

Excerpts

Looking Away Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India¹

By Harsh Mander

I sometimes wonder how I would describe today's India if I were a historian writing a hundred years from now.

I would write, first, that the paramount marker of the first decade of twenty-first-century India was the extraordinary indifference that people of privilege had for the intense and pervasive levels of human suffering all around them. In an interview he gave in the middle of 2013, philosopher and public intellectual Noam Chomsky observed that India's 'misery and oppression are so striking, much worse than in any country I have ever seen. And it is so dramatic'. Tellingly, Chomsky also noted: What is really striking to me...is the indifference of privileged sectors to the misery of others. You walk through Delhi and cannot miss it, but people just don't seem to see it...they put themselves in a bubble and then they don't see it.'

There is indeed a startling absence of compassion among a majority of well-to-do Indians towards the millions who have no advantages of birth to shield them from hunger, oppression, violence, squalor and humiliation. A dispassionate external observer would be bewildered by middle-class India's capacity to look away when confronted with enormous injustice and suffering; by our society's cultural comfort with inequality. That the accident of where a child is born still determines her chances in life almost irrevocably— whether and how long she would be able to study, and with what quality, the vocations open to her, the limits of her wealth and social standing, even her most basic well-being and dignity—is widely considered unproblematic, even legitimate. Many people of wealth and privilege are convinced that they have what they do because they deserve it, and that those who are in want and need also deserve their lot—because of laziness, addiction to drink, lack of education, lack of ambition, low capabilities in general, and the profligate breeding of large families.

The second-most striking marker of this age that I would record, looking back on India a century later, would be the legitimization of prejudice and discrimination against people of minority faiths and cultures and people whose life choices differ from those of the majority. Since the early 1990s, there has been an erosion, among significant sections of the middle class, of our traditions of pluralism and the lived acceptance—however imperfect—of diversity. People of minority communities are subjected to bigotry, intolerance and open hostility. Large sections of the elite and

¹ Published by Speaking Tiger , Delhi, 2015

middle classes are also unapologetically prejudiced against people of 'lower' castes, residents of urban slums, people from ethnically distinct regions of the country like the Northeast, working-class migrants from poor states like Bihar, coloured people, sexual minorities and many others who differ in whichever way from the 'mainstream'.

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The challenges of inequality in India are compounded by the powerful revival of the politics of difference, a new conservatism and the evidence of active social and state hostility towards minority groups and communities, reflected in grossly under-provisioned Muslim ghettos, religious profiling in both terror-related and other crimes, and the extra-judicial killings of tribals, Muslims and Dalits.

There is growing appeal among the middle classes for Right-wing politics that often combines market fundamentalism with hostility towards minorities and India's neighbours. In the general elections of 2014, this mood was best represented by Narendra Modi, who fought a blistering electoral battle deploying 'shock and awe' tactics against his adversaries—who included liberals, socialists, 'secularists' and minorities—whom he felled decisively to become India's sixteenth prime minister.

Of all the major political parties seeking votes in the 2014 elections, the BJP, through its prime ministerial candidate, offered the Indian electorate perhaps the most cohesive, if troubling, vision for the country. Modi offered a combination of three fundamentalisms. First, a market orthodoxy which guarantees unprecedented levels of subsidies to big business in the form of long tax holidays, soft loans, cheap land and electricity, at the expense of public expenditure on education, health, social protection and public infrastructure. Next was communal fundamentalism, constituting barely disguised hostility towards religious minorities, especially Muslims, which was the main rallying agenda on the ground in electorally crucial states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. And the third was a militarist fundamentalism, envisioning an aggressive foreign policy, including war with Pakistan. Modi's offer to the voters was a kind of 'buy one, get two free' political bargain, but one in which you cannot embrace one of the fundamentalisms without also accepting the others.

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Formal-sector workers receive pensions of around half their last pay drawn. Using this as the yardstick—the government's own—the indigent old people who gathered at Jantar Mantar in the winter of 2013 under the banner of Pension Parishad demanded a universal pension equivalent to half the statutory minimum wages of unorganized workers, which is roughly 2,000 rupees a month. 2,000 rupees, incidentally, is a fraction of what many of us in the middle classes would spend in an

evening outing with the family, watching a film in a multiplex, and then some dinner afterwards.

Talking to some of them about what they would do if they actually got the pension was both educative and heart-breaking. Suhagan Devi of Muzaffarpur, Bihar, said, 'I'll use the money to get treatment for my filariasis, because of which my son keeps me out of my house.' A lady sitting next to her nodded and added, simply, 'If we get this pension, our children will take care of us.'

One old couple told us, 'Out of this 2,000 rupees, we'll spend money on food, medicines, rent... And if we are able to save some money then we'll set aside 100 rupees every month for our cremation.' Others made even more specific plans: 'If we get this money, we won't sit idle, we'll buy a goat, and that goat over a period of time will become a source of income and we'll live a better life.'

