

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Hindutva
in modern
India

ON THE day that we sought to become the fourth country in the world to land a spacecraft on the moon it depressed me hugely to read this story about cows in a Mumbai newspaper. "Breeding female cows will help end lynching: Giriraj", said the headline. The story that followed said the Minister for Animal Husbandry, Giriraj Singh, told reporters that the Government of India was working on a scheme to artificially inseminate cows to ensure that mostly female calves were born. The minister believes this will persuade cattle farmers to stop abandoning their animals and this will help reduce lynchings. Does the Minister of Animal Husbandry not know that it is not on account of stray cattle that Muslims and Dalits have been lynched with disturbing frequency in recent years?

Muslim dairy farmers have been attacked while transporting their own cows, not stray cattle. And, Dalits have been attacked when caught skinning dead cows to provide raw material to leather, pharmaceutical and related industries. The lynching epidemic has forced dairy farmers to abandon old cows instead of selling them for slaughter, and it is this that has caused numbers of stray cattle to grow alarmingly. In states like Uttar Pradesh, they now roam in packs and have become feral. An old lady was killed by a cow recently and the video of this killing was uploaded. In states across northern India gangs of wild cows have started ravaging crops. The menace is so serious that farmers are forced to waste their meagre earnings on fencing their fields. What really depressed me about the minister's comments was that they reminded me that this obsession with protecting cows has caused primitive hatreds and hideous violence to rise to the surface in our dear motherland. And, this makes a very bad fit with our lunar dreams.

In this column I have often blamed cow vigilantism on Hindutva. I was wrong. Last week, I read two biographies of the father of Hindutva, Vinayak Savarkar, and discovered that one of the things he disapproved of totally was cow worship. Let me use Savarkar's own words as quoted by Vikram Sampath in his biography. "The symbol of Hindutva is not the cow but the man-lion or Narasimha... considering the cow to be divine and worshipping her has rendered the entire Hindu nation docile like the cow."

From the two biographies I read of the revolutionary that the Congress party erased from our history books, I discovered that I was completely wrong about Hindutva. Instead of being an ideology akin to Nazism, as the prime minister of our neighbouring Islamic Republic believes, it is an ideology of Hindu reform. Savarkar rejects the caste system and makes a serious case for Hindus to respect science and modern technology. He is scathing not just about Gandhiji's attempts to blame the Bihar earthquake on untouchability but also about the Shankaracharya saying that it happened because of attempts to end the caste system.

Having grown up believing that Hindutva was a dangerous, divisive ideology, I find myself surprised at how important an idea it could be for our times. Savarkar was no fan of the RSS but since the BJP's motherhood has huge influence in today's India, it is my sincere hope that Mohan Bhagwat finds time to read the two biographies I just finished reading. He may discover that what India needs to build on is the very enlightened view of Hindutva that Savarkar evolved in the long years he spent in prison. On days of dark despair in his tiny cell in Port Blair's notorious Cellular Jail, he used thorns and whatever else he could find to write his thoughts on the walls. He was denied books, paper and ink and spent months in solitary confinement.

It is true that he was unsympathetic to Muslims, but he would have disapproved of them being killed on the excuse of saving cows. He would have approved proudly of India trying to enter her name in the small list of countries which have dared to explore the unknown frontiers of outer space. At the risk of invoking the wrath of secular trolls, I am going to say that I believe his ideas of modernity and cultivating the scientific spirit make him more relevant today than Gandhiji.

The Mahatma was a very great man, so I speak with respect, but it is hard not to admit that some of his ideas were obscurantist to the point of being dangerous. Had they been acted upon, India would today have been pacifist enough to be fully vulnerable once more to be invaded by people with only contempt for her ancient heritage, her wise religions and her vast contribution to civilisation. Even as we keep our eyes on the moon this week, we must not take them too far away from the Islamic Republic next door.

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen_singh

The artist at the airport

SAEED AKHTAR
MIRZA

I AM AT Mumbai airport waiting to take my flight to Ahmedabad. Since I have arrived very early I settle down and begin reading a book that I have brought along. As I read, I hear a voice call out my name. "Excuse me, are you Mr Saeed Mirza?"

