

Nickeled and Dimed

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Dalit Lives Matter

By Aryaman Sood



Image Source - Sabrang India

Over the past couple of days, discourse in elite circles has undergone a familiar pattern- outrage at a heinous hate crime, a regrettably delayed realisation of privilege accorded at birth, and finally, belatedly demanding accountability and calling for winds of change to flow through India's long-rotting bureaucratic and law enforcement machinery. If the past is anything to go by, the outrage is likely to last for a couple of weeks, before it becomes yet another forgotten footnote in the history of a country that continues to fail its minorities- be it on grounds of gender, caste, religion or another.

Though the modern, urban Indian wants to believe it is a thing of the past, accomplished scholars continue to detail thousands of incidents of caste-based discrimination that plague all aspects of Dalit and tribal lives. Some of these take the form of microaggressions that are difficult to identify. Others are more explicit, yet the common thread is that discrimination continues to play a central role in the development and evolution of the Dalit identity. Yet, for the cause of Dalits to gain mainstream traction, it appears that explicit and gruesome violence has become a necessity. Centuries of oppression has led to the creation of a system that actively disenfranchises sections of the Indian population.

Under the British raj, the Indian Forest Act displaced a series of scheduled tribes from their lands and livelihoods amidst large-scale opposition. The promise of independence did not, however, bring about any change in the functioning of the still-extractive state machinery. Though the early Congress governments paid lip-service to environmental conservation, they continued to profit off of these institutions that they had inherited from the Empire. To many, independence from the British did not deliver the freedom from oppression they so greatly craved. It merely saw a change in the colour of the skin of the oppressor. The capture of institutions by the elite has only worsened as India opened itself up to the world, and it's showing no signs of decline. To merely understand this as a class problem would be an incredible disservice to the complex social hierarchies that continue to govern Indian society.

A survey from 2015-17 showed that Upper Caste Hindus owned 41% of total assets. The Indian caste identity is and should be integral to our understanding of class and poverty. The disenfranchisement runs deep – it includes negligible access to education, a denial of equal treatment, and an inability to move on from the idea of birth ascribed occupations. In an India that is still governed by deeply entrenched social hierarchies and does not give its people equal social and economic opportunity, meritocracy simply becomes a farce. In our India, where the police seize the phones of a Dalit victim's grieving family to muffle press coverage, where only minority activists face the wrath of the state machinery, where outdated and patriarchal notions of 'strong men' continue to guide electoral politics and where majoritarianism rules the roost, the façade of equality has well and truly taken its last breath.

Yet, every once in a while, you will see a tacit shift in the conversation. In early 2020, the CAA brought together the youth and minorities of this country in a way that neither thought possible. Last year, the rape and subsequent murder of Priyanka Reddy made the front pages of most newspapers. In 2012, India had a moment, insensitively christened the 'Nirbhaya moment', which was supposed to wake us up and bring forth change. This idea of change remained just that- an idea. The collective does not seem to seek justice, it looks for displays of violent and public vengeance. Symptomatic of the 'male saviour' mindset that plagues our society, the death penalty and enraged calls for castration doth not mindsets change.

Yet, with the coming of a new regime, it appears as if the chinks have developed in our ability to have collective outrage. Shock at the creation of a 'Hindu Ekta Manch' to defend the criminals that saw it fit to abduct, sexually abuse, and murder an 8-year-old minor in cold blood in Kathua has given way to a sense of resignation. While disgust at the audacity of defenders persists, it no longer shocks us like it used to. Forceful cremations, carried out in the dead of the night in the enforced absence of a grieving Dalit family, would never have seen the light of the day were it not for the chance presence of a citizen. The UP police's subsequent denial that there never was a rape, and the claims that the narrative is being manipulated. This, coupled with the imposition of yet another communications blackout by the regime, muffling the cries of the victim's family amidst allegations of police intimidation and violence should jarr any free democracy. It looks clear then-- India no longer fits the bill.

The fact that this country has such a short attention span is concerning, but that it needs visceral imagery of atrocities to introspect is distressing. What use is this graphic imagery, forgotten to the annals of history till the next time a story of assault gains virality, if innumerable cases of sexual and physical assault go unreported? What use is this reflection if it leads to twitter trends, but the status quo does not yield? With no real breakthrough or transformation in sight, a protest for the idea of a 'real' India goes on. In the face of abject hopelessness, this takes up more meaning than ever before. And dramatic as it may be, the one thing that should be kept in mind till we find the breakthrough- Never forget, India. And never forgive.



Nobel Prize 2020 - Beyond the Criticisms

By Siddharth G.



Image Source- CNN

Many times the Nobel Prizes for Economics come with controversies and dissatisfactions. A classic example of the same was when in 1974, Gunnar Myrdal and Frederich Hayek were both awarded the prize together, only for Myrdal, in 1977, to wish that the prizes were abolished altogether because it was awarded to people like Milton Friedman, and said that economics was a 'soft science'.