For some who were fighting disability and disease, the 2,000 rupees would only make bare survival possible. 'I'm handicapped, so I'll spend this money on arrangements for me to move around. And I can afford the medicines I need.' An old woman said, 'We are a family of seven, my husband is a cancer patient; my son is disabled and his wife is a TB patient. Even basic needs like food cost much more than 2,000 rupees every month. We are under heavy debt. I don't know what I'll do with these 2,000 rupees.' An elderly widow said, 'I have two sons. One of them is deaf and mute and the other is a drunkard. Food, clothes, water—all of it costs much more than 2,000 rupees.'

One old woman was more expansive in her day-dream, 'If I get this pension, I'll use an auto-rickshaw to travel to hospital and get my medicines. I'll be able to eat good food. This much money will satiate my soul. And most importantly, I won't be a burden on my family anymore.'

On the last day of the dharna, an old widow from a village in Bihar looked very distraught. Shankar, a compassionate senior activist helping the elderly on their dharna, comforted her. 'Don't worry, amma, you will be back in your village soon.'

'That is what I am worried about, son,' she replied. 'Here in the dharna at least I ate three meals every day. How will I fill my stomach when I'm back in my village?'

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There are fewer girls on the streets of Delhi than boys, but they must negotiate the metropolis at its predatory worst, every day. Unlike the majority of street boys, who courageously negotiate lives alone on the streets, rebelling against abuse and neglect in their homes by severing links with their families, most girls we encounter on the streets of Delhi continue to live on pavements or in slums *with* families, who send

them out to earn money to support their siblings and parents. This they do stoically and bravely, but with much less of the reckless joyfulness that street boys craft out of their hard-won freedom. In their early years, girls mostly beg. As they grow older, the majority rag-pick in waste dumps and markets, earning more than a hundred rupees daily. Often bullied and molested, they learn to shout swear words and grapple with their fists. Many chew tobacco or sniff adhesive solutions. And, either through their parents or on their own, many soon learn ways to furtively earn larger sums from older men who seek casual sex with children.

We met a few such girls outside Hanuman Mandir in Delhi, not far from Yamuna Pushta, an embankment along the Yamuna in Delhi adjoining the Nigambodh cremation grounds, home to thousands of homeless people.

Farah, delicate and fragile underneath her grubby exterior, was barely ten years old. She came from a family of migrants from a village near Kolkata. She could not hear or speak, nor could her younger sister. Their father was addicted to smack and would spend his time in a drugged haze. His two daughters would beg, with wordless insistence, at the Hanuman Mandir where many homeless children and women gather for food and alms. Devotees at the temple distribute bananas and other fruit; others bring cooked kulchas and kachoris with halwa; many give away sweetmeats as prasad. On festival days or in memory of loved ones, some even distribute clothes. But the day's work for the sisters would not be complete until they had collected a few coins from the worshippers at the temple. Their mother would sit on a side lane, and the girls would run up to her periodically, deposit their collections, and run back for more.

A group of volunteers were sitting outside the temple gates, talking to some of the girls, when all at once Farah tensed, visibly wilted, and tried to hide behind one of young women volunteers. An older girl, Shabnam, ran up and fiercely grabbed the shirt of a disabled old man who was walking past. He, too, was mute, but he angrily gesticulated and threatened the girls. Shabnam protectively embraced the younger Farah. Gradually, the sordid tale unfolded.

Farah's mother had sold her to this old man. He would rape her regularly and, in return, give money to the family. We located Farah's mother and angrily urged her to let us take the girl under our care. She declined sadly. 'I love my daughter. But if I let her go, how will the family live? He will not allow us to beg here, and we will all starve.' While we tried to get the police to rescue the girl, I struggled to not judge the utterly defeated older woman, but could not quite succeed.

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It is a harsh unforgiving winter each year for homeless people who survive Delhi's streets. Through long foggy nights, bleary-eyed with sleep, they squat around tiny

fires, desperately trying to keep the chill out. Many curl up together, sometimes under a single thin blanket, bony bodies pressed against each other, some along with stray dogs, all sharing body warmth. But we also encounter the stiff sleeping forms of single, lonely people, almost frozen in the cold. Every wintry night leaves behind more bodies—anonymous, dispensable people; rickshaw-pullers, balloon-sellers, women thrown out on to the streets by violent spouses, children who have escaped abuse, abandoned old people, all of whom could not battle any further.

There are still no shelters of any kind for more than 90 per cent of over a hundred thousand men, women and children in the nation's capital for whom the open sky is the only roof.

