< understanding heroism >

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Who Are You, Who?

Why is a hero a hero? Is being a hero predestined, genetic? Or is it a reaction to a stimulus? A look at the recipe for extraordinariness.

by SHEFALEE **VASUDEV**

THE schoolbook definition of heroism has become difficult to live by. Remember? The protagonist as the *doodh ka dhula* (washed in milk) person, he who always spoke the truth. The compassionate, good guy who saved the heroine and smugly rode into the sunset. Add assertion, stoic will, steadfastness of purpose and your history lesson was done.

Perhaps Amitabh Bachchan, Medha Patkar, Julio Riberio and Satyendra Dubey memorised that same definition. Who knows, they may have even idolised similar heroes. Did they know then that they would grow up to push the envelope and add new nouns to an idea that has remained trapped in the obvious?

As heroes leap out from history and literature, comics and scriptures, cinema, dogma and sports pages, and get embedded in our collective unconscious, they answer some questions but provoke many more.

- Do heroes chart a unique path in life battling with their destinies?
- Are they extraordinary people with transformative powers?
- Are they those whose life is dedicated to the creation or defence of rational values?
- Can anyone be a hero or is it a predestined possibility?
- Is heroism accidental or is it genetic?
- And does heroism create a neurochemical response in the brain—is it a feeling?

"One tends to become what one seeks," says neuroscientist C.R. Mukundan, former professor of clinical neuropsychology at NIMHANS, Bangalore, now a forensic science researcher. "What one looks for is what one is exposed to in the formative years. The ingredients of heroism include creation of new realities, the mental and physical efforts invested to achieve the goal, and the thrill and satisfaction of experiencing achievement."

Fast forward through heard and read stories about Newton, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Genghis Khan, N.R. Narayana Murthy, Bono, Lance Armstrong...to name some and you know what he means.

Heroism is not incidental, nor is it a statistical accident. In some, it lies coiled inside like a dormant giant waiting to be woken up. In others, it is the only goal, the singular reality that validates the purpose of life. James Hillman's powerful book *The Soul's Code—In Search of Character and Calling* explains it very well. "Despite early injury and all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we bear from the start the image of a definite individual character with some enduring traits." Every life has a plot, every person a calling. A call may be delayed but it never disappears.

Heroism, too, is a call. And as neurological studies indicate, an act of heroism (an emotional response of the brain) is a complex cross-circuit between empathy, compassion, risk-taking and an addiction to thrill.

A lot of this would apply to Vir Chakra recipient Air Commodore (retd) Jasjit Singh, the fighter pilot who flew Mystere

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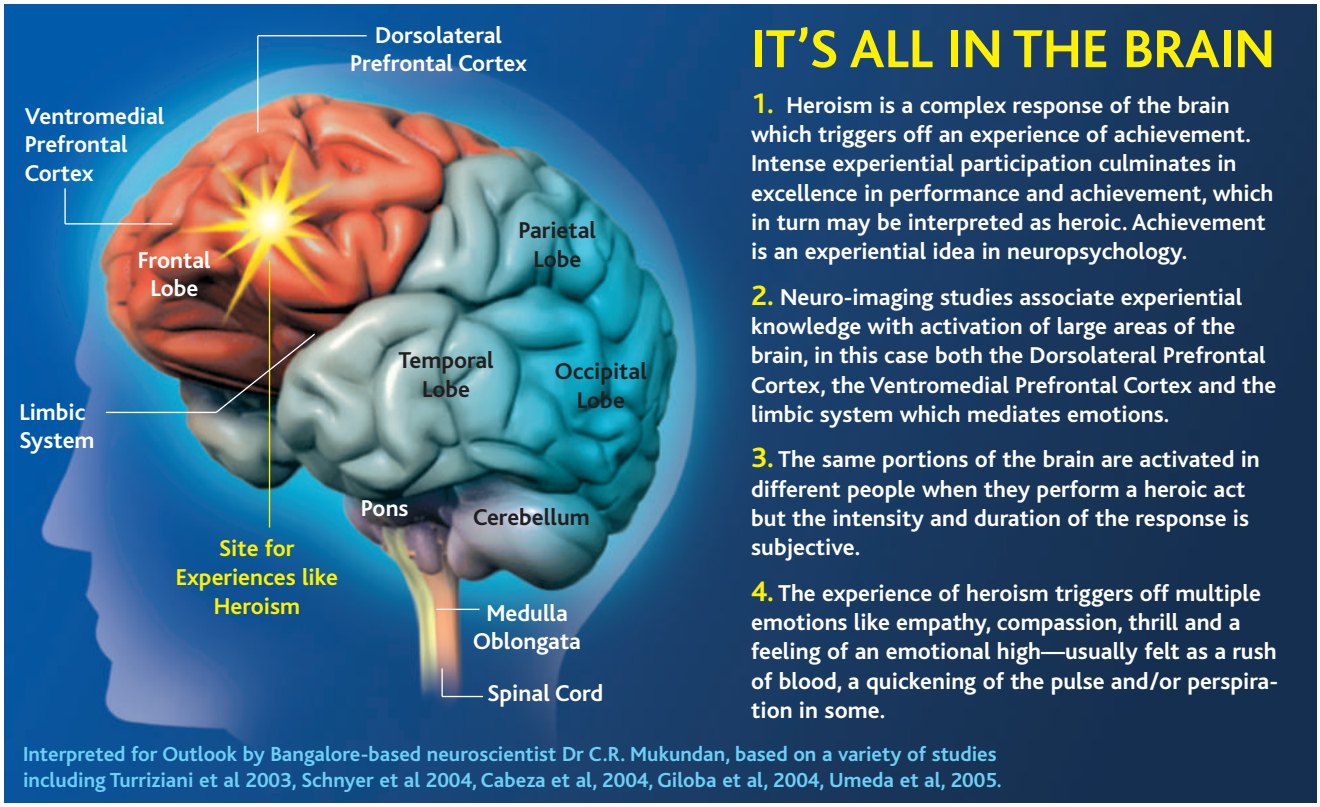
4A, the fighter aircraft better known as the Flying Coffin in the 1971 Indo-Pak war. "Heroism is about the courage of conviction, truth, intellectual bravery and one's work in the face of all odds," he says. "I wanted to fly Mystere 4A because I needed to prove it to myself that I was capable of rising to the call of my duty," says Singh, now 71, who flew in the face of fire, death and destruction all around.

