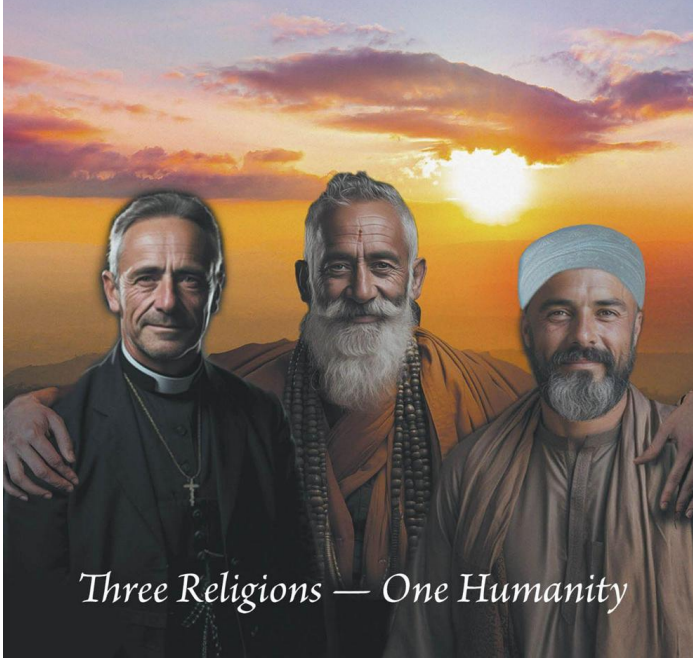


Originally written in Gujarati by Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai
Translated into English by Nurdin M. Kassam

Smouldering Fire (Bhārelo Agni)



Dedication

This translation is dedicated to my grandmother, Virbai.

You live in the deepest recesses of my being, in an exclusive corner of my heart, where I feel your presence with gratitude, reverence, and love. You, who could not read or write the word 'love', taught me unconditional love by your day-to-day actions. As a child, I was privileged to sleep with you at night, holding your thumb, which engendered lasting security in me for which I remain eternally grateful. Your love will be my companion until the last breath of my life and beyond.

*With love and gratitude,
Nurdin*

Translator's Preface

The seed that germinated in my translation of this book was sown by two incidents that occurred about seventy-five years ago when I was growing up in Mpwapwa, a small village in Tanganyika (now known as Tanzania), East Africa. Tanganyika was then a protectorate under British control.

When I was about ten years old, my father asked me to go to the District Office in Mpwapwa to pay a bill. The District Office was the headquarters of a white colonial officer who was the administrative, judicial, and executive authority for the district. For all practical purposes, he was the uncrowned king of the village. Growing up, my feeling about him was one of fear. Hence, it was with some trepidation that I undertook the mission, and yet I felt proud that my father had entrusted me with it.

When I arrived at the main office, dressed in my new shorts and sandals, I saw an African clerk, Mr. Harrison, sitting at his desk, shuffling papers. I was aware that Mr. Harrison, as an assistant to the District Officer, had a lot of authority and was also someone to be feared. I waited at the counter for him to acknowledge me, my face barely reaching the top of the counter. He saw me but continued to shuffle papers without acknowledging me. While I was waiting meekly, a white man walked in. Mr. Harrison promptly stood up with a broad smile, greeted him in English, collected money from him, and handed him a receipt for a bill similar to the one I was waiting to pay. After wishing the white man a respectful goodbye, Mr. Harrison returned to his desk without even glancing at me. I felt humiliated, ignored, and helpless.

As I was wondering what to do, a black man walked in, and Mr. Harrison promptly stood up again, greeting him warmly in Swahili, a local African language. He, too, had come to pay a similar bill. Mr. Harrison collected his money, gave him a receipt, bade him goodbye, and went back to his desk, again without acknowledging my presence. By then, my rational mind and fear were overtaken by a sense of deep hurt and humiliation. I blurted out in Swahili, "What about me? I want to pay the same bill!"

Without raising an eyebrow, he said, "You have to wait. I am busy."

I knew I needed to do something.

I walked out of the main office and burst into an adjacent building. This was the office of the District Officer himself. There was a white woman, presumably his secretary, sitting at the desk. That was all I needed – a human being to whom I could narrate my pain. I started to vent my hurt, in broken English, Swahili, and Kutchi, the Indian dialect we spoke at home. I must have made enough noise as the District Officer came out of his office to find out what was happening.

The intervention resulted in Mr. Harrison accepting my money and giving me a receipt, with a stern face. While walking home from the District Office, I remember thinking, *I wish I were a lawyer*. To my young mind, being a lawyer symbolized fighting for justice, and I needed justice.

Twenty years later, as I stood, robed in my barrister's gown before a high court judge in Dar es Salaam, pleading pro bono for justice on behalf of my client, I silently thanked Mr. Harrison for sowing the seed for me to become a lawyer against all odds. The sense of injustice I had felt then was instrumental in my active involvement in the Legal Aid Society of Tanganyika, which provided free legal services to the poor.