Entrepreneurs in the walled city around Jama Masjid have learned to profit from the failures of the state to provide for its most dispossessed citizens. They hire out quilts to homeless people at 10 rupees a night, and mattresses for an additional 10. They also occupy open tracts of government lands—where the government could have built many shelters—on which they erect makeshift private 'shelters', with plastic sheet roofs but no walls. Under these, they lay small cots with blankets and mattresses which they rent out to the homeless people who can afford to pay 30 rupees a night. A bonus of sleeping in these privatized 'shelters' is that the police are paid off to not harass the people who pay to sleep here.

Winter forces homeless people to make difficult choices. If you want the warmth of a quilt to keep out the cold, you may have to give up a meal.

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His son Babu found him dead in the cowshed behind their home.

Kusara Mallagaud had drunk pesticide late the previous night, and quietly lay down for the last time in the shed where no one could hear him as he writhed alone in pain in his last hours. He clearly wanted to die the way he had tried to live his life, enduring his suffering himself, always trying to shield his family. But even though he fiercely protected them all his life, in the manner of his death, he profoundly and permanently abandoned them.

Kusara succumbed to the deadly epidemic of despair that is stalking rural India, which has already taken what some experts estimate to be more than 200,000 farmers' lives in the period between 1995 and 2007. As governments hotly contest these figures, this epidemic of terminal despair shows no signs of abating. Palagummi Sainath calculates that 'suicide rates among Indian farmers were a chilling 47 per cent higher than they were for the rest of the population in 2011'. In some states, they were well over 100 per cent higher. A farmer in Andhra Pradesh is three times more likely to commit suicide than anyone else in the country, excluding farmers.

Babu, barely nineteen, suddenly found himself the oldest male member of the family. He bravely tried to hold back his tears, as his grandmother and aunt wept inconsolably around him. His mother had gone to her parent's home in the ritual of mourning, and his younger siblings were still numbed and stunned. 'If only he had spoken to us, we would have sold everything to pay off his debts,' Kusara's sister kept wailing. The villagers who had gathered around added, 'It was he who would give strength when others would lose heart. We never dreamed that one day he would go this way.'

It was only to his son Babu that Kusara had occasionally confided. Babu had observed his father's progressive retreat into his silences. Babu had himself opted to drop out of school to share his burdens. A month before he died, Kusara had spoken to his son about the hopeless enormity of his debts: 300,000 rupees. Every day, he had to hide furtively from the moneylender and, in doing so, was forced to feel a deep sense of shame. But for how long could he avoid him? Babu suggested that they sell off their home and their two-and-a half acres of land. His father did not agree...

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Despite overwhelming evidence, supported by virtually every commission of enquiry established after every major communal riot, and many independent, scholarly studies, that the large majority of victims in almost every communal riot are Muslims, the middle class remains convinced that during riots, Muslims are always the aggressors.

This is what that indefatigable warrior against prejudice, Ram Puniyani, calls the 'social common sense', which remains unshaken with its preconceptions and prejudices despite all evidence to the contrary. On the flipside, there is also a continuous attempt to play down the numbers of lives lost, and to suggest that a significant proportion of people killed were actually Hindus.

The conviction that Muslims are aggressors even when they are manifestly and overwhelmingly the victims plays out in the prejudiced mind in ingenuous ways. During my year of self-imposed exile to Ahmedabad after the carnage, I developed. A friend insisted on taking me to a group of doctors working in a leading private hospital. When the doctors learned what I was doing in Gujarat, their conversation unsurprisingly turned to the communal riots they had seen in Ahmedabad over the years. One doctor said, 'When Muslim persons injured in riots would come into the government hospital in which I worked, I found they usually had simple shallow injuries. But when Hindus were brought in, the knife injuries would be deep and complicated, because Muslims are taught how to injure and kill with a thoroughness and cruelty which Hindus are incapable of.' Their conviction, that Muslims are

particularly skilled at aggression, despite witnessing the unimaginable cruelty that had been visited upon the victims, mostly Muslim, remained unshaken.

This 'blaming the victim' plays out in many other ways during communal riots, to breach the natural flow of human sympathy with the survivors. In Muzaffarnagar, within three months of the violence, the state government forcefully shut down all relief camps at the height of winter, even though people were too terrified to return home in a continuing climate of hate. As a result, hapless survivors were left unprotected in the open, and at least fifty children were reported to have died in the winter chill.

But I heard many officials—and even some journalists—observe privately that the government had to shut down the camps because Muslims otherwise were getting habituated to eating 'free food' for no work in the camps. This, again, is something I have heard in the aftermath of riots I have managed as a district officer over the years, and also in Gujarat when camps were again shut down within six months to give an impression of normalcy before the state elections.