Incidentally, (or perhaps not, as neuroscientists would say) heroism runs in the Singh family like a good gene. Theirs is the most decorated defence family in India and Singh says he hero-worshipped his father Sant Singh who fought the First World War in Mesopotamia. Singh's nephew Major Kuldeep Singh Chandwalla (played by Sunny Deol in J.P. Dutta's film *Border*) was awarded the Mahavir Chakra after the 1971 war for his bravery at Longewala. He held his own against an entire Pakistani infantry unit with just one group of soldiers holding rifles, a few machine guns and no heavy vehicles. "That's heroism," says Singh adding that till then, Kuldeep Singh never looked a man who possessed that kind of valour.

Circumstantial stimulus is a very mean-



IT'S ALL IN THE BRAIN

1. Heroism is a complex response of the brain which triggers off an experience of achievement. Intense experiential participation culminates in excellence in performance and achievement, which in turn may be interpreted as heroic. Achievement is an experiential idea in neuropsychology.

2. Neuro-imaging studies associate experiential knowledge with activation of large areas of the brain, in this case both the Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex, the Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex and the limbic system which mediates emotions.

3. The same portions of the brain are activated in different people when they perform a heroic act but the intensity and duration of the response is subjective.

4. The experience of heroism triggers off multiple emotions like empathy, compassion, thrill and a feeling of an emotional high—usually felt as a rush of blood, a quickening of the pulse and/or perspiration in some.

Interpreted for Outlook by Bangalore-based neuroscientist Dr C.R. Mukundan, based on a variety of studies including Turriziani et al 2003, Schnyer et al 2004, Cabeza et al, 2004, Giloba et al, 2004, Umeda et al, 2005.

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

ingful term in understanding heroism. When people break out of the nature-nurture limitations and hit new dimensions of their own potential.

Isn't that true of people like Sachin Tendulkar or the overwhelmingly popular Shahrukh Khan? Major H.P.S. Ahluwalia who scaled the summit of Mt Everest in 1965, only to come back and become grievously injured in the 1965 war, doesn't think so. "The heroism associated with sports or film stars is a misconception. These are just short-lived thrills," he says adding that he has a dislike for the term heroism. An Arjuna awardee, Major Ahluwalia set up the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre in Delhi.

Later, despite being wheelchair-bound since the 1965 war, he led the Silk Route expedition across Uzbekistan, Kyrghyzstan, Xinjiang and Tibet in 1994. "I was a little sad when I reached the mountain summit," he says pointing to a breathtaking photograph taken from the top that adorns a wall in his office. "The only way was down," says Ahluwalia. Heroism, for him, is about that moment when you scale the summit of the mind.

DECEMBER 2005. The rise and fall of heroism has been stark this year. Many unsung heroes were celebrated and clouds descended on the idolised ones. A Delhi bus driver called Kuldeep Singh freed himself from the clutches of leading an unexceptional life and saved the lives of 70 passengers and countless more during the Delhi blasts. Abhiram, a society plumber in Noida, took a bullet in his shoulder to stop a house from being robbed.

