

SIXTEEN – THE AGE OF REVOLT AND DEATH

- **Minati Dash**

I could not sleep through that night, anxious about meeting Noni's parents the next day. It's not as if I would meet them for the first time. I had gone to Kashipur in October 2010 to do my PhD fieldwork. They had scarce resources, yet, they asked me to stay at their place and insisted that I share meals with them. I was humbled by their graciousness. I had stayed in the cramped room that was actually all of their house. Sacks of ragi, rice and fodder stacked up against its two walls made the room look even smaller. I doubted if the three of us would ever fit into the room. But at night, when a few torn rugs were spread on the floor, and we lay down, it turned out to be a cosy little place where, fagged out after a hectic day of travels and interviews, I just passed out immediately.

I was lost and overwhelmed when I first entered the village. Strangely, I was quivering and gasping for air in the middle of a shrub forest. In my heart, I had wished that I never had to meet them like this. Not after Noni's death. I didn't know what to tell them in the hour of this terrible loss. It was really scary to face the distraught elderly couple when tragedy hung heavy in the air. Noni was their argumentative daughter who had grown up in the shadow of Sangram. Sangram, i.e. the collective Resistance of the Adivasis and Dalits in Kashipur that had begun in the mid-1990s against the conglomerate of mining giants, including Tata Steel, Hindalco and ALCAN (Aluminium Company of Canada), which had proposed to mine their sacred mountain, Baphlimali, and set up a refinery amidst the villages. The consortium was ironically named Utkal Alumina International Limited (UAIL). Fear loomed over the area about the possibility of loss and disruption of lives and livelihood, waters getting polluted and an idyllic landscape ravaged. The quiet village life being thrown off gear. The locals, needless to say, resisted the mining project. Noni's father, a dreamy-eyed idealist, was a towering figure of the movement. During the Resistance, Noni had sat by the chulha and avidly listened to animated debates about the state, democracy, Adivasi rights and law incessantly flowing on around the yard where the movement leaders gathered to take stock of the situation and chalk out their next move.

ON THE ROAD TO SELF-DESTRUCT

-Manojit Mitra

Recovering from a heart attack in his Siliguri home, a young communist would go to his neighbour's to listen to Beijing Radio every evening. That was 1964; the Communist Party of India had just split on the question of alignment with China in the wake of the recent Sino-Indian border war. The ailing man, who was so keen to know about China's view on the political situation in India, would go down in history as the architect of the anarchical far-left movement that jolted the newly independent country in the second decade of its journey. He subsequently drafted seven documents to provide the basis for organizing an armed revolution focusing on the rural areas as the theatre of operations to challenge the existing system and establish a classless society. His senior party colleagues, more mature and better informed, dismissed the documents as 'ridiculous'. The ideologue who put the obscure tribal village of Naxalbari in the Terai region on the world's political map was none other than Charu Majumdar. 'The man is not mentally stable,' a senior functionary at the party secretariat in Kolkata remarked reading Majumdar's blueprint for an armed struggle, according to his biographer and close associate Souren Basu. Though derided by his more seasoned party colleagues at their Kolkata headquarters, Majumdar's seven documents – inspired by Mao's tactical line during the Chinese Revolution – had already captured the imagination of the lower ranks of the party in the districts. The deepening economic crisis throughout the country, acute food scarcity, the war with Pakistan in 1965 soon after the Chinese aggression of 1962, and ideological confusion among the communists in the wake of the split – all this set the backdrop to the peasant uprising in the Naxalbari area in the summer of 1967. Led by Majumdar and his comrades – Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal among them – the farm workers captured the land owned by the big landlords and marked the fields out with red flags. In some places they attacked the rich farmers, looted their houses and snatched away their guns. From a purely legal and constitutional viewpoint, the uprising, though very localized and on a small scale, challenged the Indian state in a very basic way. The brutal police action that followed resulted in many deaths – among those felled by police bullets were tribal women and children.

