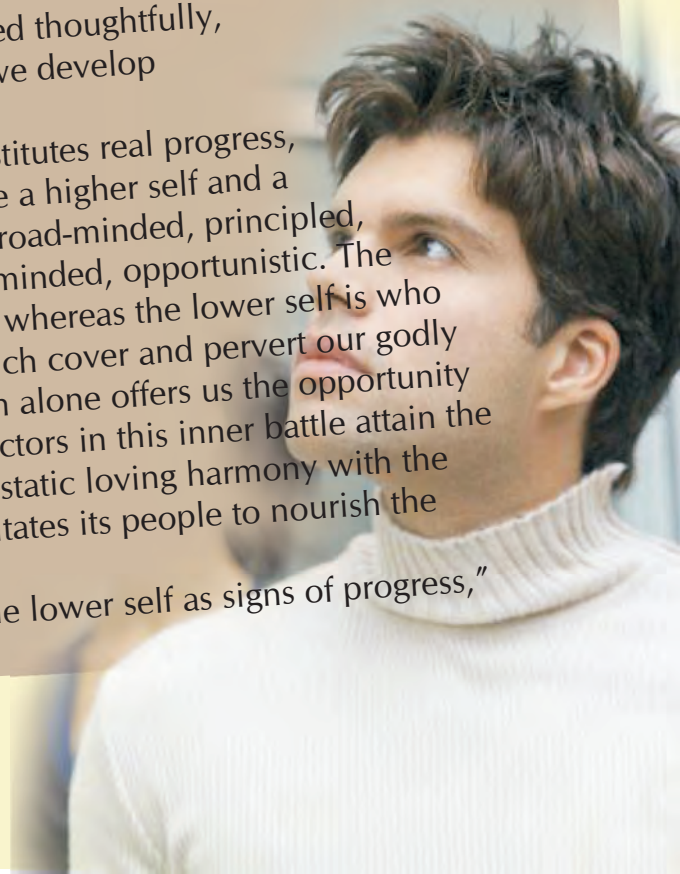
"The Virginia tech tragedy was the most-publicized among a series of school shootouts in America over the last decade. Again, misdirected progress is the root cause. Advancement in technology has made cheaper and handier guns more easily available than ever before. The same technology makes grisly scenes of violence and murder ubiquitous in our media. This diminishes the value of human life in the impressionable minds of those watching it. Worse still, the media depicts giving in to anger as not only normal but even heroic. After all this, people naively ask how the children shooting their co-students don't have a conscience to stop them. Albert Einstein put the problem well: 'It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity'."

### WALKING ENCYCLOPEDIAS, LIVING FAILURES

I paused as Amit pondered on our discussion. He asked thoughtfully, "Science helps develop our technology, but how do we develop our humanity?"

"Your question brings us to the question of what constitutes real progress, lower self. The higher self inspires us to be selfless, broad-minded, principled, whereas the lower self incites us to be selfish, mean-minded, opportunistic. The higher self is who we actually are: pure, godly souls, whereas the lower self is who we think we are: our material bodies and minds, which cover and pervert our godly nature. Among all the species of life, the human form alone offers us the opportunity to conquer the lower self with the higher self. The victors in this inner battle attain the ultimate goal of life: a life of eternal, enlightened, ecstatic loving harmony with the Supreme. Therefore, a truly progressive society facilitates its people to nourish the higher self and starve the lower self."

"But modern society deems the facilities that feed the lower self as signs of progress," said Amit, catching on.





"Exactly," I replied, delighted to see his perspicacity. "With this notion of progress, our society directs all human energy, even scientific energy, principally for catering to the desires of the lower self. But the lower self, filled as it is with insatiable desires for selfish enjoyment, causes people to act in ways that harm them individually, socially and globally. Normally the lower self is regulated by the higher self. But nowadays, people, being preoccupied with 'progress', spare little, if any time, to nourish their higher self, resulting in the deterioration of whatever little good qualities they have. And we end up with the contradiction that we discussed earlier, of people who are walking encyclopedias, but living failures. To summarize, the modern notion of progress, by pandering to our lower self and distracting us from our higher self, perpetuates our suffering."

### A MISSION OF MASS DISTRACTION

"But the moon mission doesn't perpetuate our suffering," Amit protested. "The moon mission is a prime example of a mission of mass distraction," I answered. "It infatuates our ego, which is the basis of our lower self, with the sense of having accomplished something wonderful, while distracting us from the truly wonderful work of conquering our lower self. Srila Prabhupada pointed out: 'Modern man has struggled very hard to reach the moon, but he has not tried very hard to elevate himself spiritually.' So despite the hard work of the scientists, the moon mission is unproductive in bringing about real human progress. And to the extent it distracts humans from real progress, to that extent it is counterproductive.

If all the energy and money spent on the moon mission were used to educate and train people in mantra meditation, millions of people would have become equipped to curb their lower self and tap virtues like self-discipline. That would reduce obesity, check the AIDS menace, decrease the global health expenditure by billions of dollars, and free our scarce monetary resources for basics like food for the starving millions. Thus real progress, spiritual progress, would lead to holistic development, with more food and better health for millions of people.

"Let me conclude with a quote by the British scholar C S Lewis: 'We all want progress, but if you're on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.' Unfortunately, for the last five centuries, the West has sped rapidly on the wrong road of unbalanced materialistic progress. Chandrayaana (India's moon mission) is a sign that India is also accelerating on that erroneous path. This is unfortunate because India, with its profound philosophical wisdom and ancient spiritual culture, has the unique opportunity to lead the world in turning back. Turning back doesn't mean giving up all material progress, but giving up the undue emphasis on material progress and focusing on holistic progress. Still there are signs of hope. The global acceptance of yoga, meditation and chanting has prompted many Indians to re-examine their national, spiritual legacy. But will India rise to its full potential as a global spiritual leader? Time alone will tell."