I wish those who believe any human being would voluntarily choose to live with his or her loved ones in the humiliating, unsanitary, under-served, highly cramped environments of a relief camp in India would himself sleep one night with his own children, wife and parents in one of these camps, and then decide if any human being would choose this life of 'free food' out of laziness and greed.

As a small offering of solidarity, I spent one night in the Shah Alam Camp in Ahmedabad in 2002 among ten thousand others, and it is a memory which I will carry until my death. Ten thousand people—body pressed against body—slept within the narrow confines of the medieval mazaar amidst graveyards. People were stoic in their memories of suffering, betrayal and loss, and busied themselves in the everyday tasks of daily survival. A child needed milk, a baby was being born, a sick old man needed care. There were barely a score of toilets for ten thousand people, and a person could bathe only once in nine days. I recall the stench of unclean toilets and crowds of bodies packed together, the absence of privacy, the shame of pushing among the crowds for food, the broken childhoods of children, women delivering babies in the camp, and so many other indignities. My stomach was violently infected for a month after my stay in the camp. Musthaq, a young resident of the camp who went on to join us as a peace worker, said to me, 'I was the youngest in my family, and everyone spoilt me. The killings broke out in our colony Naroda. I saw children and women being burnt alive. I saw our neighbours loot and burn our home. I still did not cry. We were transported in trucks to Shah Alam Camp a day later. I still did not cry. Volunteers had cooked rotis for thousands of people streaming into the camps. There were no plates; the rotis were strewn on the dirt floor. My family was famished, and I saw them push other people to grab the rotis from the bare dirt. It was then that I began to weep for the first time.'

I also recall an incident in the Khargone district when, as the district magistrate, I was immersed in trying to help the survivors of a small local riot connected with the build-up to the Babri Masjid movement in 1989. An RSS activist with a red tika on his forehead walked into my office one day and said, 'Collector saab. We all can see how much you have taken this riot to heart. But you should not. These Muslims set fire to their own homes only so that they can get compensation.'

At that time, the compensation was the princely sum of 2,000 rupees.

I was overwrought, perhaps, and could not hold myself back. I got up and pulled the startled man by the hand to the door of my office, saying, 'You have to come with me now and set fire to your own house. I will give you 2,000 rupees from my personal bank account right away. But first, you must set fire to your house in my presence,' and continued to drag him out until he freed himself from my grip and fled.

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My personal faith choice is that of agnosticism, the acknowledgement that I do not know if god exists, or if there is life after death. I find this position more scientific than atheism, because even atheism is based on certainty, whereas we truly do not know. But more than scientific rationality, what is more important to me are the social *ethics* of my agnosticism. It is not just that I do not know if there is a god. I do not even want to know, because this knowledge should not be the driving force of my life choices. I love the Sufi story of Raabia in the twelfth century, who feverishly runs up and down the streets of the Iraqi town of Basra with a bucket of water in one hand and a flaming torch in the other. Asked why she carries the bucket of water, she says she wishes to douse the fires of hell. Then why the flaming torch? She wants to set heaven on fire, she says. I should lead the good life neither out of fear of the fires of hell, or the desire for heaven, but only because I am convinced that it is the right thing to do. This knowledge alone should be enough for me.

I recognize more clearly now that our understanding of secularism in this country is not the denial of faith but equal respect for every faith, including the absence of faith. This is the secularism of Ashok, Kabir, Chisti, Nanak, Akbar and Gandhi. Many argue that we should not describe this principle as one of secularism, but find another name for it. I am content to call it secularism, as long as we agree on what it entails. If a person's faith leads them to oppressing women, people of 'lower' castes and sexual minorities, to hating people of other faiths, and into superstition and unreason, then it should be opposed resolutely by all means. But if it leads people to greater compassion, or gives them solace in moments of bereavement, then why

should it be negated? Faith may not work for me, but why should I object if it works for someone else? How can I be so convinced that I am right and the other wrong?

The two persons in India's public life who sacrificed the most for the secular idea of India—Mahatma Gandhi and Maulana Azad—were deeply devout, and this is what spurred their politics of unshakeable respect for the faith of others. Gandhi paid for his belief with his life. The two people who, during India's freedom struggle, most influentially led the battles for a state based on religion were Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Jinnah was not a practising Muslim most of his life, and Savarkar was a self-professed atheist. There has to be a moral in this seeming paradox somewhere.

Azad was passionately opposed to the two-nation theory, declaring, 'Religion has never been a binding factor in the formation of nations.' He wrote: 'It is one of the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, economically, linguistically and culturally different.' He added, 'The basis of the partition was enmity between the Hindus and Muslims. The creation of Pakistan gave it a permanent constitutional form.'

