

India of their Nightmare

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In the textbooks of economics, we have listed symptoms which appear in our society. It is considered that society is right for a revolution. And since I have been travelling throughout India for the past fifteen days, I have been observed each and every one of those symptoms present in our society. But I do not see any sign of discontent, I do not see any kind of anger or any sign of crisis happening or a revolution happening! Can you explain to me why this contradiction exists in our society? And I was stumped! I did not know what to answer! And finally I said, you know, “that we are spiritual people and that is why we are able to sustain ourselves.” But even I knew that it was false, it was wrong. You cannot live hungry and be happy with the rich spirituality. Whereas Bapu once said that “to a starving person, God appears in the form of a piece of bread”. So where does this spirituality come from? I think more than anything else society is sustained by our belief in faith.

At a seminar of so-called intellectuals, I was very disturbed when I saw a renowned person who had a very impressive bio data, get up and say that “we should not help poor people!” And I was surprised as to why he said that! Then he said, “poor people are poor because they were sinners in their last birth and their poverty is the punishment which God has given them and if you help them you are going against the will of God. Therefore, we must let them suffer in their miseries and so in the next life they will become better human beings.” And the only thought that came to mind for that man was “Go rot in hell yourself. How can you be so insensitive?”. And this is the faith that sustains this nation and otherwise there is absolutely nothing in this nation that can help it sustain itself.

While traveling through “Rural India” and not through the poor hamlets of India, I saw children whose only entertainment was playing with mud balls, because their parents were working in brick kilns, making bricks. Till the Child Labour Act was enforced strictly, these families of migrant

labourers who worked in brick kiln yards, every member of the family had to work to put food on their plates every day. That meant that even the children had to work. The only thing they could do was carry bricks from one station of manufacture to the other. And the only way they could do it was by carrying those bricks on their heads. And you know how much they were paid? For carrying thousand bricks they were paid seventeen rupees! One seven not seven zero!

I work with an organization which helps rehabilitate these children. And I remember a few years back we had a brother and sister who were rescued from a brick kiln and brought to our organization. They had been working as labourers in brick kilns and their skulls were flat like a table top, because they used to carry those brick loads on their heads everyday, day-in and day-out, because they had to carry at-least three thousand bricks for their labour to be worthwhile for their family. What sort of a nation is this? You students, you probably go to the gym to build muscles... But for those children, a day without carrying a head load must be the day that they celebrate!

What kind of a nation have we made? It has been 70 years since Independence, what sort of independence do our own fellow citizens enjoy!? And we are completely oblivious to the suffering they have to endure just to survive from day to day. I went to another labour camp, a newer labour camp, where people harvest sugarcane. And their fate was even worse because there was nothing over there, because their parents would be working eighteen hours in the sugarcane fields because sugarcane has to be harvested within a period of fifteen days otherwise its quality starts deteriorating. And if they are slow, they are fired. They exist, they live from one sugarcane field to another with no hope at all. They are continuously moving with the season of the harvest through four states.

Yes, we have the right to education. These children who live at the junction of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh spend four months in each state. What sort of education will they get!? They study four months in Kannada, four months in Marathi and four months in Telugu schools

and then they drop out! And we say “Oh! These are duffers! They cannot cope with it!” Every misfortune that befalls at our citizens is put away to ‘fate’! And this is the tragedy of India that we became so anesthetized to everything. We live in the cities, we do not care, because we do not have electricity shortages, we do not have water shortages, we have public transport, we do not have to travel much! We only travel if we insist on the college of our choice. Otherwise education facilities are enforced rights to all of us. What do we lack?

We talk about sustainability and how important sustainability is. There is a huge chunk of population for whom sustainability is survival. They are bothered about their day to day survival even today! What are we going to teach them about living a sustainable life? When Delhi is hit by smog, it is very easy to blame the farmers of Punjab because they burn their fields and say has been all been caused because of the smoke which comes from the north. What about the fact that families have three cars and all three people traveling in the same destination insist on still traveling by their own cars. Is it not pollution? Are we aware of that? Are we even bothered by that?? I was in Delhi on the last day of my travel and the first thing I did was buy a face mask from airport pharmacy, because google told me that the air quality was too bad. And when I was being driven to my hotel, I saw children playing on the streets and the labourers breathing in that smog. And the mask on my face made me feel guilty, because here I was sitting in the air-conditioned car, being driven by a chauffeur and even in the air- conditioned car I was wearing a mask, because I was feeling threatened by the air quality. And there they were, doing back-breaking labour on the street. And I felt that was expected, that was their job and that is what they have to do to earn a living. This is the kind of nation we have created so successfully.