I look up to see a tall young man staring down at me enquiringly. As he adjusts the backpack over his grey T-shirt I notice he has a kind of gaunt face and long curly hair. I am surprised by the seriousness of his face... it seems strange on a man so obviously young. I also notice he is wearing slacks that are an incredible electric blue. As I try to take in all this information about the man, his voice interrupts my thoughts. "Are you?" he asks again and this time I recollect and nod. The young man breaks into a wide smile which lightens up his serious face and I smile too.

"Sir, I am a big fan of yours... I have seen most of your films... some documentaries, one of your travelogues across India... and I have even read two of your books..."

The young man's smile widens. "Big fan..." he adds. "Thank you," I reply. "And what do you do?"

"Sir, I am a painter. I came to check things out in Mumbai and now I am going back home."

"Why don't you sit down?" The young man does so and for the next 10 minutes he tells me everything about himself. He is 23 years old and from Udaipur. He took to painting early in life encouraged by his parents and despite the tremendous odds today he has almost made it. It was tough going for a young dreamer in a small town but the struggle was worth it.

"I just got Rs 14 lakh for one painting and I am elated... It was bought by a group of buyers in Europe and they have encouraged me to carry on. It must be some record for a painter like me who is just starting out... isn't it?"

I smile and nod as he continues about his sojourn in Mumbai.

"I felt so happy so I came to Mumbai to meet the famous art gallery owners... to check them out... but they put me off..."

"Why?" "They told me that I am too ambitious... I should create smaller works, not large ones... that is how young painters start... start small and then grow..." I don't

agree. I will paint the way I want to... nobody has the right to tell me what size my paintings should be... am I right?"

I like his robust attitude and say, "I agree. Paint the way you want to."

"Thank you sir... they think they are big shots... just because they own galleries in Mumbai... so I have rejected them. In three days I made the rounds of all the galleries and I spent the rest of the week travelling from Colaba to the Prithvi Theatre in Juhu and saw plays... met some wonderful people... now I am going back... would you like to see some of my work... on my phone...?"

I hesitate a bit and then nod. As soon as I do so he whips out his mobile phone and begins showing me his paintings and adds a running commentary that describes his work... "I don't agree with realism... I prefer the abstract... I like the work of Ram Kumar... Akbar Padamsee... abstract work is much more free... so much is left to the imagination... which painters do you like?"

As I view the rapidly changing images I say,

"Well... quite a few... let me see... I like the works of Sudhir Patwardhan, Tyeb Mehta, Atul Dodiya, Nalini Malani, Ghulam Sheik... lots of different kinds of painters..."

"Do you like the works of Ram Kumar and Akbar Padamsee?"

"Of course I do." "Do you like my work?"

I stop looking at the paintings and look at the young man. I realise he is serious about knowing my opinion. So I say,

"Can I see the work once again...?"

I go over his work slowly this time and with each piece of work I tell him what I feel... the ones that I like and the ones I have problems with. In fact, there are two works that I find quite remarkable and the young man tells me that they have already been booked by the same group in Europe that had bought his earlier painting. I smile.

"You have some ready buyers... you must be a very happy man..."

"I am sir... really..."

Then slowly his face turns serious.

"But today I am not." I am surprised

"Why?" I ask.

"Haven't you read the newspapers this morning?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Look what the government has done about Kashmir..."

I realise that he is talking about the revoking of Article 370 by the government of India. It was announced in Parliament yesterday (on August 6) and the headlines in the newspapers had been euphoric. There were numerous reports of rejoicing all around the country. I look at the

young man silently... he seems to be in deep thought and then he began to speak very softly.

"Most of the people in our country are so happy... shouldn't I be happy too? But I am not. I know this is a democracy and the will of the people matters... if there was a vote now, 90 per cent of the people of India would say they agree with the decision... but... we didn't ask the people to whom this decision matters most... the Kashmiris... are they not Indians... does their opinion not matter?"

The young man turns to look at me in anguish and I keep silent. Then he says softly,

"Sometimes democracy can be ugly... today I am sad... and confused... is it okay to be this way...?"

I smile and put my hand on his shoulder.

"It's absolutely okay to be this way... you are not just a painter... you are an artist."

He smiles too, just then I am informed that my flight is ready to depart. I get up and wish him goodbye. I slowly make my way towards the gate and as I do so I turn to look at the young man one more time. He is looking at me so I wave to him and he waves back.