SEEDS OF AN ANCIENT CULTURE IN THE LAST FORESTS

-Ankita Anand

They live close to the last forests, for they still keep the secrets of nature. Perhaps unknown to them for centuries, the forestland and mountain ranges they inhabit contain the richest mineral reserves in the country. Now that India is growing as an economy, development has turned its glare on tribal country. The region that has come under the sharpest focus of the growth-rate-driven new economy is the tribal heartland of Chhattisgarh. This is a state that abounds in minerals, which in turn have brought the horde of mining companies to devour the wealth lying hidden inside the hills. Ruthless mining has left the surroundings badly scarred and the people devastated. Since the administration invariably sides with the big companies both from the private and government sectors, and the mainstream political parties are reluctant to cross swords with the corporates, the resistance has come from the far-left guerrillas. The tribals have often been caught in the crossfire between the armed forces on one hand and the plucky, at times ruthless guerrillas on the other. Their identity has been reduced to that of victims.

But beyond it all lies their everyday life and ancestral practices, informed by science and wisdom that comes from living in close proximity to nature. They hold the key to many layers of a past otherwise lost to us. This way of life too has now come under attack from a slash-and-burn consumerist culture and the bludgeoning impact of ‘civilization’, which threatens to steamroll all individuals and social groups into a homogeneous, conformist mass, a community to be benchmarked by primetime television. To see what survives and find out about the traditions that are still extant, I visit a few villages in the districts of Kanker and Balod and meet members of the Gond tribe.

AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE FOR KASHMIR

-Jehangir Rashid Malik

Law and order

Na hai law na hai order

Jiska law hai uska order

Made on order law and order

India Pakistan ne milke khela humse border border...

Ab na hume chhode Hindustan,

Ab na hume chhode Pakistan.

Arey koi toh humse bhi puche ke hum kya chahte... Azaadi

Is paar bhi lenge..Azaadi

Us paar bhi lenge..Azaadi

Hum leke rahenge... Azaadi.

This powerful monologue poignantly delivered by Shahid Kapoor in *Haider*, Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 movie about unrest in the Kashmir Valley, casts light on the dilemma of the young inescapably caught between militancy and the security forces. The twentysomethings in Srinagar and other places in the Valley are badly trapped inside a vicious arc. The deeply moving film captures the gruesome reality of what Amir Khusrow thought to be a slice of paradise on earth. The militant outfits, hugely financed and armed by Pakistan, go on a killing spree, and the security forces retaliate; together they account for a massive toll every year. According to the Human Rights Review published by the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, in 2016 alone, 100 men of the state and Central forces, 145 civilians and 138 militants were felled by each other's bullets. This kind of body count is associated with only a full-scale war. '*Kashmir mein upar khuda hai, aur neeche fauj,*' this juxtaposition of two irreconcilable realities of the Valley life in the movie points to the growing youth discontent.

JOURNEY OF THE LEARNED ONES: FROM PARADISE TO REFUGEE CAMPS

-Ajay Chrungoo

It was a chilly winter day in the Kashmir Valley. After two days of duty in the oncology ward of Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences in the city, I came home. The mood was of relief, of the family being together again. We were looking forward to a quiet, relaxed weekend. After lunch I settled for a nap; I had worked the previous night without a break. Nobody at home disturbed me till late in the evening when all hell broke loose. Addressing the congregations at the mosques, the separatist groups had announced that the Kashmiri Pandits being 'kafirs' would have to leave the Valley unless they agreed to embrace Islam or be killed. Is our house going to be attacked? The question troubled us. The other Pandit homes in the neighbourhood were equally rattled. Many of them were ready to flee to safety. Somehow we were spared that night.