The modern secular state in India has no religion, but is bound by the 'higher morality of the Constitution'. It is also bound to ensure equal protection and equal rights without favour or prejudice to all people regardless of their faith—and their gender, caste, class, language and place of residence. But the democratic state is not simply 'hands-off' religion, as the colonial state was and many Western democracies are. It is not freed from both the right and the duty to reform what is unjust—such as to women, children or disadvantaged sub-groups—under the rubric of accepted religious practice.

The greatest challenge which all countries will have to face and resolve in the twenty-first century are the ways in which they will deal with the two paramount challenges of inequality and diversity. But the understanding of how these challenges are to be dealt with varies widely in different parts of the world. The nation-building project in countries of Europe was sometimes one of coercive—and often violent—homogenization, in which minority languages, faith systems and cultures were forcefully submerged in the hegemony of the majority language, culture and faith. In contrast, India has traditionally dealt with diversity in ways that are respectful of pluralism—although social values attached to the practices of different groups are intensely graded and hierarchical. It is only the Hindu nationalist project which is homogenizing—what Ramachandra Guha once described as an enterprise to create a Hindu Pakistan. It requires conformity with what is deemed to be essentially Indian—upper-caste, male, north Indian, Hindi-speaking, Hindu (and heterosexual). The degrees to which an individual is not any or all of these render that person a lesser Indian. This is why Hindu nationalists have been so implacably opposed to

Gandhi's humanist secularism founded on his devotion to the Hindu faith, as much as to the secular democracy enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

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In early 2013 I was invited to speak about inequality at the Danish Parliament to some parliamentarians, senior intellectuals and activists. Since I had arrived a couple of days early, I decided to look at what Denmark does for its homeless populations, and to learn from it. It was snowing, and temperatures in Copenhagen had plummeted to minus 10 degrees centigrade. I had expected to find the best programmes for the homeless in Denmark. Instead, I was told that the Danish government takes care only of *Danish* homeless people.

Since almost every homeless person in the city was non-Danish, I asked who took care of them. I was told it was the church. My local hosts helped me establish contact with the church, and I met a priest, a wonderful, compassionate young woman in jeans about my daughter's age. She said the church was able to provide a roof and food to ninety homeless people. For the remaining—at least a thousand people—there were no arrangements at all.

I realized then how inextricably intertwined are the ways a society deals with inequality and how it deals with difference. India has dealt very badly as a civilization with the challenge of inequality, but has fine historical traditions of religious tolerance and coexistence. In contrast, I found that whereas Scandinavia today sets some of the highest standards on the planet with its welfare state; in dealing with inequality, it is troubled and confused by 'different' immigrant populations of diverse colour, clothing and faith, who more recently have made their country their home. It is probably this anxiety with difference which overpowered their otherwise sterling instincts and social contract for greater equality through interventions by a caring state.

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Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and a peace worker who lost both his parents and sister in Auschwitz, reminds us that, 'The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference.' And while I am dismayed by reports of Wiesel's fierce opposition to Palestine, it is to these luminous words that I turn while opening this last segment of my book, for an initial, tentative exploration of the possibilities of love, empathy and public compassion being fashioned into instruments of social and political resistance, justice and, indeed, social transformation.

I will reflect briefly on whether love—variously understood as empathy, compassion, caring, solidarity, fraternity, forgiveness and non-violence—contains within it the capacity to dismantle indifference and prejudice. I will try to acknowledge the possibilities, but also the limits to empathy. I will talk of non-

violence as resistance, and also of unmapped pathways we can embark upon to claim a more just and caring state, and a more just and humane society. I will also suggest that justice and empathy are closely intertwined, through the mediation of solidarity and fraternity (and because the word fraternity literally refers to a brotherhood, I will speak equally of sisterhood).

In the strange new ‘social common sense’ cultivated for our times in new India, it is the rich and the privileged who are being led to feel oppressed and short-changed by the poor, rather than the other way round. The dominant narrative is: ‘We work hard and earn an honest living, and then we are taxed to supply freebies to the undeserving poor, rather than encouraging them to work hard and pull themselves up by their own efforts.’ Likewise, it is the religious majority which feels persecuted by the minority, rather than the reverse: ‘Cynical political parties cultivate religious minorities as “vote-banks”, and in return they are soft on terror, the mafia, their regressive clerics, religious conversions by fraud and bribery, and on their proclivity to breed large families.’ The Preamble to India’s Constitution identifies four pillars of constitutional values: liberty, equality, justice and fraternity. Each have been compromised in many ways in India’s journey as a republic, but what is often least acknowledged in the dangerous fraying of our fraternity.