This year, too, the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, popularly known as the Nobel Prize for Economics, did not escape. Awarded to Stanford professors Dr Paul Milgrom and Dr Robert Wilson for their work in auction theory and developing new models of an auction, the criticism was led by Branko Milanovic, the Serbian-American economist, who had tweeted that Economics is a "social science", and thus should be used to increase the material gain of the people and make their lives better by working on poverty, inequality, and wealth. Thus, he argued that only those efforts that try to do the same should be appreciated and awarded, and not any other minor contributions such as designing how to conduct an auction.

But one thing he missed out is that auctions have been there for a very long time, and have been helping people divide resources more effectively. While we might think of auctions to just involve precious gems, jewelry, and artworks, the concept of auctions has been extended to effectively sell other resources, such as minerals, oil, treasury bills, and bandwidth. These have macroeconomic implications. For example, auctioning treasury bills, through open market operations (OPO's) is still used as an instrument by the central bank to reduce the money supply in the economy and reduce inflation rates.

In fact, in a time when there is an increasing awareness about climate change and ways to mitigate its effects, Robin Mason, Professor of Economics and Pro-Vice Chancellor (International) of the University of Birmingham, notes that auctioning the rights to emit carbon emissions to different sectors of the economy will help reduce carbon gas emissions. A paper published by the Centre for Clean Air Policy made a case for the same back in 1998. The paper argues that auctioning will make way for efficient revenue generation by not creating dead-weight losses which would occur if other means such as taxation were implemented to cut carbon emissions. It also argues that through the auctioning method, there will be an incentive for innovation as firms will benefit from the decreasing prices of the allowances, driven by these innovations (as there will be a decreasing trend in the value placed by these firms over these allowances as they keep innovating and increase revenues while decreasing carbon emissions) and the decreasing abatement costs for the sector. Auctions also make sure that the highest bidder pays for the allowances, and that adds revenue to the government which it can invest to create schemes and policies that can help the public, and also reduce carbon emissions. Finally, auctions reduce the influence of the bureaucracy and the government and save their time, because it will not be necessary for them to conduct re-evaluations of these sectors frequently and either reduce or increase the allowances accordingly, reducing paperwork and political interferences, thus making them focus on other important aspects of governance. This is just one perspective that would say that auctions are beneficial from a public policy perspective. If the same was adopted for other policy decisions too, it would make the government more efficient in distributing scarce, natural resources having alternative uses to economic agents who have different, never-ending wants - thus efficiently trying to solve one of the biggest questions the field of economics always tries to answer. This statement, though, comes with a catch.

For auctions to be efficient, it should be modeled well so that both the bidders and the auctioneers are benefitted. This is where the work of this year's Nobel Prize winners come to the forefront. Paul Milgrom and Robert Wilson analyzed different auction formats such as the English auction format (the widely used format, where bids increase in ascending order and the highest bidder wins), the Dutch auction format (where bids keep decreasing, and the lowest bid wins) and the Vickrey auction format (where the bids keep increasing and the highest bidder wins but pays the second-highest amount), and concluded that bidders care more about not being subjected to the 'winner's curse', where the highest bidder wins the commodity but pays more than the actual worth of that commodity, eventually leading to losses. While Dr. Wilson theorized that this apprehension can be overcome if more information about the bids, the commodity, and the process were shared by the sellers with the bidders, Dr. Milgrom also added that different auctioning formats have an impact on the revenues earned by the sellers. They both are also popularly known to have developed another model of auctions, called the Simultaneous Multiple Round Auction (SMRA), which is an extension of the English model of auctions, where multiple objects are simultaneously bid in different rounds, and the highest bidder of a specific object(s) wins. First developed for the US Federal Communications Commission, it was then adopted and used by many governments across the world.

Auctions, if modeled well, could earn millions for sellers and governments. It helps the government earn a lot of revenue and become efficient, thus having macroeconomic policy implications too. For this, the theoretical traditions of auctions, starting from William Vickery to Paul Milgrom and Robert Wilson, become necessary. Their contributions are important, and the Nobel Prize was well deserved by them.