Looking back from a distance of almost two decades, those announcements over loudspeakers now seem to be a watershed in the history of Kashmir. Secularism was given a final burial in the streets of Kashmir during those fateful days. Most of an estimated 3,50,000 Kashmiri Pandits living in the Valley left for Jammu and other places following the terrorist threat to cleanse Kashmir of the 'infidels' and a campaign of 'kill one and scare ten'. The small community of Kashmiri Pandits constituted not more than five to six per cent of the Valley's population. Educated and upwardly mobile, they posed no threat to others. The militants who attacked the Pandit houses, at times looting and setting fire to them sought to destroy all symbols of pluralism. They were driven by a regressive separatist ideology to reduce Kashmir into a religious monolith. They reckoned the Pandits as an impediment in their communal and secessionist designs. For the separatists, the Kashmiri Pandits represented a civilizational as well as the political frontline of the Indian mainstream.

Civilisational Frontline

The dimensions of the tragedy that began unfolding that winter day in 1990 need to be put in perspective. Chinese philosopher Lin Yutang said, 'India has a rich culture, a creative and imaginative literature, and is the world's teacher in trigonometry, quadratic equations, grammar and phonetics, animal fables, chess as well as philosophy, and has inspired Boccaccio, Goethe, Herder, Schopenhauer, Emerson and probably, Aesop. A trickle of Indian religious spirit flowed into China and inundated the whole of Eastern Asia. Not too little, but too much is India's trouble.'

The 'trickle' of the Indian spirit which inundated almost the whole of China and Eastern Asia, flowed from Kashmir. The Kashmiri Pandits 'Sanskritised' the Himalayas. Eminent scholar Ram Rahul pointed it out followed by Salman Rushdie. Their contribution to language, linguistics and grammar, philosophy and religion, aesthetics and historiography, astrology and mathematics is unparalleled and embedded in the layers of Indian civilization.

THE PRIEST POSSESSED BY DEMONS

-Ajay Bhardwaj

The Baddowal railway station lay strewn with bodies after a band of heavily armed militants gunned down more than 80 passengers travelling to Ludhiana in the wee hours of 16 June 1991. A trail of cries and shrieks rolled up piercing the early morning sky as the desperados fled raising pro-Khalistan slogans.

The police later claimed that the carnage had been the handiwork of the dreaded Khalistan Commando Force, one of the seven militant outfits which were active in Punjab those days to pursue their goal of a separate Sikh homeland.

The word 'Khalistan' had kept resonating with an ominous ring around it all across Punjab in the late 80s and early 90s. Every time a killing took place, this name of an imaginary homeland for the separatists made an uneasy echo at bus terminals and railway stations.

When exactly did the idea of a secessionist destination capture the imagination of the hotheads? Simply put, Khalistan is a derivative of 'Khalsa' which stands for the Sikh sect. But the Sikhs have always been an inalienable part of the Indian cultural mosaic and the country's spiritual tradition. That's the reason they opted for India at the time of Partition. There has been a tradition among Hindus in Punjab to baptize the first son as Sikh. Culturally and emotionally, therefore, another promised land outside India is simply not possible.

But the thick trail of blood all across the 1980s and early 1990s in the name of Khalistan left Punjab gravely bruised and emotionally wrecked. Close to 32,000 people had died, thousands of others either injured or maimed, and many more thousands permanently scarred by the gratuitous loss of their family members, and unrelenting terror for more than a decade.

Along with the meaningless bloodshed, what added to the futility of the Khalistan cause was the ambivalence about the idea of a separate homeland.

MEMORY POLITICS AROUND CHICKEN'S NECK

-Nirmalya Banerjee

As a young boy I once spent my summer holiday in Darjeeling with my father who had to go there as a vacation judge. The excitement of getting off the train at Sakrigali Ghat on the bank of the Ganga is still fresh in my mind. The broad-gauge railway track from Kolkata ended there. Ferried by a steamer across the river to Manihari Ghat, we dashed over the sandbank to get onto the train, this time round a metre-gauge one, to Siliguri, the gateway to North Bengal. Well, that was almost half a century ago.

