OPINION - INDIA

The Honey Trap You Are Born With

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From ambition and power to sex and desire, a deeper exploration of the ego, why we chase external validation and why physical pleasures can never fulfil us.



Why success, pleasure and desire can never fill the void within us.

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Very few people know what they're working so hard for. The boy preparing for an entrance exam doesn't know it, and neither does the same fellow twenty years later, preparing for a promotion. Ask either of them, and he'll tell you quite sincerely that he wants the rank for its own sake. But the manufacturer at the auto expo knows better. That's why, at many launches, a young woman is made to stand beside the

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new model, smiling. Is she there to explain the engine? No. She is there to suggest that a woman like her comes along with the car.

The manufacturer is selling the car to the man and using the woman to sell it. And what are we educating our daughters for? Don't agree to be the doll that comes with the car. Be the one who drives.

So ask the fellow what the rank is for, and he'll talk of a better salary. Ask what the salary is for, and he'll talk of a bigger house and a better car. Keep asking, and very often you'll arrive at the woman beside the car. Those who aren't afraid of the mirror already know this about themselves. The ones who keep running from the mirror go on believing they're working for the rank alone.

Now look at two cases in the news. On November 12, Jensen Huang resigned as the chief executive of Nvidia, one of the world's most valuable companies, after acknowledging an extramarital affair. American intelligence officials suspected the woman of links with Chinese intelligence. Beijing dismissed the allegation as a smear. On November 17, Nvidia's board said it did not intend to bring Huang back. Six days later, after consultations with senior American government officials, the board announced his return. Its investigation continues, though American intelligence officials have reportedly found no evidence so far that the woman was directed to spy on him. Closer home, a Wing Commander of the Indian Air Force was arrested on May 30. Delhi Police allege in their chargesheet that he shared a page of a secret war plan with a suspected Pakistani intelligence operative after receiving a nude

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photograph, and offered to share another page for every subsequent photograph. The court will decide the case.

But if the charge is true, just look at the transaction. On one side is a secret war plan of your country, and on the other side is a photograph on your phone. And people are asking how anybody could stake so much for so little.

Country, oath, duty, money: how easily all these lose to sex! Exceptions exist, but please don't start counting them. And it's not that the body has defeated the oath. The body doesn't take the decision. The 'I' does. Why has the 'I' made sex so primary in its life? Because the body is the ego's first home. See what the ego has done. It has claimed to be complete, and the one who claims to be complete must also claim to be deathless. But the body is mortal. The body isn't a house you can step out of and go and live safely somewhere else. No body, no ego. And the house, please see, is falling. It's crumbling every moment, a little today, a little tomorrow.

So the ego has a few tricks. One is a story: fine, the body will fall, but something inside will fly out and get into another body. Another is memory. Build me a big tomb, says the ego, or write "Papa Smriti" on the gate of the house. And write it while I'm still alive, so I know that even after I'm dead, I'll still be stuck in your heads. And the oldest trick of all is to hand your name over to your children. Take Chopra ji. He has died, but he has left three Chopras behind. So tell me, how has he died? He's very much alive!

The ego's logic is simple. The house is crumbling, so build another one, quickly! And at the centre of this enterprise sits sex. Saint Kabir says in a couplet that the dog is lustful for

thirty days and indifferent thereafter. The lustful man remains a dog through all six seasons and all twelve months. Nature wants to carry the species forward. Man wants to carry the ego forward.

Look at the dog. He's produced the pups. That's all. Now he says, "Get lost, let me eat." No dog tells his pup to go out and make his father's name shine in the world. But we have a song for that: Mera naam karega roshan. That's not nature's demand. That's the ego's demand. And when the body stops cooperating, man goes hunting for shilajit and aphrodisiacs and whatever new pill has come out.

Huang is past sixty, and people say, "Fine, a young man has his hormones, but at that age?" It is one more superstition that a man grows wise as he grows old. The body has aged, but the ego still wants to live forever. And before eternity, twenty years, forty years, eighty years are all the same. I remember, when I was in college in Delhi, the girls in my batch who took the bus used to say the young men were less trouble. The ones to watch out for were the uncles past forty, who came close saying, "Beti, beti." The body may grow old, but the mouth of the ego stays open like Surasa's, even at the moment of death.