And as if proving that the opposite is the truth, Gautam Goswami, the Patna bureaucrat, who was hailed as one of the Asian heroes on *Time* magazine's list two years back, was arrested for corruption. Actor Salman Khan, the black buck of the film industry, continues to oscillate between being a hero and a zero. He failed to appear in the court for his trial because he was in the middle of a hair transplant procedure. Sachin Tendulkar—sheer grit and genius—has set a new record in cricketing achievement this year, but let's not forget that, for a Ferrari, he wanted to bypass the tax laws of the country two years back. On the other hand, the era of political heroes seems to be well and truly over.

> A hero can be a **lazy, weak,** confused person. But in an **extraordinary** situation he must be ready to go that extra mile.

Rummage through the past couple of years and the stereotype of heroism has been stabbed. Heroism is now a contemporary, confused entity. Definitely more vulnerable. Like Sourav Ganguly. It is unisex, introspective and unsure in the way it charts its course. It has strong middle-class strains. Like T.N. Seshan. Success does not always come to it. It can be good and not-so-good. It may or may not be moral. It could even be momentarily transformative like the tsunami heroes and not consistently revolutionary like Mother Teresa.

Even the Bollywood script is changing. "To me, a hero is an ordinary man in an extraordinary situation," says scriptwriter Shridhar Raghavan. "He or she can be lazy, morally confused, scared, even terrified, not very principled, weak, not particularly articulate or intelligent...someone like you and me and anyone you see on the road. But when he is thrust into an extraordinary situation, he should be willing to go that extra mile, fight that extra battle.... There is a story there." Raghavan's *Khakee* had a tired, old, insecure police officer played by Amitabh Bachchan as one of the

heroes. His recent film, *Apaharan*, portrays a kidnapper as a hero and *Bluffmaster* is all about a conman.

Scriptwriters may be changing their slant, but India's increasing obsession with celebrities in sports and cinema makes it imperative to look closely at the popular hero and the real hero. The hero as perception vs the hero as reflection. As Alice Cicolini, Head of Arts, British Council India, points out, "Being famous has a transformative social potential and celebrity has a potentially corrective function in that it inspires a lot of people. As long as it does not become a negative social force."

So, at a time when we make heroes out of every Indian idol, the question "Who is the real hero?" becomes more relevant than it ever was. "The man on the street who pulls a cart and feeds his family with that hard-earned money is the real hero: we are just make-believe," answers Jackie Shroff, the hero in Subhash Ghai's 1983 film *Hero*. Shroff admits though that he felt good and noble when he enacted the valiant air force officer in *Border*, discovering deep meaning in service before self. A comment that might bring a smile to Major Rajesh Pattu's face when he reads it.

"At the end of the day you know exactly what you have done and are able to live with yourself," says Pattu, a 61st Cavalry officer who led the evacuation operation that saved many lives in the Delhi Uphaar Cinema fire in 1997. An Asian Games bronze medallist, an Arjuna awardee and a much-decorated officer, Pattu was in the cinema hall, watching a film with a colleague when the fire broke out. For weeks after that, he says, his lungs hurt and he couldn't breathe properly. "It is all right to hero-worship film stars and ape their styles and clothes, but why don't people emulate them when it comes to real-life crises?" asks Pattu recalling how some people just stood as bystanders, watching the spectacle instead of doing anything to help the people.

If heroism has a formative path of creating new realities and making personal sacrifices, then becoming a hero cannot be the end of the story. It is hardly a Zen quality. It is about doing, not being. Some, like Mumbai demolition man G.R. Khairnar, have hung up their boots interpreting heroism as the end of a journey. Others like T.N. Seshan simply hang up the phone. Sunil Gavaskar and Kiran Bedi? They chug along protected by the armour of inaccessibility. Not realising perhaps that heroism is, after all, a stubborn identity. It chases you for life.

It is, as Dr Mukundan says, "about emotions as the root drive or force which propels the people into activity." It is, as sociologist Ashis Nandy says, "About valour and death denial—since in all cultures man is nothing but a mortal animal." It is, as the evergreen hero, actor Dev Anand, rightly believes, "About the when, the where and the why. In 2005, it is difficult to say who is the real hero," he says.

Is a Kargil martyr a bigger hero or a social worker who gives hope and health to street children? Is Microsoft mogul Bill Gates more valiant or Nkosi Johnson, the 12-year-old who died of AIDS in 2001, inspiring millions of Africans and around the world to action in the fight against the epidemic?

And then there are some very prickly debates. Can the two dacoits Veerappan and Phoolan Devi be called heroes? After all, they too had many heroic qualities. Hamlet—indecisive and conquered by doubt—was not a hero. But Majnu of the romantic tale *Laila-Majnu* perhaps was. He was willing to risk everything for the idea of love. K.P.S. Gill is a super cop, heroic to the core when it came to discharging his duty in Operation Black Thunder. Being slapped with a serious

'It is all right to **worship** film stars and ape their styles. But **why don't** people **emulate** them in **real-life** crises?'