‘In the 1960s, we had to send our products – oil, soap and other such items – to North Bengal by boat across the Ganga,’ recalls a former sales manager at a leading consumer goods company. ‘This made supplies uncertain. Later, loaded trucks mounted on ferries tied together crossed the river.’

The picture changed when the massive Farakka Barrage came up in 1975 along with the construction of a new railroad over the river. The Ganga at Farakka is enormous before it bifurcates into Bangladesh taking a new name – Padma. Smooth communication meant a new boost for business between Kolkata and Siliguri. A market opened up all through the vast hinterland of North Bengal. However, the distance – as much physical as psychological – between the northern parts of Bengal and the more prosperous south still persists. The separatist movements that have repeatedly rocked the hills of Darjeeling and the adjoining ‘Chicken’s Neck’ of North Bengal are an outcome of deep alienation.

The mystique of the snow-crested Himalayan peaks around Darjeeling, the fragrance of its tea, the cool climate and fabulous oranges have brought hordes of tourists to this hill station from all over the world for well over a century. The first to come were the British during the long era of the Raj. Driven by the blazing heat of the plains, the English men and women went up the hills at

the height of summer. Like Shimla, Mussoorie, Dalhousie and Murree (now in Pakistan) in the north-west of India, Darjeeling and Shillong were discovered in the northeast by the colonial rulers.

THE TAHIRIHS OF MARINE DRIVE

-Praveen Vikkath

Very often they stare at you from the newspaper front pages – activists and celebrities shedding the last bit of their clothes in public to protest fur or some such causes. Nudity, the last bastion of human privacy, is exposed to public viewing and media glares to evoke a sense of outrage. Supermodel Austin Armacost stripped in New York in 2012 to oppose slaughter of animals for their fur. In many parts of the world, naked protests are seen as an ultimate expression of disapproval. What began in 1899 as an extreme form of protest by a group of Russian immigrants in Canada known as Doukhobors, has by now become a lively tradition of protest.

In India, where our classical art and literature celebrate intense physical intimacy, the popular culture, however, is guided by a stern moral code. The state and its instruments like the police and censor authorities support this puritanical outlook. In films, after the hero serenades the leading lady in bucolic woods, the climax is inevitably tepid – two roses being brought closer by a gentle breeze! So, when scores of young men and women gathered on the Marine Drive beach in Cochin on 2 November 2014 to hug and kiss their partners before a crowd of gasping onlookers, the effect was as stunning as a high-magnitude earthquake. This Kiss of Love aimed as an act of defiance against growing instances of moral policing in Kerala, overnight turned into a movement with support pouring in from students around India. In full view of the television cameras, the young protesters embraced their partners and kissed passionately – their way of rejecting vigilantism. The message went out loud and clear from the coast of the Arabian Sea that the young liberals would not allow the right-wing conservatives to encroach on their open space. The scene at Marine Drive Walkway that November afternoon was electrifying. And full of new meanings for the emerging conflict in Indian life – between the born-again conservatives

backed by the religious right and the liberals imbued with the ideals of social pluralism. In the mellow afternoon sun of the early winter the beach played out conflicting images: young men and women marching with banners to protest the new wave of regressive conservatism. A little distance away gathered groups of counter-protesters opposing physical intimacy in public.

FREE IN LOVE AND IN COMPANIONHOOD

-Abhishek Anicca

One February day in 2011, I found myself happily lost in a sea of rainbows, standing near the historic Azad Maidan in the city of Mumbai. The sky was blue and the rainbow flags fluttered high above waves of people. There was colour everywhere. Blue. Green. Red. Purple. Pink. The faces from the crowd looked beautiful – painted artistically. Some wore shiny ornaments – fun and playful. Many had turned out in fashionable clothes, and quite a few in quirky long hats and pajamas. They carried banners with the legends ‘queer and proud’, ‘LGBT Rights’ and ‘Section 377 must go’. They cheered and clapped, heartily shouted slogans in between singing in an off-key but soothing voice. Some of them were carrying instruments; drumbeats soon filled the air. All of us marched. It was a protest march without the revenge motive, without a call to hate and smash. It was a festival where the whole world had turned up in its colourful best.