The writer is a filmmaker, writer, traveller and thinker

Baby who lived, and
baby who should have

SHALINI LANGER

IT'S BEEN some days since I read Aieman's story. Every hour, I have grappled with myself on what I would tell the 26-year-old sister of my colleague in Srinagar, who lost her unborn baby amidst the Kashmir lockdown. Nothing I tell her would be enough, but not telling her anything... whose purpose does that serve?

So, here, let me tell her a story, about another time, another baby, another city — hoping that if and when she reads it, she knows that her baby is grieved, that he won't be forgotten.

December 22, 2000, was a sunny day, unusual for a winter that was about to take a turn for the worse. I had one of my regular appointments with my gynaecologist. The baby wasn't due for another 20 days or so, and I hoped to use the maternity break to catch up on reading and to finish a pair of woollen booties — both tasks I had enthusiastically decided I was up to.

There was some bad news though. My placenta had started drying up, and the doctor advised a week's hospitalisation. The pregnancy wouldn't last full term, she predicted, and joked that maybe I would have a millennium baby, right on New Year. I returned home, packed a bag, gave a lingering look to the chest of drawers I had readied for the baby — with everything Dettol-sanitised — and headed to the hospital.

It was sometime around 8 pm that the nurse walked in for her routine pre-lights out round. The hospital was retiring for the night — the buzz of the corridors had died down, rendering the phones ringing at periodic intervals ominous, and the antiseptic air lay heavy — when she placed a cone-shaped object upside down over my stomach. It was much like those hearing pieces that amateur spies fashion out of glasses to eavesdrop. She listened once, then twice, moved the thing around, and listened more intently. I learnt much later that the simple thing that was a Pinard Horn, a stethoscope to hear foetal heartbeat.

Within minutes, I was rushed to a pre-labour room where they told me they couldn't hear the baby's heartbeat and showed me a graph sheet with zig-zag lines of the kind seen in Bollywood hospital scenes. As I tried to understand what that meant, my gynaecologist/obstetrician rushed in. She is a beautiful woman, the red of her *bindi* standing out against the silver grey of her hair, the red of her bangles and the Punjabi *parandi* in her hair striking against the white of her doc-

tor's coat, and her diminutive size belying the authority with which she commandeers a room. For the first time, I saw her tousled, missing the bangles, the *parandi*.

She said they would have to immediately do a Caesarean. The rest of what followed is a daze — the preparation for the operation, transfer to the OT, seeing my family blurred without my glasses and stupidly beaming at them (I can still feel that smile), confident completely in my doctor's abilities, and breaking into a teary laugh as the doctor pronounced it was a boy, a very tiny premature boy, but healthy. And he had all 10 fingers and all 10 toes. Somehow that detail, in all the craziness of that day, seemed to matter.

I would learn later that for my 2.1-kg son, the day was not over yet. He struggled to breathe, and for a while, there was panic that the hospital didn't have a ventilator in its neo-natal unit. Ultimately it turned out okay, and 18 years later, the baby who scarily fit into the crook of my arm is now that same length taller than me.

What if I wasn't in the Capital? What if the phones didn't work — this was still a time when very few had mobiles? What if my family couldn't reach because there were "restrictions" outside? What if the doctor couldn't be contacted? What if, in short, I was in Aieman's shoes?

On just another "normal" day, in just another "normal" city, Aieman went into hospital for her delivery. Sometime during the day, her baby developed trouble breathing and died even as the senior doctor couldn't be reached. Her brother spent the next several hours running around Srinagar trying to inform family members of the same.

But would I dare put this question to Aieman? For, don't I dread what she would say in reply? The 26-year-old, the same age as I was in 2000, waiting for her first child with as much anticipation, with a wardrobe put together as lovingly, would be right in turning around and asking me: whose shoes am I really in?

To Aieman, I am the biggest mass of social media users in the world who hasn't blinked an eye over 7 million men, women and children blocked out from the world now for a month. To Aieman, I am the voter in the world's biggest democracy whose eyes won't see and ears won't hear. To Aieman, I am the mother from one of those parent WhatsApp groups who fuss over the smallest details of their children, but who never cried over hers. To Aieman, I am the silent audience applauding the government's semantics over Pakistan, while words like normalcy, detention, curfew lose meaning.

