

DALITALITY

Putting Dalit life, culture, world at centre



SURAJ YENGDE

THIS IS our time. I want us to believe in the fate of history and its important effort in shaping our lives. The uncompromising work of the great people that remained steady in the midst of callous atrocities and unrelenting attacks on their dignity and stature has much to offer to our burnt souls. The times that we are bearing witness to is an assault on that hope. I want us to look at the most vulnerable bodies living in these pessimist times.

Lend an ear and pay attention to the musical whispers of those people who are warned not to cross the lines and remain in one's place like a permanently fixed graveyard. Involve your sweat in appreciating the sweet lives as these men and women, children and older people motion.

It is not a call to charitable everybody. It is an invocation rooted in provocation of the masses that are most causal and yet deliberately manhandled by the feared oppressor — the privileged.

The child who is unaware about the totems of society yearns for the impossible and holds on to the curiosity deeply held within her bloodstream, inherited from her heroic ancestors. As soon as reason enters the infant's brain, a heavy brick of caste is slapped on her fragile head, jetting the blood all over the innocent child's face. Divya, a nine-month old infant, and

her elder brother of two, Vaibhav, were burnt to ashes by the cowardly hyenas of the Rajput community in Ballabgarh (<https://www.deccanherald.com/content/507466/2-dalit-kids-burnt-alive.html>) of Haryana state.

We will take on these issues and many others, that is hoped will set alight the fire of humanitarianism fazed in the oppression of everyone.

Through this fortnightly column we aim to achieve what our ancestors so honestly bequeathed — to be brutally honest in truth-telling. We will simply tell the truth and nourish the altruistic character of pensive Dalitness.

Taking a stab at his first ever journalistic piece, Babasaheb Ambedkar lamented the recklessness of newspapers in handling Dalit issues. In his editorial written for the *Bahishkrut Bharat* on January 31, 1920, Ambedkar called out newspapers for holding their caste interests closer, thereby limiting the space for Dalit issues. Reflecting today, after 100 years, it appears no different. Ambedkar continued that it was important to create an independent space for Dalits in the national discourse.

We would like to sit in the same tradition and contribute excellence to demonstrate the gifted abilities we hold together as a proud community.

Since caste relies on pollution, we would like to walk into hackneyed spaces dominated by mono-castes and exhale a breath of fresh air, eliminating the odour of casteism. We will purify the unwelcoming spaces with the antidote of love and tenderness.

The Dalits are ready and, armed with sophistication, they will grant life to the

dying art of journalism.

Everyone coming under this shield will be granted life-long worth of work commitment towards emancipation from our despicable selves. For our despicable selves are trapped in the notions of prejudice and uncare. We will subvert and bring a common humanity to parlance. We believe in the humanity of all to the core. We refuse to give hatred and anger the last word. For the last word always will be of radical love — unbended and unfiltered, raw and fleshy.

This column hopes to be the voice of the unheard, unfused to the candour of appropriation. It will use this space to critically look at the grammars of the oppressive caste world.

In the times when media has crossed the morals of ethical businessness — if there exists such — we aim to create a launching pad to direct the attack at the same institutions which thrive on mediocre *savarna* merit. The gilded age of Indian media is being written in our presence for the wrong reasons. Rather than being critical of power, the media has chosen to sleep with the powers, performing all the *asanas* mentioned in the *Kamasutra*. Plutocracy is the lingua franca of current India when 24X7 cacophony is hitting a new low. Journalists are difficult to find these days. Ramp-walking, lime-light-seeking desperate hordes of insatiate souls are overpowering the journalist fraternity without deterrence.

Either way, the conservative and progressive individuals in the media empire find Dalits an issue of mild concern, tossing Dalits into a limited enigma of Dalit death reports. As if the media thrives on

Dalit assassination.

DALIT FREEDOM MOVEMENT

The Dalit Freedom Movement is to materialise emotions of freedom into concrete action. We need to acknowledge the quality and temerity of the Dalit freedom fighters who are fighting a battle against casteism, capitalism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all forms of structural inequalities, to establish an organic society deeply tied to uplifting the free voice of everybody.

