

AFTER-COMERS CANNOT GUESS

The core conflict in the primary epic, even an undergraduate literature student learns, is about the honour of a woman – Sita, Draupadi, Helen. The story spreads over war against the villain to restore that honour, to take the old, familiar world back to normal. Now take a closer view and what you get to know is that essentially every war is about territory, brute assertion of a potentate's might to capture, control someone else's land. And a deeper reading of the fertility myths in almost every culture shows the woman, or the female deity, as an extension of earth. This sublimation of human relationships into the elements has been elegantly captured by the *Rig veda*:

The Earth is mother; I am son of Earth

The Raingiver is my father; may he shower on us blessings!

(*Rig veda*: 5.84)

The highest creative expressions have in a sense always been a celebration of this idea: land as the basic identity of man. His primal ambition. With the creation of wealth and technology-propelled means to capture more and more markets, the new corporate nabobs want land as evidence of consolidation of their economic might. The notions of their success – abstracted as equities and bank deposits – cry for a grandiose expression, a magnificent structure inside an urban conglomerate, an island off the coast, an exclusive ranch sprawling for miles, a private beach. These are just not acquisitions to testify to one's success but a reminder to the world of someone's glory. Every wannabe businessman therefore wants land, a lot of it, to raise mansions and monuments, and plinths of further success, production units to be as conveniently located as possible. Well, come to think of it, in a free, democratic society there is nothing wrong either with wealth creation or setting up industry. And certainly not with personal milestones. The problem is the war between the owners of farmlands, *kisans* – big and small – and the corporate world is an extremely asymmetric one. Arraigned against the richest businessmen with phenomenal clout and access to powers that be are inarticulate and vulnerable farmers. This is a battle whose outcome has already been foretold.

From Delhi drive into Haryana, in any direction: looking at the unending concrete forests one gets an uneasiness, struck by fear – fear of an entire state getting wiped out by ugly urban footprints. More or less the same threat looms over western Uttar Pradesh. Lush green fields give way to nondescript construction sites. With those fields go a lot of other things – language, rites, rituals, cloying smell of *gur*, a way of life. Yesterday's sturdy farmer turns into an inept property dealer or roadside vendor. The farmer's dislocation, in fact, his humiliation is a pathetic commentary on the Indian journey. This culture, to begin with, was an agrarian society with the Aryans settling as village communities taking to agriculture. The early Vedic life was a celebration of the rural idyll. Today, land which is basic to this social picture, is under tremendous assault. There was a time when land was auspicious; the Vedas refer to rituals performed at the opening of a new canal. For a people whose life revolved around the festivities of sowing and harvesting, land was the outer limit of imagination.

Now land is mere real estate.

One tends to think of the world of Thomas Hardy's novels – south and southwest of England, which he called Wessex. Horse-drawn carriages, hay wagons, farmers coming to the weekly corn market, the inn one could walk into for a sherry – it's an enchanting world. The warmth and camaraderie of

small-town life in the middle of rural wilderness with glimpses of the old aristocracy just cannot be bartered away for any amount of development. The glass-and-steel shopping malls are no recompense for the flavour of the grain market. That world needs to be preserved.

I once travelled to Longowal village in Sangrur to attend a function commemorating the *martyrdom* of Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, the wise Akali leader gunned down by militants soon after he signed an agreement with the Centre – known as the Rajiv-Longowal Accord – in 1985 to restore peace in Punjab. For me it was a revelation – students and activists sitting along with hefty Sikh farmers in the heart of Punjab’s rural hinterland to recall the moderate leader’s bold move despite threats from the hardliners. But this is not about the anniversary meeting. The sprightly young driver of our car, while coming back to Delhi in the afternoon, pleaded with us to visit his home not far from the highway. We agreed.

Off the sleek metal road, the car plunged into the village street raising dust and scaring the cattle. I did not notice the driver had already tied a colourful turban around his head hiding his smart haircut. Minutes later we were standing in the middle of a cemented courtyard with an overflowing barn on one side and two opulent buffalos tethered a little distance away. The tough tractor stood innocuously in a corner. The rural prosperity of Punjab was very much in evidence. The scene was very different from what you would get to see in a village in UP or Rajasthan. The rusty old Sikh, the boy’s father, walked up to us, his hands clasped in a greeting. The boy meanwhile sat on his knees below a buffalo, a steel bucket between his legs. Happy being back at home, he lifted the bucket to show us the frothy milk. The warm milk was a new sensation for us. A tall, strong woman in salwar kameez sat down to make the tea – Lipton Red Level, bay leaves and sugar in the milk boiling.

Served in large stainless-steel glasses with a plateful of cookies from the local bakery, we sat around the old farmer.

“I grow mainly basmati in my 10 acres,” he said in a voice thick with satisfaction. “The yield is always excellent, and the price good. Sometime back I noticed a pest attack on my fields. I called the doctor –”

“Doctor?” one of us asked.

“The plant doctor – his fee is high. He did the spray and the crop was saved.” The rough-hewn farmer unknowingly grinned. Then, all of a sudden, his face turned grim. “My problem is the big men from the city – not the pest.” He looked at us closely. “They want to buy my land to start a factory; they are ready to give me any money for my acres.”

“What will you do?” I asked.

“This land is who I am, it’s like the voter ID. They won’t get my land so long as I am alive.”

The old Sikh, his sunburnt face framed in white flowing beard, his yellow turban comes back in an empty moment. *This land is who I am*. He seems to have epitomised the problem getting acute by the day. “When we delve or hew - / Hack and rack the growing green!” – a Hopkins poem, read long time ago, returns to trouble me. “To mend her we end her, / When we hew or delve: / After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.”

Bhaskar Roy