

WHEN SUN BREEDS MAGGOTS IN A DEAD DOG



One evening many years ago I was coming back to Delhi from Agra. The airconditioned luxury train was full of professionals and tourists returning from a hectic trip. The mood was relaxed, the city people talking of the weekend ahead. Within minutes of the train leaving Agra, like raiders from an aggressor's camp, they ran through the chair car. The famished, bedraggled men, many of them carried little blue flags. The genuine passengers with valid tickets looked suspiciously at the intruders, unsure of what to make out of them. The good time on the train – tea and snacks being served by the uniformed waiters, a handful of Western tourists talking about their experience of the Taj Mahal, snatches of conversations about Bollywood, national politics floating around – all that was gone. The trespassers on the convivial evening train had seen to it. Some of them by now had occupied the empty seats, others sitting on the floor, in the narrow passage between the toilets, everywhere. From whatever I could pick up from their talks, these people were on their way to Delhi to participate in a political rally. They, however, were not a typical political crowd, belligerent, riotous, roughing up everyone around to have their way. These people, clearly from the lowest rungs of society, were apologetic, uncomfortable having boarded the car meant for the socially superior.

A while later the train suddenly stopped. Perhaps the news of the ticketless travellers, the dispossessed of society, challenging the unwritten law, had already reached the guard and others in charge of the elegant train. In no time a burly policeman, wielding his lathi, appeared in the doorway, hitting and kicking the intruders, spitting out the most vicious of abuses – some of them with obnoxious casteist overtones. Surprised, beaten, the rallyists jumped out of the door into darkness.

Having *cleaned* the coach of the *polluters*, the policeman turned to the genuine passengers with a triumphant smile all over his face. Some of them nodded in appreciation thanking him for doing a good job. His social masters.

When the train started moving again and the cop was gone, some of the plucky Dalits had jumped back onto the train, determined not to give the rally a miss. The next day BSP leader Kanshi Ram would be addressing a public meeting, a major show of strength for him.

This slide from the late 90s kept coming back to trouble me for a long time. Whenever I thought of the stranded train, the hefty policeman thrashing the rallyists, I wondered why those men had not fought back, after all they were more in numbers. All of them together could have taken on the lone policeman who had only a lathi in his hand. The answer to this question has to traverse thousands of years of history, the slow but systematic process of disinheritance of the ebony man. Someone civilizationally conditioned to accept repression as his fate, cannot challenge their tormentor just like that. It would require an equally long process of awakening.

Looking at the angry Dalit faces on television, protesting all across the country against a recent judicial move they feared would lead to their further marginalization, I thought perhaps that awakening had begun. The giant roaring back to life from a long slumber. Young, angst-ridden men, younger than *young* would pass for in this age of everlasting youth, reckless, rampaging, were an answer to the question that had bothered me for a long long time. Yes, they *can* back.

If one makes a collage of all the angry faces on the road around the recent times, a large swathe of our society seems to have already fallen out of the national mainstream. The Dalits, tribes, small ethnic groups in the far-off Northeast, students, minorities of many shades, communities with alternative gender identities, avant-garde liberal social groups, the intelligentsia – they all seem to be at the receiving end of an exclusivist intolerant surge of orthodoxy. All of us who have grown up with a particular image of India – somehow slow, sloppy, impoverished, but essentially liberal, accommodating and progressive – now find it difficult to recognize the new wave of hate, this tendency to suspect and reject everything that declines to conform to what is handed down as the monolithic mainstream culture. The proponents of the monoculture believe that a rigid adherence to their viewpoint is a rock-solid guarantee against any deviation, fissures in the Indian body politic, in the physical structure of the nation. History, however, testifies to something else.

When the political structure is suffocatingly inflexible, the parts within it start falling apart. The most glaring example of such collapse was the Soviet Block, the soulless communist empire, graphically captured by the spontaneous razing of the Berlin Wall. To hold the different parts of the structure together, you need some flexibility, some glue. The best adhesive available is liberalism coupled with autonomy – both political and cultural. Everybody who rejects the narrow worldview of the religious right does not necessarily subscribe to a seditious ideology or promote subversion. Alternatively, a predominantly liberal outlook need not exclude the conservatives, they might offer another shade to the overall mosaic of the Indian narrative.

At the moment, the scene from the evening train seems to have encompassed the entire country. An intolerance – very unfamiliar to the Indian ethos – seems to be the new hallmark of our culture. Dissenters are the new Dalits, they have no space either on a luxury train or inside the social mainstream. So are the radical students and liberal segments of society. They need to be

bashed up either by the state machinery or vigilante groups. The LGBT community is an illness that our culture needs to be cured of. And when all such deviant groups are taken care of, the hunt then begins for another social group that can be harassed and victimized. The search zeroes in on women; they become the new minority. The barbaric violation of the little girls in different parts of the country is only a pointer to the alarming process of lumpenization of an opulently rich, plural culture.

When the crisis point is reached, the turbulence is felt on both physical and moral planes. On the ground you trace the blood trail and decomposed body a girlchild's violation, in the air the sinister voices whistle. This sense of nausea was best expressed by a young man more than 500 years ago. He had gone to one of the best universities of his time. His sensibilities were as acute as that of an intellectual you might come across in a Paris café or a Broadway bookstore now. When Hamlet went back to Denmark from Wittenberg, the German university associated with both Protestant Reformation initiator Martin Luther and the mythical scholar Dr Faustus, he carried with him the cynicism and an end-of-an-era vibe, something he must have imbibed in the intellectual milieu of the campus. The state of rotteness in Denmark, visible as well as atmospheric, is acutely captured by the Reformation-age university student:

For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being god kissing carrion...

Hamlet could have anticipated the foulness and evil air in today's India where an eight-year-old child is repeatedly raped, debased and dehumanized before she is butchered. This crisis is more civilizational than political. Does it really mean anything if this country has just emerged as the world's sixth largest economy? Does it matter if this nation is poised to become a major military power? Do we want any of it if we cannot protect an eight-year-old from being devoured by the demons? ■

Bhaskar Roy