In the Dalit Freedom Movement, Dalit art and Dalit culture sit at the foundation of dismantling hierarchy. Art provides a space to challenge and nurture humanity valued through one's existence, and not performance in the already unjust society.

We will put Dalit life, Dalit culture and Dalit world right at the centre, as all the *savarna* minorities flaunt it with pride. Based on the principle of equality and fairness, the readers will get equal opportunity to dive into the lives of Dalits and get educated.

This column is a modest start, yet unbridled by its audacity to hope more. We want to be ruthless in our criticisms of a system that should have gone by now. We want to be militant in our thoughts and in moral action, that warrants an immediate fixture of the problems that are heaped on our generations. It hopes to be a rallying cry for the new masses, galvanising the struggle of its identities in a society heavily policed by one's non-belonging.

The conversation began a year and a half ago. We discussed about the various

possibilities to make it work. After a series of discussions, I asked for a page in the newspaper that would account for Dalit and Adivasi stories (a quarter of the Indian population). I was told in a mild tone, "Let's begin with a column first and then expand".

I accepted with a determination to make it grow.

Let this space be a cultural outpost for bringing high-brow interactions and unrecognised but equally powerful metaphors of a rich culture. Arts, education, literature, academic, and modern forms of nu-genes that Dalits are inventing, in the urban shanties of overcrowded smoky cities to rural segregated huts. Creation and innovation sit at the crux of Dalits' secret to survival. The fortnightly column will have an experimental outlook. It will invite new voices to help us think collectively about issues of rational concern.

This space is aimed at philosophising the ontological and epistemological concerns of the Dalit stream. The origin of one's cry is to inject the warranted claims of human dignity. I want to create a new generation of writers and encourage the existing ones to risk breaking the barriers and to take a leap of faith in their own qualities.

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Yengde will curate the fortnightly 'Dalitality' column, starting today. He is available on @surajyengde

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Sanitation is a human right

LAST WEEK I was reminded of the reason why I endorsed Narendra Modi in this column when he first became prime minister in 2014. I believed then that he had been unjustly maligned in the mainstream (read liberal, Leftist) media as the 'Butcher of Gujarat' for something that has happened under other chief ministers who have totally escaped censure. The only pogrom by the Indian State against a community was against the Sikhs. Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister. The 'liberals' who ensured that Modi was denied a visa to enter the United States, until he became prime minister, never held Rajiv to account.

Now they are at it again. Next week Modi is due to be honoured in New York by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with the Goalkeepers Global Goals Award. In an interview to *The Hindustan Times* recently, Gates explained that it was because of the Swachh Bharat campaign's success in building the infrastructure of sanitation across rural India that Modi was receiving the award. He said, "The quality of life and the number of diseases caused by poor sanitation are terrible and yet a lot of governments are unwilling to talk about it because it isn't easy to fix and it takes time. It's a topic people just don't want to talk about."

It is because we in India did not want to talk about it that until the Swachh Bharat campaign Indians continued to 'defecate everywhere'. When Vidia Naipaul pointed this out in *An Area of Darkness*, he was reviled for being 'anti-India'. But, when Modi said in his first speech from the Red Fort that it was time for this ancient Indian practice to stop, we had to take notice. Had he not lent his personal support to the movement to stop open defecation, it would not have been possible for the Government of India to declare on Gandhi Jayanti this year that every district in India is now ODF or open defecation free. Of course, there are those who continue to defecate in the open, but as someone who has tracked Swachh Bharat carefully, I believe that the successes of the programme are more to be celebrated than whining about its inevitable, small failures.

The 'liberals' campaigning to get the Gates Foundation to cancel Modi's award could not care less. A group that calls itself 'Stop Genocide' delivered a petition with more than 100,000 signatures at the headquarters of the Gates Foundation in Seattle some days ago demanding that the award be 'rescinded'. They said Modi's human rights record was reason enough for this. The charges now go beyond what happened in Gujarat in 2002. Modi is accused of violating human rights in Kashmir and of allowing his supporters to abuse the human rights of Muslims through vigilante violence. The National Register of Citizens is also listed as something designed to harass Muslims.