One day, when she can, and she must, Aieman will ask that question. Would we have an answer?

shalini.langer@expressindia.com

GAINED IN
TRANSLATIONBALBIR MADHOPURI
ਬਲਬੀਰ ਮਾਧੋਪੁਰੀ

COMPOSED BY Guru Ravidas, 40 poems set to 16 ragas are a part of the Guru Granth Sahib. Many verses written by him are available outside of it, and imbued with the idea of god and *nirgun* (formless) *darshan*. His *bani* (poetic compositions), a powerful voice against untouchability, caste and social injustice, has long been a source of rationation for the downtrodden to drive social change. In his attempt to sensitise people through his verses, Ravidas held caste discrimination as a mental disease at the root of all social strife. He also held forth the idea of one god as the creator of the universe.

Jaat-paat ke pher mah urjhai rahe sabh log/ Mannukhta ka khat hai Ravidas jat ka roag (Everyone is trapped in the caste-system/ Ravidas, humanity is being eaten up by the disease called caste) and; *Ravidas ek Braham ka hoye rahyo sagal pasara/ Ek mat sab ghat sirjai eike sab kou sarjanhar* (All are made from the same clay, by the same creator).

In fact, Guru Ravidas, along with his contemporaries, launched a campaign using *satsangs* for a more equal society. Kabir and other saint-poets joined him. He gave a voice to the voiceless and made weavers, cobblers, barbers, butchers, washermen and others from the artisan community part of this wave. Sant Ravidas used language that avoided hyperbole and was easily understood by the common folk. This is the reason his poetry became a weapon in the fight for equality. His people-friendly verses like *Man changa tan kathori vich Ganga* (If the mind is pure, then Ganga flows in the small earthen pot) is part of lexicon.

As he took his writings to the far corners of a multi-religious country, Guru Ravidas told people to see Ram and Rahim, Krishna and Karim as one. He put forth his views about Hindu-Muslim unity.

Mandir Masjid duo ek hai, eh ma antar nahi/ Ravidas Ram-Rehman ka jhagra koyi nahi (The temple and the mosque are one. There is no difference between the two. Ravidas says that there is no dispute between Ram and Rehman.)

Six centuries ago, Guru Ravidas held in his heart a pious desire to create a society where no one faced discrimination on the basis of caste, gender, social and economic status; where people would pay no taxes and enjoy the freedom to freely migrate to the places of their choice. He envisioned a society with people living in harmony with-



Illustration : Suvajit Dey

out any sort of discrimination. He named this ideal society "Begampur (a place with no pain)". *Ashabad* gives a detailed description of this in Guru Granth Sahib:

The regal real with the sorrowless name: They call it Begumpura, a place with no pain/ No taxes or cares, nor own property there/ No wrongdoing, worry, terror or torture/ Oh my brother, I've come to take it as my own/ My distant home, where everything is right/ That imperial kingdom is rich and secure/ Where none are third or second—all are one/ Its food and drink are famous, and those who live there/ Dwell in satisfaction and in wealth/ They do this or that; they walk where they wish/ They stroll through fabled places unchallenged/ Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free/ Those who walk beside me are my friends. (Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 32.)

Guru Ravidas praised work done by hand and gave it a special place in his writings. Colouring leather, shoemaking tools, his caste are mentioned with pride. In his poems, he presented his vision for a world with a democratic and socialist set-up.

Aisa chahun raaj main, jahan miley sabhan ko ann/ Chote-barai sabh sum basai, Ravidas rahai parsan (I want a regime where everybody has food/ Ravidas will be happy to see a country where there is no discrimination between lower and upper classes).

Considering this, many Sikh scholars call Bhagat Bani within Guru Granth Sahib a Dalit text. In his opinion, Guru Nanak Dev changed the entire Bhakti tradition into a formidable wave. Sikh scholar Jaswant Singh Zafar in his book *Bhagat Satguru Hamara* has argued that Guru Arjan Dev, who compiled Guru Granth Sahib, considered Ravidas Bani a source of inspiration. He, like Guru Ramdas, praised his writings in his Bani, which is recorded in pages 1,207 and 835 of the Guru Granth Sahib.