That was the first pride I had ever attended and it remains the most unforgettable experience of my life. I come from Patna where I had never heard the term LGBT or queer. Being gay over there was a joke some men would crack about others to attest their masculinity, a virile stallion’s way of running down a sissy. Going to the pride was definitely a learning curve for me.

Understanding identities – your own and of others – is the key to knowing the world around you better. Gradually, I understood that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender are not merely terms, they define the way people with different sexual orientations and gender identities live their lives. Together, L-G-B-T-Q becomes not only the sum of their lives and struggles but also an umbrella under which all of them can come together and fight for their rights.

That day, as the march came towards an end, people started to disperse. Their voices had gone hoarse but their spirits still high. The big group of hijras who had danced for the entire stretch of the march kept their drums aside and were silently soaking in the atmosphere. Unknown people smiled at me, some even hugged me.

AN ENDANGERED NILGAI OF A CAMPUS

-Amit Ranjan

Like that officer of the palace guard on duty around midnight, I also see a ghost beckoning someone, and therefore, can't help saying: Something is rotten in the state of Delhi. The ghost the state has enticed threatens to expunge its status as a centre for learning. The city-state is also a unique construct that equates the will of the people –expressed through a popularly elected government –with that of one nominated individual who more often than not overrules the people's representatives. Delhi, as a metaphor for the nation, is bruising –with farmers' rallies, students' marches (whether it is to protest the leaked exam papers, or cuts in funding for higher education), Dalit anger, journalists' protests (over fake news memo) and much more. It is syzygy season – there are powers neatly aligned and determined to take away from the public space; and there are protestors gradually coming together into a new axis to resist those attempts. The fault lines are deep, and it's difficult to say where we are headed. When Hamlet steps out of the assurance of the castle to follow the ghost, the security officer, makes the remark about the putrid state of Denmark, its moral abyss. Sensing the killer toxicity in Delhi's air, I move towards Jawaharlal University (JNU) which has for quite some time come under constant sniper attack from the government and myriad right-wing platforms. Reassuringly, the gutsy streetfighters on campus have doggedly rebuffed and fought back the incursions. The teachers and students of JNU recently decided to go on a Long March to Parliament, with a charter of their grievances.

Memories of a March

As a metaphor, Long March has always captured the imagination of campaigners with a cause ever since the Chinese communists, led by Mao Zedong, trekked a grueling 10,000-km stretch crossing 18 mountain ranges and 24 rivers from the southeast to the northwest of the country in 1934-35. Protesters around the world have since been inspired by the guts and gore of those intrepid marchers.

IDENTITY: TERMS OF ABUSE AND ENDEARMENT

- Aakar Patel

I came to Bombay (as it was then called) from Surat around 1995. My workplace – a newspaper office – was in Lower Parel. I began as a trainee reporter on this English newspaper without a regular beat. That meant I would stay in the office rewriting press releases, and occasionally being sent to cover events none of the more senior reporters wanted to do. One evening, around 7 p.m. or so, a man walked into the newspaper office, which was working out of a modest space in a godown. He was short and stout and very dark, with thick, wiry hair and yellow eyes. He was pointed in my direction and walked up to my desk.

He sat down without being asked to, and handed me a piece of paper. It was in Marathi, a language I was vaguely familiar with, and its masthead made it clear it came from the municipal sweepers' association. It was about some demand, whose details I do not remember. But above the masthead was something I found interesting. In blue, was written in English: 'Jai Bhim'. I had not come across this salutation before and wondered why a character from the Mahabharat was being thus revered on the letter-head of the municipal workers' union. This was my ignorance, of course, and by now, we know that the Bhim of the masthead referred to Bhimrao Ambedkar, the most exalted Dalit icon. But I am recounting the episode to illustrate how a reasonably educated, 25-year-old man from Gujarat working for a newspaper was still not familiar with Jai Bhim.