Let me clarify here that I disapprove of petty officials deciding who is a citizen and who is not. It is not as if millions of people are flocking to India's penurious shores in search of a better life. Those who come are only the most wretched and desperate people on the planet, and if they find hope in India, we should be happy. Let me also clarify that I believe there are now distinct signs that the Modi government is beginning to lose the peace in Kashmir. I cannot understand at all why political leaders who have risked their lives and political careers to support India's case in Kashmir should be detained under repressive and ugly laws.

Let me also say that my support for Modi in this column has never been blind. I have been so critical of him on so many issues that when I last ran into him at the Independence Day party in Rashtrapati Bhawan, he gave me an icy stare and was warm and friendly to the other journalists who greeted him. Coomi Kapoor (Contributing Editor, *The Indian Express*) can bear witness because she was there and he chatted happily to her in Gujarati while giving me the icy stare. So I am no blind *bhakt* as some of my Leftist colleagues like to think I am. But, I cannot for the life of me understand what Modi's so-called crimes in the human rights department have to do with sanitation.

It is my view that sanitation should be considered a fundamental human right. And, if the Swachh Bharat movement wants to prove that it deserves this award then it should immediately start a campaign to end manual scavenging and send to jail municipal contractors who exploit destitute, desperate people to clean city sewers by hand. The Supreme Court described these sewers as gas chambers recently. Swachh Bharat must as its next step declare that it will end the truly shameful practice of manual scavenging in all forms by October 2, 2020.

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen_singh

Annihilation of nature

GAINED IN TRANSLATION



G MADHUSOODANAN

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THE KERALA Sahitya Akademi published its first ever, comprehensive, environmental history in October 2017, that I wrote on the Akademi's request. A month later, the first cyclone in the history of modern Kerala was reported. As per weather records, cyclones generally originated in the Bay of Bengal and made landfall on India's eastern coast — the west was safe from cyclones. Through Cyclone Ockhi rose in the Bay of Bengal, it wreaked havoc on the west.

It shook my belief that Kerala was safe from natural tragedies. For days, I investigated if anything unusual was being reported from the Arabian Sea. Some research revealed that surface temperature of the Arabian Sea had been rising since 1997 due to carbon emissions, turning the sea restive.

An extremely severe cyclonic storm, Nilofar, had prevailed in the Arabian Sea between October 25 and 31 in 2014. In 2015, two more extremely severe cyclonic storms were reported. In October 2018, Cyclone Luban originated in the Arabian Sea and Cyclone Titli in the Bay of Bengal. It was the second time in history that cyclones formed in both the seas at the same time. Luban made landfall at Salala in Oman and Titli on the Odisha-Andhra coast. According to scientists, cyclones that originate from the Arabian Sea do not change route and make landfall on the eastern coast.

The increase in sea surface temperature in the Arabian Sea would spell trouble for India's western coast. Not to mention that high-intensity rains cause floods. In 2018, the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology and IIT Gandhinagar published research studies substantiating the claim that the increase of temperature in the Arabian Sea has been causing high-intensity rains in different parts of India.

The impact of climate change started making minor appearances in the country around 2005 and majorly around 2017. When we get ready to take on these changes, we would know how nature took a beating during the previous two centuries

and consider corrective steps.

India's natural wealth didn't suffer much till the advent of colonisation. Richard Grove has argued that the age of colonialism was also the period of Green Imperialism. Starting the beginning of the 19th century, the British cleared forests in areas that today come under states such as Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Assam and West Bengal, for commercial plantations. The forests of the Western Ghats were mostly climax ecosystems, with no human intervention. Such forests gave birth to perennial rivers by absorbing rainwater and maintaining streams and rivulets. The Forest Survey of India defines dense forests as forests with more than 70 per cent tree cover, which is just 8 per cent in Kerala, accounting for just 4 per cent of the land area. The deluge of 2018 was not the first in Kerala. Two other floods were recorded in the state in 1341 and in 1924. Several corroborative evidences link the floods of 2018 and 2019 to climate change.