We pride ourselves on our achievements. I was at a conference on Sunday, talking to the youth and one of the speakers came up and said “We must stop referring to ourselves as Third world country. We are a First world

country. We have sent rockets to Mars and sent people to the moon.” I wanted to ask that person, how are we a First world country, when there are still places in this country where women have to walk four to five miles, just to fetch water for the day!? We do not yet have technology to send water to every home.

I was in Latur. Latur is a big city and it has been suffering from drought. So one of the questions in my conversations was to ask ‘how is the water situations in the city?’ I heard from them that “it is very normal”. I said ‘good. So you get water!’ “Yes” They said “once in seven days” and that was normal for them and that was in the city. Just go to the outskirts of Latur and they sit by the roadside with jelly cans hoping that they would be able to stop a water tanker just to get one jellycan of water which they can carry back to their homes.

In the morning in my house when I open the tap and if the water supply is slow, I want to call the chief minister and abuse him for not giving me enough water. Or when I turn a switch on in my room and if the light does not come on instantaneously then I think ‘what kind of government do we have which gives us nothing!?’ and there are people who say, ”hafte mein ek baar paani aaya toh normal hai”. This is the contradiction with which we live. How are we going to survive as a nation?

We bow to the Mother land. We praise her as a mother to us! But do we do anything supportive to make her the mother who cares for all her children? Do we treat all her children equally? No, we do not! And we like to call ourselves one of the biggest democracies in the world. Yes! Population-wise we might be the biggest democracy in the world but what matters is ‘are we a responsible democracy?’ Ask yourself that question. One of the most shameful campaigns run by this government is ‘Swachh Bharat Campaign – The Clean India Campaign’ What kind of people are we, that for the basic duty, for a basic habit, the Prime Minister of this nation has to keep appealing to us for four years, from the ramparts of Red Fort pleading with us to make this country clean. Do they have to come to tell you to keep your house clean every day?

To keep your room clean everyday? Then why is it that as soon as we step out of our homes we litter the place? We open the windows of our posh cars and spit on the road side. The take-away meals that our children are enjoying in the cars, the leftovers are just thrown out of the window.

I had this terrible experience of being at a seminar where everybody was talking about corruption and how it is our nation, and how we are inflicted by the disease of corruption and how it is terminal! The person was really emotional, he was a professor from IIT. And he was very agitated by the rampant corruption in our country! And then he says that “the corruption has become so evil that traffic policemen hide behind the trees to catch people”. I was surprised, so I got up and asked him, “What do you mean?” So he said, “you know, when I do not see a policeman, I break the traffic signal and the policeman jumps from behind the tree, catches me and fines me. If that policeman would be standing in the clear view, I would not have broken the signal.” And so I said, “Wow!” Such an impressive argument! It is like saying that if there was a policeman standing, I would not have beaten up a person or if there was a policeman standing with a gun I would not have committed murder. Just look at the arguments and justifications. Why cannot we be disciplined without the fear of punishment? And that is because it is in our culture.

Children are taught to be afraid of god! You worship because you are afraid of God, not because you love God. You worship because you are scared that even if you chant a prayer wrong there will be a punishment, that God will come and punish you! We have created such a big villain called God and we are all terrified of him/her. And everything we do, that we consider to be religious is out of that fear and terror of that God! Whoever that God is, I have yet not seen any religion, any family, any belief, any ideology where the child is taught that you worship God because you love him/her and not because he punishes. And God never really punishes! God is God because he forgives and gives you another chance to change. A nation also keeps giving us chances. A nation also perseveres and allows us to commit some mistakes and hopes that we

will learn from these mistakes and change. But have we? Do we change or do we take that benevolence for granted?

Once, there was a lady selling fruits at a station. She was kind so she was asking her customers to taste the fruit for sweetness. And I saw a lot of people just going and picking up a fruit, happily munching on it and walking off. Then I finally asked somebody who had gotten down from the first class compartment and with no intention of buying fruits he picked up one and started walking off and I asked him, “Do you understand that you are not being fair to that woman?” Then he looked at me and said, “Ek hi toh liya hai. Why are you telling me? I just took one fruit!” So I said, “There have been ten people who have picked up one-one fruit each and that makes it half a kilo of fruits which she lost without making an income!” ‘Nothing is my fault! I’m just a poor animal who follows others and keeps doing everything blindly!’.

