

## THE SPECTRE OF WALLS



Around this time five years ago, a few of us from the mainstream media or publishing, decided to do something different going out of the familiar way. By 2009-10 it was clear to almost everyone that the India we were living in was an entirely different place, almost a new country. The changes that had swept through the land buried many shibboleths forever, freed us to a large extent from the gargantuan, scarily Kafkesque structure of government control that had sought to stifle the positive impulses without which no society can move forward.

For the first time in the life of the republic, it was possible to live your life normally without silently suffering like Joseph K., the protagonist of Kafka's *The Trial*, at the hands of a malevolent system. Those who have any recollection of the unending wait for a telephone or cooking gas connection, have some idea about the dark shadow of evil we lived in. A black, heavy, rotary-dial telephone – extremely whimsical and erratic – was a status symbol in those days of government monopoly. My neighbour on a housing estate in east Delhi, had an LPG connection in his father's name. When the old man died he neither surrendered the connection nor informed the authorities – lest the cooking gas supply stop. Simple ordinary folk were pushed into evasion and subterfuge by an opaque system.

By the end of the first decade of the new century, India was a more open place; you had more free spaces not being staked out by the government. Apart from the reforms of the early nineties, what led to the gust of the 'wild West Wind' was the deluge of new technology. No significant research has yet been done to quantify the societal impact of mobile telephony and the internet. The fact is no large-scale and sustained act of repression – political, social, patriarchal or economic – is any longer possible without social media waging a war to force the authorities to intervene. From the Andaman archipelago one could call someone in Delhi by punching the buttons on a little cell phone. The government was duty-bound to answer any question from the citizenry pertaining to its activity. This was an India we had not known. A culture connected to the world by the magic of new communication gizmos, and relishing a new effervescence in its creative expressions, India was an exciting place. It needed to read something new to know about itself.

The first issue – India: Waiting for a New Helmsman – had on its cover a caparisoned elephant, its howdah empty, outside a red-sandstone fort. The writer Robert Hutchison wrote about the evolution of Mussoorie, its ups and downs, since the colonial days. Our editorial team put together an account of the Indian entrepreneurs – not always the headline-grabbing big ones – successfully doing business in many obscure corners of the world – Africa, Russia, Australia, China and so on.

The response was mixed – the younger the reader the stronger the approval. The older ones, more used to the conventional format, wondered whether TEL was indeed a magazine or a book. The second issue – almost an equal number of contributors from either side of the Radcliffe Line examining the consequences of Partition – was an overwhelming success. Months later, I met a visiting academic from Lahore. ‘We knew photocopying an entire book is not right, still we could not help it since we had only one copy of TEL.’ Both of us laughed.

When we set out on the road I was often scared by the impossibility of the journey. Among the massive structures of the big media brands, their awesome reach, formidable presence, we were a tiny spec, luminous but just a dot. Well, then TEL has never been intended to jostle for a larger share of the market. Focusing on the leadership question in an issue in 2014, we put Gandhi, Nehru, Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi on the cover. Of course, today we regret her silence on an important issue like social pluralism in her country. But in those days she was an icon, an automatic choice. On the cover of another issue about the tinsel world of Bombay talkies, the cover was our artist’s reimagining of MF Husain’s brushstrokes on a roadside billboard to draw Nargis in *Mother India*. TEL certainly is not for the mass market; by definition it is non-mainstreamed. But there is another side to the TEL journey which vindicates our original optimism about a new audience hungrily waiting for a new kind of writing, another way of looking at our world. More and more people began subscribing to TEL. The academic world came forward strongly to back us. Then one day I discovered an email lying inconspicuously in my inbox – from Dileep Padgaonkar: ‘The most recent issue of your journal is a sheer delight. I read it from cover to cover in a single evening. Every page I turned heightened my interest. Just about every piece embarked me on a journey that opened vistas of knowledge, insight and wisdom. I cannot think of a sharper riposte to those who seek to harness their shallow, voodoo version of Hinduism to promote their ideological and political agendas.’ Padgaonkar, Paddy to a large number of friends and admirers, was commenting on the TEL number about women’s freedom in ancient India. His appreciation had a special meaning for me – he was the *Times of India* editor when I was there. A few days later I received another appreciative email from historian Wendy Doniger.

Many regular TEL readers are now friends and well-wishers. They visit our stall at the annual New Delhi Book Fair, and of-ten as a gesture, buy a couple of new subscriptions for friends. Over the years TEL has emerged as a liberal platform, a hub for those writers who have something new to say. Two writers we are proud of discovering are Taha Kehar, a young journalist in Karachi, and Neeru Iyer in Chennai. When we planned a special Pakistan number for which only writers from there were invited, I asked Taha to guest-edit it.

Walking down the road you expect craters and potholes all the time. But there are pleasant surprises as well. Busy at our stall in the book fair – it was February 2015 – I noticed a familiar number flashing on my phone. Leila Seth. She had agreed to write for the summer number: The New Woman. ‘I need three more days to submit the essay. Can I get that?’ For me, more than anything else, it was a lesson in humility. The country’s first woman Chief Justice of a High Court, one of the most prominent authors and cultural personalities called me to seek a little extra time for her essay? The younger generation had a lot to learn from the veterans.

Another woman of substance who wrote for this issue was Arundhati Ghose, a distinguished diplomat. While Seth exposed entrenched gender biases

in the higher judiciary, Ghose stripped bare disgusting patriarchal tendencies in the Foreign Service. Responding to a request, she sent us a few old photographs from her days as a diplomat. 'I don't want them back, you can throw them away,' she wrote saying she had already couriered the pictures.

A year after the publication of her unsparing essay, Ghose died. Had she seen the end coming? Why else should one lose interest in memorabilia, photos documenting her big moments at international conferences? The question bothered me. About a year later Justice Seth passed away too. Two re-doubtable women, radicals in their own areas, brought together between the covers of an avant-garde magazine, left us at a time when there were not many like them around.

What then is *The Equator Line* all about? Sir Mark Tully of BBC offers an answer: '*The Equator Line* is a deeply thoughtful magazine. It challenges me to think and always learn from its editions.' Padgaonkar had another take: 'True to its name, *The Equator Line* remains equidistant from the two poles of journalism: one catering to a mass readership, the other to a niche one. Few publications are able to perform this balancing act with the requisite editorial skills. TEL is one of them.'

We remain relevant so long as we continue to surprise our audiences remaining within the liberal parameter. Five years the first important landmark, but the journey has just begun. Our team was keen to celebrate the event in our own way. Despite the sweep of technology and the world getting closer, the liberal intelligentsia has been alarmed by the spectre of walls, remorselessly coming up to divide cultures and peoples. Barbed wire is the new symbol of exclusion and otherness. A bunch of short stories in this issue celebrate love across cultures, love defying barriers and threats.

Bhaskar Roy