□Will You Shut-Up Man?□And Other Mid-Debate Shenanigans

By Deepanshu Singal

The race for the White House is in its full swing and the heat is turning on. The first presidential debate of 2020 made that very clear. This election could prove to be a turning point in world politics. This is primarily due to the US-centrism in international politics, which despite being challenged by the rising China, consequently leads to American policies and events having a macro impact on the world. Even China cannot be ignorant of the American presence and the policy attitude of the White House. But as they say – with great power comes great responsibility. Such vital policy decisions need keen and rigorous discussions, which definitely didn't seem to happen during the mere 'comeback-match' of September 29th night. For what it's worth, some key issues did come up, however, were silenced in all the noise. In the heat of the moment, Biden pounded back at Trump with a "will you shut up man?" when the latter was rambling on right in the first segment. The debate (what was meant to be) was full of such insulting slurs (read: shenanigans) instead of substantial matters. There was a need for both of them to "shut-up" and focus on the main subjects of the segments. As that didn't seem to happen, this article accentuates what "the clown" and "Little Marco" have to say on key foreign policy issues and other 'less' important stuff. This will help examine the impact and relevance of such policy stances on the larger international community. The aim is not to argue for or against any candidate but to reflect on their policies and understand what the future might hold when one of them gets elected.

The Foreign Policy Sophistry

Although the debate had only a fleeting mention of China, with Trump calling COVID-19 the "China-virus" for the nth time, tackling 'Big Daddy Xi' remains central to contemporary American policy. Trump town has doubled down on China with its 'go-it-alone' policy – economically paining Beijing and driving it to the negotiating table. Apart from the tariff war, it has taken some bold economic and diplomatic steps to check China's growing ambitions. On the other hand, Biden's policy appears to be 'Trump-Lite' with slight optimism of cajoling Beijing through talks. Maintaining a stern approach towards China's actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, Biden plans to lower the high tariffs imposed on China currently. An amicable relation with China would bring stability to the entire global market. It will be a sigh of relief for economies that are dependent on both of these megalomaniacs for their development.

Relations with the extended Middle East also play a key role in America's dear 'national security'. While Trump and Biden have similar approaches towards Syria, Afghan-Taliban deal and the Israeli-UAE deal, things get different for other states. Although Trump formally recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, thus relocating the US embassy, Biden didn't demand the reversal of this decision. This goes a long way in reinforcing American alliances and the US 'choosing its wars'. Contrary to Trump, Biden is more considerate towards the Iran Nuclear Deal and is willing to re-enter it under favourable conditions. A successful deal would foster better relations between the adversaries – thus contributing to building confidence and stability in the region. Moreover, unlike Trump, Biden opposes US interference in the Yemeni Civil War. These definitely project Biden as the 'messenger of peace'. Yet, the emphasis laid on the 'just cause' of US interventions might become problematic again, as it did for the Obama administration with its interference in Syria. The policy approaches of both candidates appear quite dubious because of the volatility of the region. Nevertheless, hope remains (however little) for 'rational' decisions to be made by whoever is in power and peace shall prevail (Inshallah).

Engagement with key international organisations is another part of the policy sophistry of the presidential candidates this year. While Trump has clearly stood-up the Paris Climate Accord, Biden promises to re-join it immediately upon getting elected to office. Trump has ghosted NATO and the G5 in the past – which Biden promises to text-back. Trump's contrasting approaches surely puts Biden in good-light with these organisations and makes him look like a man-with-a-plan. Biden also aims to renegotiate the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, to "band Pacific economies against Beijing", something that Trump won't pay any heed to. The increased importance of the Indo-Pacific for the US is crucial for expanding America's circle of influence and checking China's military might. While Trump has shown commitment towards increasing the defence budget and building a space force, Biden's campaign remains in the grey here. Though increased defence budget is viewed as a positive step in strengthening state security and capability of standing up to China, on the obverse side, it creates hostility and scepticism in other's mind. This makes it absolutely crucial for it to be balanced well; not weighed down by personal or party interests – nonetheless, a utopian case.

Economy, Climate, Immigration & Other 'less' important stuff

In other 'less' important sections discussing the economy, etc., the candidates rightly focused on undermining their opponent by insulting them, bringing anecdotes from other's past, family and commenting on each other's smartness. Despite their apathetic approach, these topics influence the world greatly. Though the US economy is recovering, the Trump administration's sheer mismanagement of the financial downturn caused by the pandemic has inflicted irrecoverable losses to several developing economies. Biden doesn't seem to have a sustainable recovery plan either. Trump's policy of keeping the Federal Reserve under political pressure, unlike Biden, will be a huge blow to the global macroeconomic order. Moreover, his uncompassionate immigration policy and the (wet) dream of building the Mexican wall perpetuates xenophobia, which Biden has openly criticised. Biden is also very environment friendly and proposes to spearhead de rigueur changes in America's 'Green Policy'. To counter, Trump repeatedly has pointed out that these changes will not be painless and will incur significant economic costs. These important strands of conversation were left loose, rather forgotten amidst the blame-game and propaganda exchange, portraying each other as a fascist or a leftist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the overall policy and idea exchange was dominated by a load of baloney during the first presidential debate of 2020. In reality, both of the candidates must "shut-up" and focus on the more important things. Their campaign's publicly stated policies hold the potential to make or break the future of this God's green earth. Though both Red and Blue appear suspicious (read: sus) in their own ways, the international community must sit tight and hope for the best while the domestic interpretations of these policies determine the tide of this election. After months of campaigning and appeasing the smart Americans, now, it's time to vote!