Then we also call ourselves the best creation of God! Have you ever seen a wild animal killing four deer, so that it can have food for four days? Have they said, oh! there were twenty, let me kill as many as I can and be provided with food for months?! No! they single out only one prey at a time! Then why do we need to do that? Because basically, we are not God’s best creation but we are God’s most selfish creation! We cannot think beyond ourselves. So as long as we have everything dished out on the plate for us, we cannot be bothered!

A Democracy is not made up of a government or elections but it is made up of a group of ‘responsible citizens’ and unless we all become responsible and take responsibility for our actions, we have no right to criticize government! Because we are not responsible and we have not played our role in that democracy responsibly! And that is what brings me to the title of my topic, ‘India of my nightmares’.

Just think of it, we have a group of people united with a central idea and try to do this exercise. Try and list out the things that unite us! Except for the border, except for the flag, except for a few patriotic songs, try to make a

list of things that unite us across the population. I am sure you will not be able to create an honest list because everything that can divide us, is there to divide us and our society. We are divided by region, we are divided by language, we are divided by cast, we are divided by religion, we are divided by economics, we are divided by the facilities that we have and the facilities that people do not have- These are the disparities of a nation! Each and everything divides us! Even gender divides us.

Nothing that I have seen seems to be a unifying notion. A few get united, falsely united, but not as a nation. What keeps us together then? FEAR! The only thing that keeps this nation together is the fear of its neighbour. Just like the fear of God keeps us religious! This nation remains a nation only because of the fear! Only because of the fear from within also. Why do you think Naxalites are so influential and strong? I was in Chhattisgarh, three years ago, as a guest of the government. And they wanted to give me a holiday for a weekend in Chhattisgarh while I there. My wife loves tribal art. So she requested me to take her to Bastar. So I told one of the officers that we would like to spend a weekend in Bastar. He did not say anything, he just shook his head and walked off. Next morning when we were supposed to leave, the driver came with the car and then I asked him, "Are you taking us to Bastar?" he said, "Sir, why are you condemning me? If I go to Bastar, I won't come back alive! Because they rule Bastar!" So I asked, "Who are they?" He said, "Naxal log". I was shocked! I was within the sovereign territory of the nation of India and yet, there were places within that territory where the government of India was scared to step into. The driver said that, "if they see a government car, they just burn it. The collector himself runs Bastar from the capital of the state. If he goes there, he wouldnot come back alive!" So, the government does not step into certain territory of Bastar. This is part and parcel of India. How did this come to be? Are all those people anti-national? What happened that made them become that way!? Why do not they consider India as their country? And the answer was that the people there were given rice, they were given dal, the men were

given liquor. Is that such a big bribe that the people willingly go against the country? Or is it the misery of their existence that even that feels to them like a reward?

Seventy years after Independence our people continue to be poor. We were all happy and satisfied with the few sweet lollipops that our government handed out to us! With a bullet train the people of Ahmedabad and Mumbai are happy. With a metro, those cities are happy. We then think how progressive we are! But who gives land for that metro development? This bullet train, believe me, is moving through some of the most fertile lands of Gujarat and Maharashtra. Why do not they plan it through barren land? Why do they have to acquire fertile lands, where generations of farmers have been making their living? Who will benefit from that train? - Only a few citizens of Ahmedabad and a few citizens of Mumbai! Who will be paying for that infrastructure? - All the farmers on the route or in between. And when they protest, we call them 'Anti-nationals' and 'obstacles in our development'.

Let them come to your apartment building and say that this is in the way of the metro project and send you a notice saying vacate the house in six months as the building is going to be demolished. Then we will see who willingly gives up their residence for the development of the city. The government is building an underground metro because people especially from Juhu and Santacruz think that it will spoil the aesthetics of their residence. What about the farmer, who has a tiny piece of land that he tills with all his strength, which exists from generations, trying to put food on the plates of his family and the surplus food to feed all of us!? What does he do when he loses his land and who cares for that farmer, when he is losing all his livelihood without having any hope of benefitting from that project? Are we a nation? This is the question we must ask ourselves! Are we fit to be called a nation or citizens of a nation? Because we are not bothered.