According to a 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), world nations have time till 2030 to hold global warming level to 1.5 degrees Centigrade. If carbon emission continues at the current level, warming may exceed 1.5 degrees. To hold it at 1.5 degree C, greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced from 5,200 tonnes to 2,500 tonnes — a decline of nearly 45 per cent.

According to IPCC findings, high-intensity rainfall is the key result of climate change in India. It says that India's annual temperature may rise (compared to 1970) by 1.7 to 2.2 degrees C by 2030. It will lead to drastic increase in high-intensity rainfall during monsoons as well as cyclones, floods and drought. However, the IPCC did not foresee the rise of surface sea temperature of the Arabian Sea, that we mentioned.

Between 2003 and 2017, India witnessed 22 cyclones that claimed over 700 lives. However, the country witnessed the severe impact of climate change in 2018 when between April and June, over 50 cyclones hit 16 states, killing over 1,000 people and destroying crops.

We cannot do much to avoid recurrence of such incidents but we can focus on climate adaptation or climate proofing activities. In the building of new India, we should try and restore the lost peculiarities of nature. Environmental restoration should be a key factor in future development.

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Translated from Malayalam by Yamini Nair

SHE SAID

Many moons, much maths ago



SHALINI LANGER

A COUPLE of days is all it took for us to move on from talking about trajectory, deceleration, orbits and Moon terrain, to tying ourselves up in knots asking, by way of gravity, what's maths got to do with economics.

However, who are we kidding? That Friday/Saturday at ISRO, where women acted as mission directors, men cried in public, and prime ministers were both broad-chested and large-hearted, was a blip. In the days preceding and that followed, our higher education institutes fell further down global rankings; the CBSE put in place a system to have two kinds of maths at school so as to check depressing failure rates; a TV anchor passed off a vinyl night-suit, a scooter helmet and socks for gloves as clothes one would need "in case of a colony on Moon"; more than one of them equated India's Moon mission with stripping "chaand"/"Islam's noon" off Pakistan's flag; one anchor threatened that India's next launch would be to Lahore; and a minister drew a much-too-pat equation to explain declining car sales.

And yet, ISRO, blocking all the noise, did almost get the job done. Vikram and Pragyan may be lost, frozen in what must be an awkward tilted position for eternity, but that part of the Moon will indeed forever remain Indian.

To us of a certain vintage, what can be more fitting? Whether nights slept on terrace, hide-and-seek games during power cuts, shimmer on the water on rare ocean-side vacations, the promise of a flirtation, or the declaration of a love — the Moon frames so many of our growing-up memories.

To most of us, Moon was also our window into space — the most magical thing in the sky that hinted at the mystery of that expanse, without any of the terrors of it. It also seemed almost at hand, not just because Neil Armstrong had been there, but also because of the many stories and lullabies of childhood, and songs of Bollywood, in which it figured.

Then one day father got a glossy picture book on astronomy, a rare acquisition in those times, made possible by



Illustration: Suvajit Dey

erstwhile Soviet Union's largesse of subsidised literature. Space became even more magical, about and beyond both Newton's discovery of gravity (yes, we couldn't have gone to Moon without doing this maths) and Einstein's expansion on it (or hoped to land without working out this equation). So many stars, planets, moons, asteroids, comets, debris, artificial satellites, held together as well as kept apart by gravity — which had found its perfect balance at just the required moment to sustain life on Earth. Chaos or intelligent design, science or God, who could deny that was a miracle?

I decided then that I would be an astronomer, a dream that lasted well into learning about Kepler's Law (more maths). For a while the favourite game of my sister and me was sitting atop a pile of quilts, and imagining it was our spaceship which required us to do everything from cooking to sleeping to bathing in that small square. Visiting friends joined us, and it required every bit of ingenuity to fit us all in (for, $a = f/m$, or increasing acceleration so as to lift off our "rocket" meant either increasing force or decreasing mass — maths again).

Still, it was an interest difficult to sustain through the tedium and amount of science at school. The spark lit by India's first man in space in 1984, an event generating as much national pride as now, even on TV with graying black and white images (point to be noted), had got snuffed much, much earlier. Over the years, Hollywood turned space into mostly aliens, alien attacks, and *Interstellar*'s mind-bending, time-altering, joy-killing physics.