It is also important to reflect on the reality of how the Ravidas community rediscovered this radical saint and how it once again attained a social revival. It goes back to June 11 or 12 in 1926 when Gadar Party revolutionary Mangu Ram established 'Adi

Dharam Mandal' in his village Muggowal in Hoshiarpur district. A packed house declared Ravidas, Kabir, Namdev and Rishi Balmiki as their Adi Guru. Under Mangu Ram's leadership as president, a picture of Guru Ravidas was brought from Banaras in 1934. Its copies were distributed among 36 lower castes (Adi Dharmi community). For these castes that were then considered untouchables (now Scheduled Castes) it felt like a new lease of life. In undivided Punjab, and even after Partition, there were several temples and gurdwaras where these castes were not allowed to enter. This forced the Adi Dharmis to set up their own places of worship. As of now, Dalits have 10,000 temples or gurdwaras across 12,500 villages of Punjab. In neighbouring Himachal Pradesh, these religious institutions are called *Adi Dwaras* where the *Adi Prakash Granth* — which has 1,248 pages — is kept for worship. Different historical places linked to Guru Ravidas have been identified and commemorative structures built there by those managing *Adi Dharam's* affairs. Among these, Guru Ravidas Janam Sthan Mandir, in Kashi, Uttar Pradesh, is the most prominent. It is believed that Guru Ravidas was born near this city in the 14th century.

Guru Ravidas's social consciousness is enunciated best through his lines *Maati ka putra kaise nachta hai/ Dekhe, dekhe, sune, bole, dauro phirat hai* (How does the puppet of clay dance. He looks and listens, hears and speaks, and runs around).

This verse carries a deep meaning. While it warns an individual against being unjust, it also inspires him to do good. In another verse — *Satsanghi mil rahiye madho jaise madhup makhira* (Always stick together in prayer like honey bees) — he asks the Dalits to band together like bees in a hive. And if someone points a finger at you, then fight back as one to protect yourself.

Madhopuri is a Punjabi poet and director, Punjabi Sahit Sabha Translated from Punjabi by Saurabh Kapoor

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

I WAS 13 at the time. In our poky *sarkari* flat in Bombay, my father was having a furious, noisy argument with my two maternal uncles. The neighbours were worried. They thought it was a property quarrel which would end up in violence.

Alas, we did not have property to quarrel over. The dispute was about Kashmir. Jawaharlal Nehru had just sacked Sheikh Abdullah, put him under house arrest

Kashmir: What now?

without bringing any charges and put Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, Abdullah's deputy, as prime minister of J&K.

Whatever sweet words Nehru may have used in his promise to the people of Kashmir that he would honour their special status ended in that moment in 1953. Soon, the 'prime minister' of J&K became 'chief minister' as in rest of India, and the Sadar-i-Riyasat became the governor appointed from New Delhi.

Sheikh Abdullah was never tried but kept under house arrest. Abdullah was just as arbitrarily released and then Indira Gandhi gifted him and his heirs and successors the proprietorship of J&K. The more the powers were taken away from the J&K Assembly, the more

fervent was the cry from the Congress that J&K as a Muslim-majority autonomous province (and not the Muslims elsewhere in India) was a proof of India's secularism.

After 1989, when the Taliban and related Islamist terror organisations poured in from across the border, J&K was ethnically cleansed of Pandits as New Delhi watched. After that, the Indian Army became a permanent feature of the land. As did the separatist movement.

The last 30 years have been fed by several delusions. India pretended when it suited it that J&K was sovereign and MPs needed special permission to visit it. For no other state were Internet and mobile telephone connections shut when the

Prime Minister visited, except in J&K. Kashmir was and was not a part of India; it was and was not autonomous. It was the only state where between 40,000 and 50,000 people, local and infiltrators, have been killed in the last 30 years.

On 5/6 August, there came legal clarity. The steady de facto erosion of political autonomy for J&K has been ended. The Line of Control is now an international border between India and Pakistan. The partition of India is at long last complete.

Now what? First, the urgent restoration of normalcy, such as it was, before August. Kashmir may no longer be a bilateral issue but it is a global concern. Every day of delay makes the move look more sin-

ister both in Kashmir and around the world. Relax the curfew and face the riots. There is no point in waiting for the day when the curfew can be relaxed without angry reactions. The anger in Kashmir Valley has a long history. To expect it to die due to a constitutional change would be a delusion. It would require concrete policy changes in economic and social sectors to heal the wounds of the past 65 years.

The Prime Minister has promised a bright future. Integration of the region into India should prove the key to bringing the standard and quality of living in J&K rapidly up to the level in rest of India in terms of income as well as human development, especially for women.