Revisiting the Contours of Constitutional Protection: The Debate of Free Speech v. Hate Speech

By Mohd. Rameez Raza

In a country considered a democratic haven, off late, a lot of controversies have crept up regarding safeguarding the freedom of speech and expression. The most recent in the chain being the Bloomsbury India controversy. On August 22, Bloomsbury India announced that it would no longer be publishing a book called 'Delhi Riots 2020: The Untold Story'. Bloomsbury took this decision, as per their statement, because the pre-publication launch was apparently planned without its knowledge and with the "participation of parties of whom the publishers would not have approved". The publishing house further added that it supported 'freedom of speech' and respected the Indian Constitution as well as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) but also had 'a deep sense of responsibility towards society'. This move has received a mixed reaction with some people hailing it as a constructive measure to prevent further ostracization of minorities in India, whereas others have spoken harshly branding the publishing house as 'jihadist' and 'urban Naxals'. However, the question that still looms large is whether the freedom of speech and expression was curbed arbitrarily. This article tries to delve into the legalities of the issue and examine the existing literature and laws.

Freedom of Opinion and Expression: The International and National Stance

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was passed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 to prevent the occurrence of another Holocaust in the future. It was evident from the pre-warring days that a state with no regard for an individual's fundamental rights can cause severe disruption in the global order. As a result, every major nation of the world expressed its commitment to promote and observe a full suite of fundamental human rights, which were to be inalienable and protected internationally. Of all the fundamental rights that we have simply by the virtue of being a human, the most important of them is listed in Article 19 of the UDHR, which lays down the foundation for the protection of the freedom of opinion and expression. The rights contained within the UDHR, including freedom of opinion and expression, are currently firmly protected by the international treaties, human rights covenants and domestic human rights laws of many countries. Faring along similar lines, the framers of the Indian Constitution incorporated, within Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, the freedom of speech and expression with a provisional restriction under Article 19(2). Over the years, the judiciary has acted vigilantly to fight against any arbitrary curb in the freedoms guaranteed and that attitude continues to this day.

Hate Speech v Free Speech: The Brandenburg Test of Advocacy

Freedom of Speech is the bulwark of a democratic government as well as a prominent prerequisite for liberty. It plays a major role in the proper functioning of the democratic process. The debate on free speech is not a nascent development; it has been ongoing since ancient times of the Socratic Trial, with intellectuals over the years terming the debate as one concerning the mother of all liberties. Whether it be the case of *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978) where Justice Bhagwati pressed on its importance by stating that, "If democracy means government of the people by the people, it is obvious that every citizen must be entitled to participate in the democratic process and in order to enable him to intelligently exercise his right of making a choice, free and general discussion of public matters is absolutely essential" or the case of *Whitney v. California* (1927) in the United States of America, where Justice Louis Brandeis made a classic statement on the freedom of speech and said that any freedom without it would be futile. As a result, any exercise of one's freedom of speech today, no matter how communally or politically motivated, entails the whole spectrum of safeguards and restrictions on free speech as laid down in the Constitution of India. The present case seems to dwell in the same sphere of misunderstood liberties and overlooked duties. Justice Patanjali Shastri in the *AK Gopalan v The State of Madras* (1950) observed; "man as a rational being desires to do many things, but in a civil society his desires will have to be controlled with the exercise of similar desires by other individuals."

In the same way, though the freedoms of speech and expression are indeed guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, there exist certain restrictions imposed on them by the virtue of Article 19(2). The 'reasonable' restriction clause allows the state to impose restrictions on exercise of the right conferred by Article 19 (1) on grounds of protection of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence. These restrictions were laid down by the First Amendment Act, 1951 because it was well understood that the liberty of one must not lower the liberty of others. Hence, reasonable legal restrictions needed to be imposed on the exercise of freedom of speech.

The present case dangles between the territory of free speech and hate speech. On the one hand, the Bloomsbury Book controversy has tried to propagate well spelt out ideas against a particular community and, on the other hand, the supporters of the withdrawal have pressed that such withdrawal is nothing more than pure censorship of the freedom of speech and expression. To better understand this fine demarcation between propaganda and freedom of speech, the landmark case of *Shreya Singhal v Union of India* (2013) can be referred.

Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman specifically says in his judgment that the court needed to adopt the test laid down by the U.S. Supreme Court while interpreting the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in the historic case of *Brandenburg v Ohio* (1969), which much like Indian Constitution's Article 19 talks about the various rights of Americans. It was clearly stated that where there arose a case of distinguishing between advocacy and incitement, the court needed to consider the difference between the act of advocating a certain point of view and inciting somebody to take up arms against the government or something of a similar nature. Though the former would indeed be protected, the later speech is something that cannot be afforded any protection. Thereby, any protection that could be given to hate speech is specifically ruled out, implying that hate speech cannot be delivered in the same way as free speech.