Then came Chandrayaan-2, India's

first venture to Moon's surface. As the excitement built up, I tried to join in. However, it was not just the passing years or the blinding lights on Earth now that dimmed Moon's shimmer. Nor was it the disillusionment wrought by the media spectacle. It was also what that Moon's shimmer hid. In a touching book I had read, *Maggot Moon*, a regime fakes a Moon expedition to hide its excesses. In another, *The Book Thief*, a second regime's victim sneaks up from his hiding place on lucky nights to catch a brief slice of the sky. As the country gazed in (quite valid) admiration at its screens that Friday night, I couldn't shake off those two stories from my mind, and wonder: does the Moon shine as brightly for us all? That is the cost of growing up, I guess.

But growing up also helps one spot the hope in the hype, and on two aspects, the ISRO mission did shine a light: in showcasing the power of will and that of forgiveness. On that mission floor, we saw that superwomen come in all forms — most often in *saris* and *salwar-kameez*. And 'supermen'? They may have learnt that, in these muscular times, tears, hugs and forgiveness could be superpowers too.

As for Pragyan and Vikram, so long. Slip into that lunar night with the thought that we will remember, maybe even serenade you with that song *Moon River*, about wanderlust, about "Two drifters off to see the world... There's such a lot of world to see..."

National Editor Shalini Langer will curate the fortnightly 'She Said' column, starting today shalini.langer@expressindia.com

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

BE CAREFUL what you wish for. When you get it, you may not like it.

This seems to be the situation with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for the BJP in Assam. The headlines are about the 19 lakh left out. People from outside Assam, home and abroad, say that 19 lakh is too large a number. The BJP has been saying for three decades that the infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims since 1971 had been massive. It was expecting four

No winners in the NRC exercise

or five times the excluded numbers. Alas, once you start counting, guesswork stops.

Let us look at the numbers at stake. In any such statistical exercise, it is routine to say plus, minus 5 per cent. The number excluded is 5 per cent of the total. Statisticians would dismiss these numbers as random measurement errors. The easy (and statistically sound) way would be to say no one will be excluded whatever their papers.

The reason for saying this is not political but simple understanding of the difficulty of measuring a large population accurately. Remember the debate about unemployment rates.

In the NRC there are special reasons for expecting large errors. The Indian government, since the British colonial times, has

always begun with distrust of the population it governs. Independence changed the colour of the Ruler, not the attitude of those in charge towards their subjects (they get treated as citizens only on polling days). One requirement of the NRC is that you produce written evidence of your residency in Assam. These papers have to predate 1971. Forty-eight-year-old pieces of (government-quality, inferior) paper would be in tatters even if you had preserved them.

Whichever way the game ends, there are no winners. Those who want no exclusion would be unhappy and internationally India's reputation will suffer as an inhumane polity. The Assamese who began this agitation way back in the Rajiv Gandhi days will also never believe the

numbers unless they discover that these are huge. For them only 'born and bred' in Assam will qualify, but if I am from a tribe living in Assam but not Assamese speaker, do I have to produce paper evidence? Why did Rajiv Gandhi sign the pact (Assam Accord) in the first place?

The BJP would also like a crore or more 'infiltrators'. But in their search for Bangladeshi Muslims, they should be careful whether their dream of One Nation is under threat.

What about people from other parts of India who have moved to Assam and have no papers before 1971 proving Assamese residence? Especially if they are Indian Muslims. Are they infiltrators? If the NRC is repeated in each state, are out of state persons infiltrators? There were

agitations against South Indians in Mumbai by the Shiv Sena in the 1960s. If the NRC is done in Maharashtra, will only those born and bred in Maharashtra or only Marathi-speaking people count as genuine?

For 70 years, Indian economy has never grown fast enough to create sufficient jobs. So there are demands for local jobs for local people, defined as local-language speakers. The NRC will give support to such demands. We will have 29 citizenships for 29 states (Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh will become Union Territories on October 31) with 'outsiders' being hounded. Do we want to break up India in search for Bangladeshi Muslims who may have arrived 48 years ago?