I speak negatively because I do not see any reason to rejoice! Seventy years of independence, I was at a conference where they were talking

about casteism and corruption. And everybody was blaming the 'British'. They said that 'the British were the ones who instituted this practice of Divide and Rule, the practice of division and they divided us.' But it has been seventy years since we kicked them out of India. If you have a disease and if you suffer from it for seventy years, it will either kill you or you will keep changing doctors till it gets cured. Will you keep sitting at one place blaming that disease for everything that you suffer? Then why do we keep blaming the British for everything that we suffer from? If we lost our wealth, we say the British looted us. If we lost our wisdom, we make an excuse saying that they took all our wisdom and that is why they are going to the moon and we are nowhere. This is what Churchill had said at the time of Independence that, "This nation cannot survive as a nation". We must be thankful to him that in our resentment against that statement, we have survived for seventy years. But in that survival, we are broken in every way. Nothing unites, everything divides us! The British people and politicians have only exploited us and that is how we have learnt to live! The cities exploit the villages, the rich exploit the poor people. I will always crib against the slums all the time. The way they have illegally encroached on lands and built their slums. But one day a domestic servant comes an hour late, because he/she has to travel from a distant place, you will fire that person. You do not want to wait for a long time for your domestic servant to come to your place but you do not want to give any place to that person to live in your neighbourhood, because your neighbourhood is in an 'elite' area and they cannot be there. These are the contradictions of our society which we have learnt to live with.

You are the youth of today and 'Tomorrow is yours'. If you say, we will take responsibility tomorrow! Remember one thing, 'Tomorrow will never come!' Those who do not take responsibility for 'Today', they do not get a 'Tomorrow'. You have to take responsibility today itself. It does not matter if you are students. With your own career, you have to take

responsibility for your nation also, because you have to live with this nation throughout. We lived in India and we made a mess of this nation. My generation is the biggest culprit of the India today. Because two generations before us took responsibility for this country and earned us freedom. They sacrificed their time, their lives for their nation. People will tell you that Gandhi was responsible for our independence. No, he was not! He was successful because he managed to infuse every Indian of that time to believe that they were capable of winning freedom.

So, put your hand on your heart and find out yourself, how much time you spare for your country? The time to serve the nation will never come unless we start now! And serving our nation does not mean that you give up everything else, it just means that you give a little bit from the twenty-four hours to society, to your neighbourhood and to our nation. And if all of us do that, then maybe we will be able to create the nation of the dream of the founding father of our nation. It is not hopeless! It is never hopeless! I told you that I travelled from the rural India and observed it. But I travelled with an intention of seeing where there was hope! And in Kolhapur I saw the brick yard workers and the sugarcane workers living the life of misery. I saw organizations which were providing children in rural areas with education, knowledge and with nutrition and safety. In the slums of Mumbai, I saw an organization that has united women to work in them and create fashion garments for the fashion industries. I travelled to a Kheda and saw rural projects of 'Seva' where village women were united and they created a fruit orchard from a wasteland in just three decades, through their hard work. I went to Tilonia, to the barefoot college, where illiterate women from all over the world are brought together and taught to assemble the solar energy harvesting mechanism system, the entire system, from every component. Then they go back to their villages and set up businesses of electrified rural households all over the world, in almost twenty-four countries!

In Alwar, I saw the 'Water man' of India, who in a desert has rejuvenated three rivers which had dried up. People like these are the ones who give us hope. They keep this nation as a nation. Everything else is just propaganda. Propagandas are designed and popularised to fool us and keep us oblivious of what is the reality! The only thing that unites this country is the 'Constitution' of India. But that too is more of use in its abuse, because every government in India wants to amend the constitution and every government in India from Independence has amended it for the political benefit. And we as a people have no say in it.

In Sweden, every law, every act of the Parliament has to be voted on, every budget goes to the people to vote. In India we have not had a single Referendum. What kind of responsible democracy are we talking about? Think about all these things. Think about why I am sounding so pessimist. But if I was pessimistic, I would not have lived here. My whole family lives in the U.S. but I refuse to go there. I would rather remain a beggar with my pride than a person who is always thought of as an outsider. But do not live with a sense of despondence in this nation. This nation needs vibrance. This nation has the potential of becoming vibrant! Only if we take our responsibilities seriously and we can achieve this only if we play our role in making this democracy a 'powerful and rich' democracy. We may call ourselves a 'first world nation' but remember one thing that as long as one child goes to bed hungry, as long as one child is denied quality education and quality food, as long as one child has to travel more than 5 kilometres to go to school there is no meaning of that title.

You are the hope that we survive on. Please think about it and please play your role in this society with 'honesty' and 'integrity'. Only then we can make this country into a nation 'together' and we can turn it away from being a nightmare and turn it towards becoming our dream!