

Sudhir Kakar

From the Forest



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Moratorium is a concept used by my late teacher Erik Erikson to characterize a time granted by society to its youth. It is a period when a young person, still unsure of who he/she "really" is, takes time off to experiment with different roles and to integrate earlier identifications into a coherent sense of personal identity. Perhaps there is a middle-aged moratorium too, a period that unlike its counterpart in youth is only granted to a few fortunate individuals. In middle age, the moratorium is less concerned with forging a personal identity and more with its stock-taking. It is a time for reflection and renewal, a time for bringing some older work commitments to a close and charting new directions for the future which will recapture some of the earlier excitement and passion.

Looking back, this is what I did at the Wissenschaftskolleg during the past year. I spent my middle-aged moratorium here, a time unbelievably rich in personal development. The older work commitments I brought to a close during the year were the two books I had promised myself I would finish writing. *The Colours of Violence*, a study of religious-ethnic conflicts in general and Hindu-Muslim violence in particular, will be published by the University of Chicago Press in February 1996. (The German translation appears in Beck Verlag around the same time). The other book, *Culture and Psyche*, will be published by Oxford University Press later in 1996. It is a collection of papers, most of them previously published in psychoanalytic journals, and this too seems appropriate to the nature of a moratorium. After all, collecting and ordering what is scattered — memories, parts of life and self — is a pre-eminently middle-aged activity.

I wish I had better news for myself on the renewal side. The fear of making a precocious commitment, of beginning something that may not interest me later, made me seek escape in giving lectures all over the place — an activity I should have indulged in much less. Nevertheless, in the last couple of months, I did begin something completely new, very different from everything I have done before, and I leave the Kolleg with a great sense of anticipation and excitement.

Let me now change the metaphor and look at my stay from an Indian perspective — from moratorium to *vanaprastha*. In ancient India, *vanaprastha* was a stage of life, sometimes during middle age, when a person abandoned the worldly concerns and pleasures that are a province of the previous, "householder" stage and departed for the forest to engage in study and meditation in a hermitage. I am afraid I only fulfilled a part of the prescriptions for the *vanaprastha*. I did come to a forest, although in our contemporary age of "globalization" the forest is the Grunewald rather than one outside an Indian village. And I did some study and much meditation. Where I miserably failed was in living up to other expectations placed on this stage. The ancient Hindu law-giver enumerates them thus:

Abandoning all food raised by cultivation, and all belongings, he may depart into the forest, either committing his wife to his sons, or accompanied by her.

Let him offer there five great sacrifices according to the rules, let him wear a skin or tattered garment; let him bathe in the evening or in the morning; the hair on his body, his beard, and his nails unclipped. Let him honour those who come to his hermitage with alms.

These verses are followed by others on the importance of restricting diet ("may eat at night only or in the daytime only") and a list of ascetic practices to be followed, such as living under the open sky during the rainy period and dressing in wet clothes during winter.

Here I must confess my failures. I did not dress in wet clothes in winter although I had ample opportunity to do so for at least seven of the ten months I stayed in Berlin. I did clip my nails, shaved my beard and got my hair cut at a horrendous price in the salon at Hagenplatz. Given the wonderful food produced by the Kolleg kitchen and the variety of restaurants in Berlin, I decided to postpone the bit about only eating fruits and nuts. I did offer alms, though — in the shape of chicken curry, *raita* and *moong dal* — to all the fellows who came to my hermitage at the top of Villa Walther. I desisted from wearing only a skin or tattered

clothes; after all, I am a Hindu, not a complete *meschugge*. I am glad to report, though, that I did not have the trouble the poet Bharatrihari (400 B.C.) had with the *vanaprastha* stage and which he expressed thus:

*Renunciation of worldly attachment
is only a talk of scholars,
whose mouths are wordy with wisdom.
Who can really forsake the hips
of beautiful women bound
with girdles of ruby jewels?*

This was easy. I did not see a single girdle of ruby jewels during the whole year.