In the Surat I had grown up in, there would have been no chance of such a man actually pronouncing his caste and background. Being from certain communities was something to be ashamed of, and not advertised and definitely not with such assertion. Most of us had been raised in conditions of such extreme prejudice that we were able to easily dehumanize many who were part of the same social scene. Caste names, we unknowingly accepted, were interchangeable with words of abuse. *Bhangi, dublo, dhed* – words freely used to offend but were actually identity tags of some castes. I only realized much later in life that someone's caste could actually be an abuse for others.

BETWEEN GOD AND THE WRITER

-PERUMAL MURUGAN

The meteoric rise of **Perumal Murugan** as a Tamil literary icon is seen by many as an outcome of the conflict between the new waves of conservatism and the liberal values. Seeking to explore the new frontiers of social permissibility, his fiction has inevitably earned the ire of the religious orthodoxy. In the process, *One Part Woman*, his sensational novel about a couple's quest for a child, has become a literary landmark. It has raised disquieting questions about the gender issues and moral inhibitions. Seen closely, Murugan's works are a celebration of the disinherited's triumph over the social status quo. In an email interview to **Nikhita Nair** of *The Equator Line*, the Dalit writer reflects on his oeuvre and explains the angst of his protagonists. **Archana PN** has translated the author's answers from the Tamil. Excerpts:

The protagonists of your novels seem to have fallen out of the social mainstream. They are rebels not by choice but compelled by circumstances, as if they belong to a disinherited community, disowned by every god. In many great novels, a man suffers and pays a price because of a certain flaw in his character. But your characters – Kali and Ponna in *One Part Woman*, Shorty in *Seasons of the Palm*, Sathivel in *Current Show* – are destined to suffer not because they have made mistakes but for the situation in which they were born. Because of their caste or poverty. Did you design such a fate for them? Or their journey

through life is part of your experience? Have you come across such people in your everyday life?

An author recreates God's secrets. In a way it's acting against God. We can call it a tug of war between God and the writer. The writer unravels God's mystique, claiming the external appearance is false. He presents the intrinsic picture and keeps creating new forms.

Yes. I don't decide any character's fate. I dig and show what they have been destined to be. I would like to know why they have been cast the way they are. Despite the way God has created them, these men and women somehow fit into some community, certain environment.

THE FLYOVER

Saadia Azim

Good morning, everybody.' He looked at the audience in front. *'Pranam.'* He folded his hands. 'My name is Babon Halidar.' The little boy cleared his voice looking at the mic he held with both hands. For the first time the nine-year-old felt the amplifying effect of his own voice, through the little holes in the device. He suddenly felt proud.

But then the surging traffic – buses, cars, autorickshaws and the noise of people rushing around drowned his words. He tried again forcefully.

'Myy Namme Izz Babon... Haaldaar.'

His legs quivered, mind reeled. He cleared his throat and began again:

Hey, if you come to our street
Both the fair guys and darkies
Will hold your hands and greet.
Like the colour of a great sunset,
Do you know the blood inside us is red?

Why they forget this in India and Pakistan

Only one God for all peoples and places?
Do they remember this, both Arun and Imran
The one above for the Hindu and Musalmaan?

Babon intoned his poem urgently, his voice impassioned, as if a lot depended on how well he did it. His friends – some his age, many older – sat in straight rows on the smooth red carpets spread over the road. They clapped cheerily for him. Some of them laughed, others listened carefully, some made faces, a few others waited for the function to get over.

The road had been blocked by rows of chairs; festoons, balloons, streamers and colourful flags around the pillars and railings of the newly built flyover gave the place a festive look.