River Interlinking

Reflections From The Case Study Of The Pattiseema Project

By Rishita Sankrit

The Pattiseema Project

In Andhra Pradesh's Krishna river delta lies the region of Rayalaseema, which faced droughts for over nine consecutive years and for a total of fifteen years between 2000 and 2018. This drought-prone region forces farmers to migrate in a desperate search for work when cultivation becomes untenable. The crops often fail due to deficient rainfalls and dried up borewells. While the lands desertify, farmers drown in debts.

On the other hand, the Godavari river annually lashes out on its neighbouring regions with uncontrollable floods. In August of 2020 itself, tens of villages in East and West Godavari villages were left stranded due to the river flooding, which according to reports had touched the peak of 22.90 lakh cusecs (equivalent to 198 tmc ft).

With the aim of ensuring that farmers in the Rayalaseema region get adequate access to water during harvest season while at the same time attempting to control the oversaturation of Godavari, the Pattiseema lift irrigation project was initiated. The project interlinks the Krishna and Godavari rivers and is designed to draw about 120 tmc ft (thousand million cubic feet) surplus Godavari waters into the Krishna through the Polavaram right canal, reaching Krishna at the barrage near Vijayawada. A study by Ravi Babu B. and P. Padmavathi titled Interlinking of Krishna and Godavari rivers: An ecological study further dives into the details of the project. According to their study the project is aimed at drawing about 80 tmc ft of Godavari water to Krishna, of which 10 tmc ft is intended for domestic and industrial use in major Krishna and West Godavari districts, and the remaining is intended at satisfying the irrigation needs of 7 lakh acres of paddy fields. The project was commissioned in 2014 and was completed in 2016, and is highly praised for being completed in the record time of two years.

The project has been operational for about four years now. It can serve as a peek into the future of what can be expected if we go ahead with the river-interlinking projects across the country. And thus, this case study aims to ask two major questions: What was the socio-economic and ecological cost of building the project, and, what has been the extent of the benefits accrued to the farmers, if at all.

Socio-economic and ecological costs

In 2015 while the Pattiseema project was underway, many farmer groups rose in protest claiming that their farmlands were acquired for the project either without their consultation, or through forceful consent. Yernei Nagendranath, the president of the Federation of Farmers, while addressing his organization and the Bhartoya Kisan Sangh at a round table conference, accused the then Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu of not holding even a single meeting with the farmers for consultation despite rising protests. While there have been reports of compensations being sanctioned to the farmers (sufficiency of which is a question in itself), what stopped the government from bringing the farmers into confidence and making them a part of the decision making process, if the purpose of the project was to benefit the farmers?

Though the government's indifference to the farmers' grievances is not unprecedented, it may be excused if the project by and large does indeed help them. While there is less evidence of that, the interlinking of Krishna and Godavari rivers has posed a serious challenge for the fisherman in the region.

Marine scientists have always cautioned the policy makers on the negative ecological impacts of river-interlinking. In their study authors Ravi Babu B. and P. Padmavathi note that in addition to aquatic life, fish diversity is severely affected, due to which the fishermen in Guntur district's Tadepalli village on the banks of river Krishna having been facing trouble from a species of fish which they had never seen in the river before. The authors note that the change in depth, flow and turbidity of water creates a barrier for indigenous fishes to migrate upstream and spawn. In addition to that, river-interlinking encourages the spread of alien invasive species that "out-compete the endemic ones or even hybridize with them and carry disease-causing parasites and pathogens through water". And thus the farmers found that alien species of fish damage their nets and scare away other fishes. And consequently their catch, and thus their earning, has dropped.

Such consequences of river-interlinking does weigh the debate in favour of the critics. However their fears are not limited to adverse impacts of river-interlinking on farmers and fishermen. They are also concerned about the capacity of the government bodies in carrying out the project without corrupt practices. The Pattiseema project validates those fears.

In 2017 the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report found that the Pattiseema project had costed the taxpayers an avoidable expenditure of Rs 351.40 crores due to the mismanagement in project execution. The CAG observed that this additional expenditure was due to changes in construction patterns, but even more surprisingly due to a labour welfare tax benefit that was accrued to the contractor by mistake!

We may think of them as expensive, but expected oversights in any large-scale projects. However these lapses of the government were not limited to financial mismanagement, but also in following other legislative protocols. An environment activist and former bureaucrat EAS Sarma found in a response to his RTI queries that the Pattiseema project had not acquired the necessary environment clearance. According to the activist the government claims that since the Pattiseema project comes under a pre-existing project (Polavaram) for which the environment clearances had already been obtained, and therefore separate clearances were not required for the Pattiseema project. However Sarma points out in the environment clearance dated October 15, 2015, it was stipulated that any change to project would require fresh clearances to be obtained, and since the inclusion of the Pattiseema project indeed involved substantive changes to the Polavaram project, not obtaining clearances was a clear violation of the agreement.