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Ela Bhatt, one of India’s tallest social workers, reminded us in a moving speech delivered at a celebration, organized by NDTV, of the greatest living Indians, that ‘poverty is violence’. ‘It is violence,’ she elaborated, ‘perpetuated with the consent of society. A society that is silent, or looks the other way in the face of poverty, [gives] consent to exploitation, injustice and war. Poverty strips away a person’s dignity, humanity, it corrodes the human spirit. There is no justification for poverty in India.’ And she added, ‘Diversity is the key to life. Our world is richer when cultures and subcultures flourish, when faiths and sub-faiths intermingle; when each language, dialect and *boli* have freedom of speech. We need a multiplicity of economies and sub-economies that co-exist in harmony. Monoculture and standardization of practices are nothing but ways of managing Nature or managing people; they are not life-giving forces. India’s rich diversity needs the spirit of *bahudha* [multiplicity] to sustain it.’

This is something we expect non-state, social formations to champion and work for. But social formations are today confused by the turbulent upsets not only in Indian politics, but also within their own ranks. Since the early 2000s, ‘civil society’ has moved Rightwards. Till then, whatever their other differences, it could be assumed that most participants in this space would be broadly Left-liberal. Since the communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, however, and even more after the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement, the centre of gravity, even of civil society, has swung significantly to the Right. In this changed scenario, some social formations believe that they should seek political power and influence mainstream

politics from within. Others remain uncertain, worrying about the slippery ethical ground of electoral politics, and the frequently problematic positions of even progressive political formations on issues such as gender, markets and pluralism. Yet others are quietly bracing themselves to survive in a radically altered—more Right-wing and less tolerant—political environment, if not with vocal support, then at least by buying safety with the counterfeit of their silences.

And yet, this is precisely the time when non-party citizen formations must be at their strongest, with conviction and clarity of vision. With one of the weakest political oppositions within Parliament in the history of the Indian republic in 2014, the main opposition to the market-majoritarian-militarist-fundamentalist government must come from outside Parliament, from non-party citizen formations. Their most significant contribution would be to bring ideology back centrestage in political discourse. We need to insist on debating the central questions on which the future of our people rests: How can social and economic equality be achieved even while markets are nurtured? How can India's pluralism be defended against majoritarian assaults? How can public services better and more accountably deliver quality health, education and social security to poor people? How can we defend human rights and dignity in areas where oppressed people or social minorities are battling the Indian state and big industry? How can *all* young people be assured jobs and hope?

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Amartya Sen, in *The Idea of Justice*, makes an important linkage between human empathy—combined with reason and the love of freedom—and the pursuit of justice. 'We could have been creatures incapable of sympathy,' he says, 'unmoved by the pain and humiliation of others, uncaring of freedom, and—no less significant—unable to reason, argue, disagree and concur. The strong presence of these features in human lives...does indicate that the general pursuit of justice might be hard to eradicate in human society, even though we go about that pursuit in different ways.'

The existence of empathy in human nature provides a clue to why, even though injustice has been a feature of all human societies throughout history, every human society has also seen stirrings for greater justice. Closely related to the idea of empathy is that of compassion. The Dalai Lama—one of the living men in the world I most admire—often stresses the highest value of being a compassionate human being, one who is moved by the suffering of others.

I am most drawn to the idea of what I describe as *egalitarian* compassion, because it does not place the giver on a pedestal above the receiver. The idea is that of two human beings, each equal in dignity and worth, but one in difficult circumstances, to whom the other reaches out with care and—importantly—with respect.

Compassion is constructed through feeling the pain of the other as one's own. The related idea of empathy involves both the cognitive act of imagination, of understanding the feelings of another human being; and the emotional, of actually experiencing the feelings of another.

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Indifference is primarily born out of the failure and the fatigue of empathy. Empathy requires both a leap of imagination—to imagine how the other feels—and solidarities of feeling—to feel the suffering and humiliation of the other as though they were one's own. In other words, empathy has both a cognitive and affective element: it engages both the mind and the heart. Empathy tends to flow more naturally when the suffering person is someone I can relate to and understand, someone whom I feel is similar to me in some essential, relatable way, because I can then better imagine what the other person is feeling.

Empathy breaks down when I can persuade myself that the 'other' is, in some ways, not like me, not fully human in the way I and the people of my family, my community, my caste, my gender, my race and, indeed, my sexual preferences are. I can do so when I refuse to see or acknowledge that people who are of a different gender, caste, class, religion, sexuality or culture from me are essentially human in the same way as I am, when I am in the sway of normative frameworks and politics which cultivate difference and foster indifference.

Some scientists and philosophers believe that empathy is a uniquely *human* trait, inborn in human beings but also one which can be taught and nurtured. Equally, as we can learn empathy, we find that barriers can be constructed against the natural surge of empathy which would otherwise have arisen had it not been actively blocked.

Hierarchies and the politics of difference are two of the most significant walls which can block out empathy from our minds and hearts. I often worry about the ways we are raising our children—teaching them by our actions if not our words to be disrespectful of people who are different and less advantaged, and being uncaring about suffering and deprivation.

