

The Thief, his Tortoise, their History, and the Revenge of Myth

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Last month, on March 23rd, a male Aldabra Giant Tortoise by the name of “Adwaitya” died at the Alipore zoo in Calcutta. Press reports -- *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), BBC News, CNN, *New York Times*, NDTV [New Delhi TV], *The Times* (London), among many others -- render “Adwaitya”, a form of the Sanskrit *advaita*, a word of vast import to describe the philosophical outlook that is known as non-dualism, as “the one and only”, and if it is true that “Adwaitya” was 255 years old when he died, one can understand why he should have been so named. The oldest documented living animal is a Galapagos tortoise, 176 years old, at a zoo near Brisbane in Australia. Some 80 years older than his nearest rival, who was taken from Isla Santa Cruz by Darwin himself, Adwaitya, should his exact age be verified by carbon dating, would have had an extraordinary innings.

There is perhaps something in the history of these ancient and gigantic creatures that also ties them to larger-than-life figures. Adwaitya became known as “Clive’s pet”, and in reading his obituary one might have been reading about the death of Clive himself. Said to have been one of four tortoises gifted to Robert Clive, whose triumph at arms at Plassey in eastern India in 1757 is conventionally thought to have gained Britain its jewel in the crown, Adwaitya was transferred to the Calcutta zoo in 1875 and remained there for the rest of his life. That innocuous phrase, “rest of his life”, means much more than it might ordinarily, since Adwaitya would have witnessed the birth of the Indian National Congress (1885), the mass resistance to British rule known as the Swadeshi Movement (1903-08), and the dismantling of the empire that, shall we say, Clive built. Adwaitya was, then, not a very loyal pet, calmly outliving his master and his master’s creation. Perhaps Adwaitya knew all along that the sun would set on the British empire, and that he would be there to see the sun go down. Luckily, Adwaitya did not see the sun go down on the human race, which from time to time seems bent on a course of self-destruction.

Advaita’s adherents, from the venerable Shankaracharya (c. 780-820 AD) to the twentieth century *advaitin*, Ramana Maharshi (1789-1950), otherwise known as the Sage of Arunachala after the sacred hill in the vicinity of his ashram, have always claimed that advaita is, in a manner of speaking, the eternal truth, since advaita teaches that the goal of life is to attain self-realization. That supreme awareness comes about when one is able to distinguish the real from the illusory and achieve emancipation from ego-illusion. Clive joined in the plunder of Bengal, but when he was put on trial in Britain on charges of corruption and bribery, he described how the riches of Bengal had been laid at his feet and yet he had exercised some restraint. ‘Here I stand, My Lords,’ Clive reminded the jurors, ‘astonished at my own moderation’. Clive lived only to the age of 49 and reportedly died an opium addict. Of Adwaitya, say the zookeepers, let it be known that he sustained himself on a diet of wheat bran, carrots, lettuce, soaked gram, grass, and salt. Not only did Adwaitya know of the inestimable benefits conferred by a vegetarian diet,

which some scientists now assure us is more friendly to the earth, he was evidently intoxicated enough by life to scarcely be in need of any external stimulants. The *Pioneer* [Delhi], in an article on 6 May 2005, nearly a year before the tortoise's death, reported that Adwaitya had not seen a doctor for 29 years.

Philosophical matters apart, Adwaitya's longevity and forbearance might explain why the tortoise occupies such an honorable place in Indian mythology and story-telling traditions. Most Hindus are likely to associate the tortoise with Vishnu's second of ten incarnations (avatars). As "kurma", or the tortoise, Vishnu descended upon the earth to recover precious items that had been lost in the deluge and had settled at the bottom of the ocean. There is another story about the tortoise. In the beginning, everywhere was water; there was nothing to eat. Prajapati, the Creator, became anxious about the fate of his children, and was advised that the earth lay trapped under the water. Once he had rescued the earth goddess (Bhoo Devi), he placed her on the back of the tortoise. Thus, as Akupara, the tortoise carries the entire world on its back. The nineteenth century Indian mystic, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, put even a greater burden on this slow-moving animal. People who had attained self-control, and in particular mastery over their sense-organs, were likened to the tortoise. Through the uncommon subdual of the sense organs, Ramakrishna discoursed at gatherings which drew restless young men to him, among them the future Swami Vivekananda, anger, lust and other sentiments which are destructive of equanimity are put in abeyance. 'Such a man', says the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 'behaves like a tortoise, which, once it has tucked in its limbs, never puts them out. You cannot make the tortoise put its limbs out again, though you chop it to pieces with an axe' (p. 179). Ramakrishna found in the tortoise a remarkable illustration of the steadfastness with which God's true devotee goes about her business: even while she moves in the water, her thoughts are always on the bank where her eggs are lying.

Many will read in the story of Adwaitya, "Clive's pet", the tale of the tortoise and the hare writ large. Eternal tales will surely continue to come down to us in new incarnations. What other point is there to Vishnu's avatars? We might even be tempted into seeing in Adwaitya's story a parable for our times as the lumbering giants of Asia, the Aldabra and Galapagos tortoises of our times, India and China, make their way past the hares that had all but won the race. But one thing is certain: long after the history of the British empire will have disappeared, the mythical world of tortoises (and hares) will continue to endure. Stories, like water, yearn to be free; and even if there are philosophers, such as Walter Benjamin, to remind us of the death of the storyteller, stories always find a way to insert themselves into our consciousness.