Such transgressions by the government along with added burden on the local residents of the Rayalaseema region paints a pessimistic picture about the success of river-interlinking projects. Although, if the overall impact is found to be positive in mitigating the effect of droughts and in substantially benefitting the farmers, we may be willing to forego the corrupt practices and the damaging consequences of the construction of the Pattiseema project. However, the reality is far from what is desired. (*find full version on our website*)

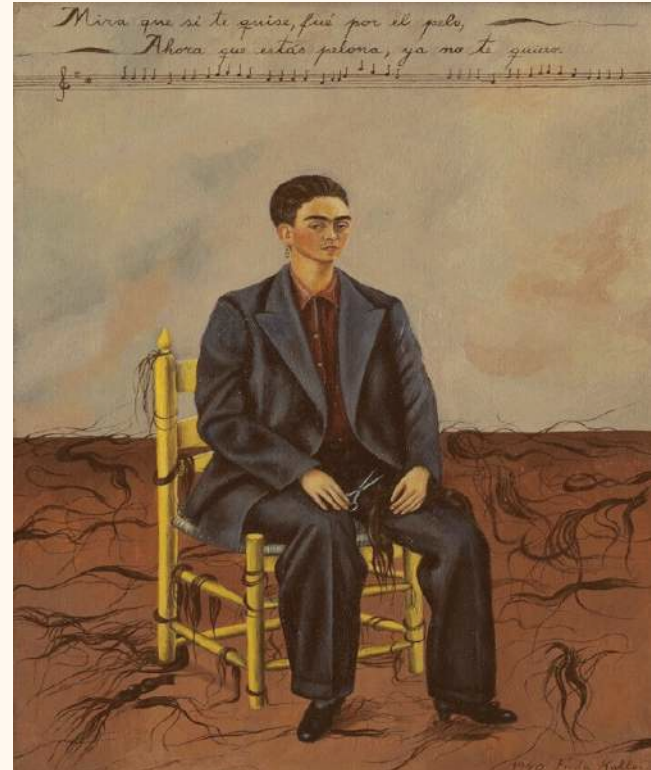
Frida Kahlo's 'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair'

By Sanjana Hira

Frida Kahlo is a name synonymous with the emergence of gendered art in the twentieth century. The Mexican artist was renowned for her self-portraits and the embedded symbolism in her work that revolved around the themes of identity and death and celebrated indigenous Mexican culture and the female form. The artist's turbulent relationship with Diego Rivera, whom she married twice, was also a recurrent theme in her work and is reflected in one of her famous portraits shortly after their divorce – 'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair'.

Kahlo is celebrated as a feminist icon because of the manner in which she depicts herself in her self-portraits. Challenging the stereotypical norms of beauty laid out for women, she proudly sports a unibrow and moustache, not conforming to the patriarchal standards for women's grooming. While many of her earlier portraits showed her in classic feminine attire, adorned with a necklace or headgear, they were deep-rooted in traditional Mexican culture and enabled her to defy the norm in her own way. She wore bright ribbons and jewellery, defying the existing expectations of how a cultured Mexican woman should dress.

'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair' displays Kahlo in a large black suit, sitting on a chair with a pair of scissors in her right hand and long strands of hair strewn around her. Her hair is cut short and atop her are lyrics of a popular Mexican song that read – "Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore." This particular portrait is believed to be a declaration of her independence – not just from Diego, but from men in general.



The contrast between Kahlo's clothing in this portrait compared to her earlier ones is striking. Her attire consists of an oversized man's suit and red shirt, sharply veering away from her typical feminine dresses and high-heeled shoes. While many interpret the portrait as her mourning her husband's infidelity, her denouncement of the "appropriate" apparel can be viewed as a strong symbol of independence and autarky. The locks of hair strewn around her are thought to symbolise her femininity that she has sacrificed but can be interpreted merely as a challenge to gender conforming notions of beauty today. Long tresses are not necessarily representative of being feminine and instead of viewing her cropped hair as an act of martyrdom, one can interpret it as a bold message, in the same way that her choice of clothing defies existing norms.

In some ways, if we were to read Kahlo's portraits as something that escapes the heterosexual matrix of intelligibility, we might be able to gain some insight into why it seems so profound. Judith Butler, in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, posits the idea that gender and sex may not have a linear relationship – in that, that gender is symbolic of cultural meanings that the sexed body takes on, so in some ways, bodies that conform to the larger heterosexual culture have a better chance of surviving the violence than those that don't. In fact, this matrix becomes the filter through which we perceive the normative and, hence, anything outside the filter seems to be a subversion of the institutions that are creating and perpetuating the matrix. Kahlo is unapologetically weaving a very different story of her own self, and while that may simply be a take on her own agency – of her being in control of her own appearance, it can also be read as a deeper argument on the idea of its perception as well.