And you think you're just earning money, or just preparing for an entrance exam. But earning for whom? Preparing for what?

During an interaction at IIT Delhi in September, I asked the students: suppose your CGPA is locked away somewhere and nobody except you will ever get to know it. Would you still be so concerned about your CGPA? You worry about the CGPA because it is to be demonstrated to others. And then even an eight-point-two or a nine-point-two doesn't suffice. I display

my CGPA to you, you offer me a job. I display my job to you, you offer me a kiss. Everything is a transaction. And why do you want that hug or kiss or relationship? You don't know. There's a vacuum within that never gets filled up. It remains a lonely, empty place and keeps aching.

Take the boy preparing for the civil services. He says he wants to serve the country. Very good. But he won't do even a simple survey of whom the selected ones go on to serve. Ask him what will happen to his prospects in the marriage market once he gets selected. That he knows quite well. And what does a good match mean? Surely not a learned woman who comes and says, "Sit in front of me. I'll remove all your delusions right now, and then the two of us will listen to the Gita together." He'd chase her away that very evening. No, a good match means a good match. Everybody knows what's meant.

The ego in a woman is no different. But historically, religion, law and society have allowed the man far more freedom to pursue his desires while restricting the woman's freedom. And many of those restrictions have served to keep the woman available to the man. So the rank was never the point. And please understand, even the woman beside the car was never the point.

That's why honey trapping succeeds where money trapping fails. Show a man a crore of rupees and he may well take offence. "You think I'm for sale? Take your crore away." When Indra and the other gods wanted to trap the rishis, did they send money? No. They said, "These fellows have gone past money. They won't fall for that. Send the apsaras!"

The money couldn't supply what the man felt he lacked, so he hoped a body would. That promise is hollow too. It never delivers, because the hollow is not some gap in you that the right object will fill one day. The hollow is what the ego is. But the ego loves to be deceived. Ask yourself, if I keep being deceived, is the object deceiving me, or am I hell-bent on inviting deception? Not only do we invite deception, we manufacture it, and then we play the victim.

You didn't choose to be born with the tendency to identify with the body. But who keeps walking into the trap? You can't keep holding your birth responsible for the choices you are making today.

Look at the oath a man takes in uniform. The day you take it, everybody is standing, your family is watching, and the words are perfectly clear. Years later you're alone, what you want depends on one small exception, and suddenly the same words need interpretation. Why? Because reason is a puppet, and the ego operates it. It's the intent that drives the argument.

Say a boy has been tormenting animals. We'll come up with a hundred reasons why he must be corrected. Then the boy is brought in and turns out to be my son. Suddenly this same brain starts producing reasons to defend him. Did reason change? No. The intent changed. Nor is it that the man who breaks his oath doesn't know the consequences. He knows the law, and he knows he may be held to account. But in that moment he wants satisfaction. Give it to me right now, he says, and the consequences I'll put up with.

And the moment he makes that exception, you get to see what he was serving all along.

Please understand, I'm not condemning sex. It's as natural as the heart beating or the stomach digesting food. The trouble starts when it becomes the ego's favourite toy. Underlying all this is a fundamental mistake: that the physical can give you psychological fulfilment. It can't. Money is physical, and so is somebody's body. A big house is physical, and so is a pair of beautiful eyes. None of them can give the ego what it is asking for. Breaking this false equivalence is the whole work of self-knowledge.

Fine, then, take your moment of release. That the bodily urge returns is natural. But why does the same psychological hope return? Why do you still expect to get from the body what the body has never been able to give you? A consumer with even a little love for himself would turn to the seller and ask just one question.

When, sir, would you satisfy me?

Then you write poetry, and half of romantic poetry is a futile attempt to make the physical psychological. You praise her body, but you don't have the courage to name the parts you're really aiming at, so it's the eyes and the lips and the hair and the fingers, and you call it beauty. If your poetry had any honesty, it would also have mentioned that the beloved goes to the toilet. Remember, sex is one thing. Sexualisation is another. Sexualisation is when you dress up the physical so that the ego can believe it has found a juicier object this time, and this time, surely, fulfilment will come. The other person may be fully clothed. What matters is what you are seeking through that person.