The second incident took place in Kongwa, a 'sister' village of Mwapwa. I was stationed there after leaving school at the age of fifteen to assist my father and uncle in running a small shop, which was our main source of livelihood. Our shop catered to the needs of poor African customers. The few white customers in Kongwa hardly ever visited our shop. They normally went to the only provision store in the village to buy their groceries, liquor, and imported products. It was customary for the Indian shopkeeper of the provision store to run out of his shop to take orders from the white customers sitting in their cars, run back into the shop, and deliver the groceries to the car – particularly if the white customer was the District Officer. As a teenager, I watched an old Indian shopkeeper running meekly, carrying groceries to the car of a white customer who was half his age, and then saluting him. It was a painful sight. It symbolized the humiliation and helplessness of the whole Indian race! At the time, I thanked God that our shop only carried cheap clothing for poor black customers.

One afternoon, as I was minding the shop while reading a Gujarati book (very likely *Bhārelo Agni*), I heard a motor vehicle approaching and saw a Land Rover driven by the District Officer stop opposite my shop. I pretended not to see it – out of a mixed feeling of fear and defiance. He honked once, twice, three times, and when I still did not look up, two black police officers entered my shop and told me in Swahili, "*Bwana* [the boss] wants to see you."

Without thinking, I responded, "If *Bwana* wants to see me, he is welcome to come into my shop," and pretended to continue reading my book. I probably did not have the guts to look at the police officers or the District Officer because fear had gripped my body.

Soon thereafter, I heard the screech of tires as the Land Rover drove away. I breathed a sigh of relief but fully expected the police officers to return to arrest me and take me to jail. They did not come, but the lingering feeling that they would come back continued to keep me awake at night for months to come. My biggest fear, however, was that if my father found out, he would not only be very angry with me for jeopardizing the family's livelihood, but that he, too, would endure many sleepless nights. I therefore never reported the incident to my father – or anyone else. They would have thought I had gone crazy!

It was during this period that I read *Bhārelo Agni*. When I finished reading it around 1952–53, I felt that the book had to be translated into English. It would counter the feeling of inferiority instilled amongst Indians by the colonial environment in which I was growing up. The young boy in me felt strongly that *any Indian who reads this book would never again be ashamed of being an Indian*, because it portrayed what I, as an Indian growing up in Africa, believed was 'Indian wisdom'.

When I re-read the book many years later, what touched me most was the author's ability to portray what I can best describe as 'universal wisdom in action'. I also realized that what I, as a young boy, believed to be 'Indian wisdom' is no different from 'universal wisdom'.

The book's central message is that the only way to eliminate violence is to make the world free of all weapons and our hearts free of violence. Weapons, once created, will inevitably be used by someone, somewhere, somehow.

We owe it to our children and grandchildren to propagate this legacy across the globe and live the values of non-violence, love, and universal brotherhood, all of which are embodied in *Bhārelo Agni*. These messages are more relevant and necessary today than at any other time in the history of human evolution. Unless we heed these messages and practise them, we may, with easy access to weapons of mass destruction, destroy human civilization as we know it.

Many, committed to the ideals of *Bhārelo Agni*, have assisted me in making this translation a reality. Some of them have been mentioned in my acknowledgements. We are connected by a common thread to the ideals reflected in the book. This binds us together as the '*Bhārelo Agni* Family', to which I welcome you, the reader. The addition of each member will bring us one step closer to a world in which hearts will be free of violence and the world free of weapons. You, the reader, will be our catalyst in spreading the message of love because, in the ultimate analysis, whatever the question, love is the answer.

In the book's concluding paragraph, the author poses the question: "Why so much violence in a world so starved of love?" Why indeed? I ask myself this question every time I listen to the news. Many of us live in countries where we elect our governments. Most of us, given the choice, would choose peace and love over violence and hate. And yet, our elected governments do the opposite. They spread divisive policies and fear of the 'other'. Why is there such a gap between what a democratic government *should* be and what it is? We are told democracy is the best system of government. And perhaps it is. Why then, does it not deliver on peoples' aspirations for a more peaceful and loving world? Is there something wrong with a process that prevents the best system from giving voice to the deeply desired goals of peace and love? Or is it because we, as part of a society chasing instant gratification, tend to elect those who promise short-term illusive security rather than those who stand for world peace?

It is befitting that I end this preface by expressing my profound gratitude to one person whom I have never met and will never meet: Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai, the author of *Bhārelo Agni*. He wrote the book almost ninety years ago when there were no computers, no internet, and very few tools for research. His level of commitment to the cause of peace and love cannot be underestimated. Could there be a better reward for his commitment than the dawning of a day when all or the majority of the elected members of our governments will be members of the *Bhārelo Agni* Family?

For that to happen, we must be passionately committed to the cause of creating a world in which every human being, irrespective of caste, colour, race, gender, or religion, can live with dignity and peace; where our governments are committed to giving expression to our deeply desired goal of a peaceful and loving world; where school curricula will embrace subjects like love and peace and their significance in living a happy and fulfilling life. For that to happen, our commitment must be a commitment from the depth of our inner being.

We need to 'walk the talk' and ensure that the values of love, one humanity, non-violence, peace, and equity for all human beings become election and leadership issues. We need to vote for people and parties who will commit to these values. If such parties do not exist, we need to create one in every country.

Are we ready?

Nurdin M. Kassam
Vancouver, BC, Canada
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