To a much larger project of striving for a just and humane society, the first contribution which the cultivation and nurturing of empathy can make is by helping build social solidarities. Battles for justice must be fought by people who live with that injustice. To remind us of this, the slogan of many disabled peoples' organizations is salutary: 'Nothing about us without us.' Development scholar Robert Chambers also reminds us how 'poverty experts' often fail to consult the greatest experts of all: people themselves living in penury.

And yet, I would think that a society would be much poorer if it left sufferers to deal with their problems alone. In a society built around social solidarities, when women are battered, men fight in the forefront for equality with women; when violence decimates the minorities, people from the majority speak out and fight for justice; upper-caste men and women protest and resist caste discrimination; heterosexual men and women join battle against the criminalization of consensual same-sex relations, and so on.

In the aftermath of the Gujarat carnage, I spoke in many gatherings of Muslim people in Gujarat and other parts of India who were devastated by the brutality, of the complicit role of the state and, above all, the fact that Dalits and adivasis were the foot soldiers in much of the violence that was unleashed on them. ‘We have lived in peace with our Dalits and adivasi neighbours for generations,’ they would recall to me in great sadness. ‘How then did they turn against us?’

I would say to them, ‘I understand your anguish. But I too have a question for you. When Dalits and adivasis were being oppressed for generations, when did you speak out in their support?’ For instance, across Gujarat, Dalits are prohibited from drawing water from the common village well. I asked, ‘Is there any village in Gujarat where the Muslims invited their deprived Dalit neighbours to share the well which was used by the Muslim community instead?’ And I would explain, ‘If the Muslims never reached out in solidarity when Dalits and adivasis were being persecuted, how did you expect that they would stand in your defence when you were under attack?’ They could never find a village in which Muslims shared their water sources with Dalits and each time, this set off a great deal of collective introspection.

My conversation with them would continue. I would ask: why do Muslims tend to get agitated mainly when Muslims are attacked? It is exactly the same with Sikhs, Hindus, Christians and people of various identities. Why do we not feel equally aggrieved when people of any faith live with hunger, homelessness, disease and persecution?

The Prophet, I am told, said that if one places one’s hand on the head of an orphan child, the blessings of Allah would number as many as the hair on the child’s head. I point out that he never said ‘the head of a *Muslim* orphan child’. Then why is it that Muslim charity contributes to building Muslim orphanages for Muslim children, but not for all children in need?

This applies equally to many charitable interventions by people of all other faiths and persuasions as well—Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Christian and Buddhist. I therefore speak of the need for all people who live with injustice and suffering, and all people who share their suffering, to build a new bond between themselves—ek dard ka rishta: a bond of shared pain, born from empathy, solidarity and fraternity.

It is this bond which will drive us in the direction of greater justice and caring in our world.

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Noam Chomsky remarked that the idea of social protection is basically the idea, simply, that we should take care of each other.

There can be no better encapsulation of the idea of the good state, a state which must be founded on the idea of social solidarity, on the continuous mindfulness of the obligation of the state to care for every person, weak and strong. But Chomsky goes on to say that we live in times when this is considered a profoundly ‘subversive’ idea.

For many today, this idea of social protection—or the duty of social caring—is indeed a dangerous philosophy which must be crushed at all costs. Those opposed to this idea are either people who believe that markets by themselves are both necessary and sufficient to end poverty, hunger and want, or those who restrict their idea of solidarity to narrow notions of identity, whether of race, ethnicity, community or caste, or any other. These two ideas often converge, as in India’s political arena today, which renders the opposition to agendas of social protection and the caring state even more adamant and powerful—and for some, so much more charismatic.

It is therefore the moral case for social protection which I try to make here. It is not in the nature of markets to care for people who are not useful in a direct utilitarian way as producers or consumers, or to those who do not conform. In the age of the hegemony of markets, the India of the middle class has become what Michael Sandel describes as a market society.

We are easily persuaded when the state tells us that it simply does not have the money to ensure that every child gets nutritious food and good schooling; that old people do not have to sleep hungry; that homeless people do not have to sleep out in the cold; and that children do not have to die only because they cannot afford healthcare. These are people for whom markets can never work. They enter the already crowded zone of our collective amnesia and we are unconcerned that neither markets, nor the state, nor even in most cases non-state public action, are reaching them. We are being convinced that the markets will get to them one day, and until then, they can do nothing better than wait, and suffer patiently, without complaint and without resistance.