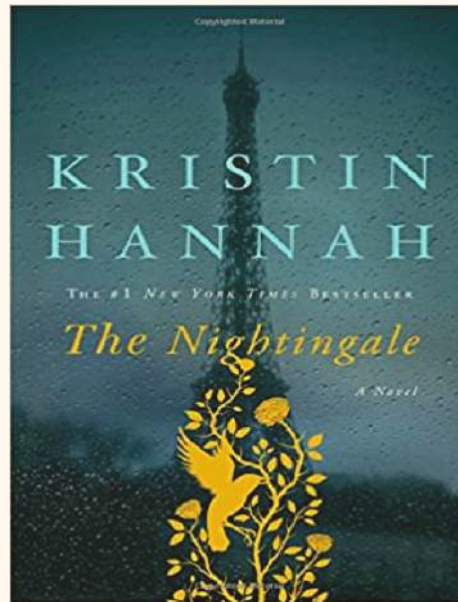
Why was it that not conforming to these set boxes was seen as something that was not normative? Is there something to be said about the subversion itself? It attempts to traverse

the boundaries between the feminine and masculine, but does the manner in which it does so complicate the reading of the larger idea of the self itself? If we begin to view this self-portrait as made by Frida Kahlo herself – what does that say about women's agency in painting their own selves – because the act of painting your own image, and in some ways controlling your own perception, speaks on a rather deeper and subversive level.

Whether Frida Kahlo painted this particular portrait in mourning for her unfaithful husband, or as metaphor for her emancipation, or even a combination of the two, it is emblematic of female empowerment and can be seen as a confrontation to existing patriarchal norms. "I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best," said Kahlo. A constant theme across Kahlo's portraits is her unashamed depiction of herself – each one exuding confidence and independence, and along with that, a clear message to all women.

War stories from the Kitchen – The Nightingale

By Prerna Vij



The *Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah is a difficult book to review. It is attempting and succeeding at the many things that it is trying to achieve. In many ways this book is an exceptional study in the very idea of genres and how at the very crux of it- books have the ability to escape categorisation and tell stories in unique ways. The book situates the story of sisters Vianne and Isabelle Rossingol during World War 2. The switches to and fro between late 20th century America where an old lady is narrating the story and then goes back to war ridden France. In this switch the book touches upon some very pressing issues – the collateral of war. A war that lasted over six years and possibly changed the world politically forever. The war left behind in its wake carnage and some of the worst human rights abuses. The story of the war itself is written in ways that not only gloss over this pain and suffering but attempt to put forth a more homogeneous narrative- one that discounts the participation of women in the struggle itself. Many movements around the world against the autocratic regimes in the countries were mounted and held together by the women who became inconspicuous participants. In some ways their essentialism prevented them from being held responsible for what were considered acts of treason.

Kristin Hannah writes the tale of these women as not simply women during war but as women with agency. The careful intermingling of narrative driven and character driven parts- makes the novel worth a read if only for the surprise twists. Without giving away too much- the book makes for an interesting entry into the historical fiction category. In many ways it breaks down the perception of women and children being mute spectators or collateral damage in war. It engages them in the active warzone. The complicated narrative that Hannah weaves around the question of agency and visibilization of agents that somehow get lost in the masculine overtones of war is extremely fascinating. In some ways, if we only read it as a historical fiction novel, it would disregard the several prominent themes that run throughout the book- mainly ideas of family and trauma. The body becomes this venue of sorts where it loses the capacity to process the tons of trauma that is inflicted on it and simply looks to the larger picture.

I think the narrative itself is steady, although there is an ambiguity in who is narrating this story. It gives it a unique perspective. The unreliable narrator is a woman in this case. An old woman who is moving from her house on the Oregon coast to an old folk's home. She is suffering but that's somehow refuses to take precedence when it comes to the larger narrative. The fact that most stories of women are lost when it comes to wars which exist on a much larger scale- and women simply become citizens who stayed behind, seems to turn on its head throughout the novel. In some senses it complicates the idea of revolution and the spaces that it can occur in. No longer is the battle simply limited to the border or places where soldiers are deployed- it is expanded into more personal frontiers as the enemy begins to encroach upon the lives of those who are simply trying to wait out the period. This blurring of spaces, creates a narrative that is spatially transgressive. Somehow the war enters the butcher's shop and the local church as it has at the frontlines. The ferocity with which violence tempers itself is truly written in a fascinating manner. War is all encompassing and to live in a warzone is terrifying for the inhabitants- the constant instability and threat to life has been written in a careful manner without ever romanticizing the struggle.