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Hero: Death, Afterlife

'Vijay', the identikit of the troubled Indian, has moved on

AP

IN the film *Deewar*, when Amitabh Bachchan as Vijay lay dying in his mother's lap, a number of Freudian undercurrents were bared. "*Mujhe sone do maa, mein bahut thak gaya hoon*," (Let me sleep mother, I am very tired) he said.

Vijay's death gave birth to the hero in conflict with himself. Popularly labelled the anti-hero created by scriptwriters Salim-Javed, Bachchan reflected the angst-ridden inner self of young men in a politically turbulent India. Badness with the goal of goodness.

It is not easy to reason Bachchan's popularity by calling it super success, super talent, super humility or super timing. *Zanjeer*, *Sholay*, *Don*, *Natwarlal*, *Coolie*, *Namak Halal*, *Laawaris*, *Sharaabi*, *Shahenshah*...the man became a mannequin on whom hung the many dilemmas of Indian youth. Bachchan may be the tallest, the most well-spoken, the most lovable cinematic mannequin of our times, but his heroism lies in the fact that he is not really a mannequin. The hero of the millennium—voted (surprisingly) over Gandhi and Mandela—is a man who teaches a powerful lesson in the reinvention of self. In an industry obsessed with youth, he has made ageing an old idea. Now, as he narrates the stories of heroism in modern India—the tired, self-doubting Inspector Anant Shrivastav in *Khakee* who turns defeat into victory, the maverick policeman in *Bunty Aur Babli* who brings the cons back into business, the idealistic teacher in *Black*, the new-age old lover in *Baghban*, the arrogantly humble *Sarkar* or the affable host of KBC, there is in him, a resonance of everything we want to see in our ourselves. He is the scriptwriter's ambition, the storyteller's imagination, the sociologist's case study. He is the old woman's blessing and the young man's alter ego.

He is what India thinks its heroes should be.

Vijay is dead. Long live Vijay.

sexual harassment charge may malign his reputation but it definitely does not rob him of his heroism.

Why does morality then still stick as the hero's medal? "Because there can be no hero without an adequate number of people sharing his moral universe," says Nandy. "Krishna is a hero in Mahabharata but not Bal Krishna in Bhagavatam," he adds. "Hitler and Mussolini couldn't go down as heroic in history because the Germans and Austrians could not find moral qualities in them."

Morality is a linear idea. Unforgiving and inflexible. Whereas "life, which inspires heroism," writes James Hillman, "is a non-linear concept." Heroism, an explainable emotional response of the brain, thus, cannot be just this or that. It has to be this and that. Heroism is associated with the good and the true, but as Cicolini points out, the trouble is in identifying what is the good and the true—since beliefs are entirely subjective. She cites the example of the American soldiers who have given their lives for the ideals their nation currently stands for—surely the most heroic of deeds. "But like their ancestors returning from Vietnam, the return of the dead and wounded has been decidedly lukewarm," she says. "They are heroic to those who believe in the ideals, cowardly to those opposing them."

"Good and bad, positive and negative qualities have always been relative than binary," says Dr Mukundan adding that Robin Hood was a hero for his people as he protected them. "The problem arises when people want to see the hero as a god, an entity of perfection."

'We need heroes to **prove** that the **good** and the better is **possible.** It is about our **longing to lay** our hearts at their feet.'

Associating godliness, a certain infallibility with heroes is an Indian truth, let's face it. "But that makes sense," says Renuka Narayanan, editor, religion and culture, *Hindustan Times*. "Hinduism has a binary, compassionate worldview. The good and the bad are two different poles—the karma theory rests on it," she explains. "After all, why do we need heroes? They are proof that the good and the better is possible. Hero worship is all about the longing to lay our hearts at the feet of someone worthy."

But as Narayanan herself points out, even our deities have less than perfect qualities. Take the five heroic women—the Panchvarma—in Indian mythology. Sita, Mandodari, Draupadi, Satyabhama and Tara. "All amazingly stoic women who upheld their convictions but were far from perfect," says Narayanan.

Contemporary heroism mimics the mythological—and like everything else today in the world—is an amoebic, contradictory idea. It cannot be understood through hallowed interpretations of martyrdom. It is no longer about victory on life's battlefield. Like a comet of potent energy with transformative powers—however brief—heroism comes shooting from somewhere, altering reality. Like Satyendra Dubey.

Who we choose as our heroes tells us who we are. Why the Gandhi of 1940s has morphed into the Amitabh Bachchan of 2005 is self-explanatory. ◘