As a young person in college, my imagination was captured by a seminal book called *Small Is Beautiful* by British economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher.²⁴ I love its subtitle, *A Study of Economics As if People Mattered*, which should be the talisman for all economic theory. He rejects the assumptions that ‘growth is good’, and that ‘bigger is better’, and questions the appropriateness of using mass production in

developing countries, promoting, instead, labour-intensive ‘production by the masses’. He suggests a philosophy of ‘enoughness’, understanding, in the vein of Mahatma Gandhi and Buddhist thinkers, that human needs can and should be limited; that technology and production should be so organized as to ensure that workplaces are dignified and meaningful first, efficient second; and to recognize that nature and its resources are priceless.

In what I learned from him, and from Gandhian economics, I am driven to question the assumption that the pursuit of the highest possible pace of economic growth should, in itself, be the highest goal of society. Although the question of how much of (priced) goods and services we produce is important (because this creates wealth and sometimes—but often not—jobs), there are other, much more important questions that must be asked in a good society while evaluating state economic policy. These alternate, and in my opinion far higher-order questions are, firstly, *by what means* are these goods and services produced? Are they based on the displacement or the oppression of labour, on the large-scale uprooting of people from their lands, habitats and natural resources, on polluting our rivers and poisoning the air, and on depleting natural resources faster than they can be replenished? Secondly, *what* is being produced: are we spending on weapons and luxury goods when people lack nutritious food, clean water, healthcare and decent homes? And, lastly, *for whom* are these goods and services being produced or, in other words, what is the distribution of income, wealth and consumption?

As society pursues the goal—or mirage—of galloping economic growth, even with all of these caveats, it must care for everyone left out of this growth story. I believe that in a good society, people of every social class and identity should be involved in a huge public debate about what is the floor of human dignity, socially, below which no human being should be allowed to fall.

We should build a new social contract in new and rapidly growing India that we seek a country—and world—in which no child will sleep hungry, no child will sleep under the open sky, no child will be sent to work instead of a school which is as good a school as for any other child her age, no person will be subjected to discrimination or violence because of her identity, no person will be denied free, good-quality healthcare, and no old person will have to work or beg to live with dignity.

For this to be possible, we first need to reclaim the idea which Chomsky spoke of, that we owe it to each other as human beings that we all take care of each other. It requires the kindling of the ideas of solidarity and fraternity, of social caring.

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In drafting India’s Constitution, Ambedkar laid great stress, not just on liberty and equality, but also on fraternity. He said, ‘Fraternity means a sense of common

brotherhood (and sisterhood) of all Indians—if Indians are seen as being one people. It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life. It is a difficult thing to achieve.’ He was convinced that ‘without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than a coat of paint’. Ambedkar dreamed of an India in which divisions of caste and religion would gradually fade away.

However, it is fraternity which has been most forgotten in our Constitution. It is forgotten not just by those chosen to uphold our Constitution, it is lost even in our public and social life, in which the aggressive use of oppositional identities remains for most political parties the most reliable instrument to harvest votes with, and prejudice and inequality are produced and reproduced in our hearts and homes. The idea of fraternity is closely linked to that of social solidarity, which is impossible to accomplish without public empathy; the daily, lived realization that human beings who look different, wear different clothes, worship different gods, speak different languages, have different political persuasions, actually have exactly the same intrinsic human dignity, and experience the same emotions—dreams, hopes, despair, pain, happiness, anger, love, triumphs and defeats—that we do.

My faith in the central role of the state for social and economic justice and the protection of the rights of people disadvantaged by class, gender, caste, faith and other social identities remains undimmed. The change within my thinking is my growing recognition that *a just and caring state can only be located ultimately in a just and caring society*. All the inequities and injustice which I have described in this book, without exception, represent profound and culpable failures of the state and its laws, policies and institutions. But these failures of the state are due to the *social* sanction given by the influential middle and upper classes to inequality, prejudice, caste and communal injustice, patriarchy, the differential treatment of children, the oppression of labour, discrimination and violence against minorities and their criminal profiling, and the denials of healthcare, social protection, housing, clean water and sanitation, and a hundred other basic requirements for a decent, healthy life.

This does not mean that progressive laws should not be passed even far ahead of social consensus for these measures. It only means that it is important to be mindful that it is not *enough* for us to agitate for changes in laws and policies. For instance, it is futile to make states more accountable for the protection of women without fighting battles in our own homes for gender equality, for raising men to be kinder and women more assertive, and in schools and work-places for the equality of men and women. It means that it is not enough to fight for stronger laws to end corruption, without recognizing and resisting ways in which the middle and upper classes are not just victims of corruption, but also participants in and beneficiaries of it.

Of course, to achieve greater justice and equity we need better state laws and policies. This is absolutely necessary but this is not enough. We must recognize the ways in which we—people of relative privilege and power—are also acutely culpable in these injustices and inequities, for our failures to fight these more intimate battles, including with our loved ones and colleagues, within the popular discourse, and with ourselves.

Baldly, what I realize today is that India will not change until we —the middle classes—also change.