And because nothing delivers, the hope has to be kept alive. To keep the hope alive, you have to keep the object. So come the vows, the promises, the “don’t ever leave me”. The object must stay available, so you can enjoy it again tomorrow. Who knows, maybe tomorrow it’ll finally work. Shri Krishna says in the Gita: nirashih, nirmamah. Free of expectation, free of possessiveness. And what does he ask Arjuna to do? Fight! You have given up the hope that some object will complete you. You haven’t given up life.

But the ego preserves that hope at any cost, and around it man has built rituals, taboos, social restrictions and laws. Look closely at many of them, and the idea is that one body keeps getting a regular supply of another. See how deep the arrangement goes. Exception 2 to Section 63 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita excludes sexual acts by a man with his adult wife from the definition of rape. Section 67 makes non-consensual intercourse by a husband with his wife during separation a separate offence. The Supreme Court is to take up the challenge to the marital rape exception for final hearing in December. The Union government, in its affidavit defending the corresponding exception under the earlier penal code, acknowledged that a husband has no fundamental right to violate his wife’s consent. But it argued that calling the act rape would be excessively harsh and that removing the exception could seriously disturb the institution of marriage. If calling it rape would shake the institution of marriage, please tell me, what is that institution standing on?

These are very different acts we are talking of. But see how much an individual is prepared to surrender, and how much society is prepared to justify, to ensure the availability of a

body. Then there are those who see the mess this obsession makes and twist a beautiful word like brahmacharya into mere celibacy. They declare sex itself dirty.

Sex isn't dirty. The ego is.

Then others come along promising liberation through more and more sex. One fellow is obsessed with having sex, and the other is obsessed with not having sex. How different are the two? Sex occupies the most important place in the lives of both. Brahmacharya is about having something far more important in your life. Suppression is foolish, and glorification is equally foolish. Because sex is just a small thing. Do you remember what you ate the day before yesterday? Sex belongs at about that level, not worth suppressing and certainly not worth amplifying. It is a small thing that the ego has made into the biggest thing. Life holds so much work and so much beauty, but the fellow who hasn't got this one thing walks around with a long face.

You may say, "I'm an ordinary person. I have no fortune or office to lose. What has this got to do with me?" It has everything to do with you. A student asked me the other day why, after his studies, he gets no time for co-curricular activities. I said, you have told me two things you do. Who will tell me about the third, the one that goes on all day? Have you ever wondered what your thumb is looking for as you scroll and scroll? The thumb, too, has become a sexual instrument, searching the screen for sex. And when I talk of sexuality here, I don't mean merely the act of intercourse. I'm talking of the misplaced expectation that physicality will give you

psychological fulfilment. And if the police are right about that officer, see where it all happened. On a phone.

There is an account in the Jain tradition of celestial women being sent to distract Mahavir. Why couldn't they move him? It wasn't about those women at all. Mahavir lived in such a way that before the object came to him, the mirror came to him. He could see what he wanted to get through the object, and after that nobody could cheat him, because he knew where the real enemy was.

And that enemy is not some other fellow living within you. It is the one you presently call 'I'.

Mahavir never fought anybody, never raised a weapon against anyone, and still he's called the great warrior. Why? Because he fought the one battle that is worth fighting.

Now, none of this is an argument against earning well or holding high office. I'm not dissuading you, not obstructing you, not demotivating you. I'm just asking. Can you study engineering because you love engineering? Can you work for the country because there is work the country needs you to do? Surely you can. But then the work comes first. Success doesn't hand anybody that mirror. In class six you were collecting marks to display to others. In high office you can collect a great deal more. Your powers have increased, your resources have increased, but has your understanding of yourself increased?

A board of directors can give a man his chair back. What can it do about the man sitting in the chair?

By all means, earn well and rise to high office. I'm just offering you a simple test. You claimed that you wanted the position

because there was some great work you wanted to do. The day your sincere commitment to that very work puts your position at risk, and you don't care about losing the position, you'll know there was some truth in your claim.

Otherwise, perhaps the position was wanted for something else altogether.

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