The French have a history of resisting- it was the country that gave revolutionaries their war cries of liberty, fraternity and equality. It was only befitting that a country that had long built itself as the centre of resistance would want to protect what makes France, France. In many ways Kristin Hannah encapsulates that feeling and that feeling. Contextually, the story feels authentic almost as if the war is raging all around us and in some ways it is. Fiction like this often makes you reflect on the stories that you never hear- ones that perhaps get lost when the historical narratives and textbooks are written with the sole purpose of presenting simply one story. The book touches upon issues of power structures – especially questions of morality when you are forced to comply to orders that may not comply to your idea of it. *The Nightingale* is a simple read- on the face of it.



Behind the Scenes: #helpyourhelpers

Period Poverty and Project Coपल By BTS

By Vidhi Gupta

□Meeting the hygiene needs of all adolescent girls is a fundamental issue of human rights, dignity, and public health□
□Sanjay Wijesekera, former UNICEF Chief of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

In recent times, with the onset of the pandemic, many daily wage workers and blue collared employees lost their jobs to the growing uncertainty in various sectors. Project Coपल, initiated by Behind The Scenes and in collaboration with Kamakhya, aims to generate employment and awareness about the use of cloth pads and safe menstruation. They are an eco-friendly and sustainable alternative for regular pads.

Menstruation, in itself and in many cultures, is seen as a taboo. It is looked down on and women are considered as 'impure' or 'polluted'. As a result, they are not allowed to step out of the house and in extreme cases, sent away to huts like done in Nepal. Since periods are considered as such a shame, period poverty is not given the due attention and awareness that it requires. It has been estimated that 1 out of 5 girls drop out of the school after they start experiencing menstrual cycle. According to a survey, 82% of women in India are not aware of sanitary pads and their uses. Thus, knowing about their harmful effects and implications is out of question. Out of the 18% that do know about them, only 12% have access to them. Remaining 88% have to rely on alternatives, such as rags, cloth, hay, sand and ash. This exposes them to infectious uro-genital diseases such as urinary tract infection (UTI), bacterial vaginosis with skin irritation, vaginal itching, white and green discharge and others.

As a part of Project Coपल, BTS and Kamakhya have conducted various sessions to educate and help women understand how and why they should use cloth pads instead of regular commercialized sanitary pads. We have worked with 3 organisations so far, from different parts of the country. These were Katha, a group of female tailors based in Delhi, Anamcara, an organisation that works towards sustainability of the Kekadiya village in Madhya Pradesh which is the only all-tribal village of central India and a group of women in Gorakhpur who teach women from rural areas how to make and use cloth pads.

In our interaction with these women, we found that while they knew about sanitary pads, they were not aware of its harmful effects on the body or on the environment. Access was no better. In Kekadiya, for instance, the women have to travel 10 kms to reach the market place to buy sanitary napkins. In many other rural settings, this inaccessibility makes women dependent on cloth which they would use and dry in dark and closed places to avoid humiliation by the society. This results in the cloth remaining infected, even by bugs and insects.

To curb this problem, we hold sessions with these organisations and educate rural women on how and why they should use cloth pads. Normal pads are made of bleach and other chemicals including plastics that harm both the body and the environment. Cloth pads are much cheaper than regular pads, thus, saving finances and are easy to make at home, thus granting access. These can be made from any old cotton cloth and towel that one doesn't use and magnetic buttons to keep the wings in place. All one needs to know is how to stitch.

Considering their financial status, making cloth pads at home not only increases their awareness, but also reduces the financial burden that they carry. The most important point that we must emphasize is that the cloth pads must be kept to dry in the sun as it acts as a disinfectant. But, due to the various social stigmas and stereotypes that are attached, women now feel ashamed of their own body. We have been actively working with Kamakhya to break such ideologies and superstitions to empower the women with a strong mindset. These would lead to the women making several choices, giving them the independence to decide for themselves.

There is one question that we often encounter during our sessions, that earlier the women in rural areas would use cloth only, but seeing the shift in urban societies and excessive advertisement of only regular pads, they decided to shift as well. However, now we are contradicting ourselves and asking for another change. How is it different each time? This problem, however, has persisted because of the urban-rural divide prevalent very strongly in India. This brought us to realise that even the rural women are aware of the existing narratives and that it influences their behaviour. It is therefore important to reflect on oneself before educating others over any given topic.

It does indeed take time to switch to cloth pads as it may seem like a novel idea. However, the pros outweigh the cons without a doubt. They can save finances of a poor family or even allow women, who don't have any means to menstrual pads, a fair access. BTS aims to conduct more such workshops in the future, in order to promote sustainable menstrual hygiene - and end period poverty, one step at a time!





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