

# A Few Small Incidents Happen While Bihar Votes...

## The Needle's Eye



**CHAITANYA KALBAG**

"On an October evening, two young men met at a paan shop."

So starts 'Hatyaare' (Assassins), a disturbing and dystopian Hindi short story by Amarkant. It was published in 1964, and faintly echoed 'A Clockwork Orange', that classic 1962 tale by Anthony Burgess of a darkly futuristic England blighted by extremely violent youths. Assassins is about two young men best described as 'rowdies'. I am sure we have all been shocked by the suddenness and savagery of crowd fury, by the anti-social underemployed louts who loiter in the shadows of our cities and can materialise at a moment's notice, like the schools of piranha in the Amazon. Amarkant writes a cold, non-judgmental chronicle of a few dissipated hours of their lives. One man is tall and fair, one short and dark. They inhabit an imaginary India. The fair one boasts he is a secret adviser to Nehru, who is weary and wants the ruffian to become the nation's prime minister in his stead. He says Nehru came to see him.

"Nehru took my hand and burst into tears, saying, 'The country's passing through a great crisis. All our leaders and politicians are corrupt and narrow-minded. Those who are honest have no brains. My leadership's weak too. My officials deceive me...' and so on. Towards the end of the story, the two men have casual sex with a poor prostitute in a shabby shack, and then flee without paying her. Several men chase them, and the fair one whips out a knife and stabs one of them, probably mortally.

It is a cynical story reeking with indifference to law and order, amorality, delusion, and casual cruelty. It is probably a little worse today, although it ought to have been much better. After all we are in the 21st century now, blessed with better education, life expectancy, communications, and wishfully, political maturity. We ought to have all been peaceably worshipping only one god – the god of economic growth and prosperity. Instead we seem to be drowning in a putrid pool of religion, caste, and identity stereotypes, with mobs of men (nearly always men) all pumped up and eager to bludgeon, blacken, besiege and blaspheme. Many critics have asked why more than three dozen Indian writers have returned their Sahitya Akademi literary awards now. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley poured scorn on their 'manufactured revolt'. So the question is: why now? Why did the writers not protest when India was ruled for long stretches by the Con-

gress party, when Salman Rushdie's book was hastily banned or MF Husain driven into exile, or when bigotry reared its ugly head time and again?

Perhaps it is because the wind has become a gale. The dissenting writers are only a handful among the hundreds who have won Sahitya Akademi awards since 1955 in 24 Indian languages including Maithili, Bodo, and Santhali. But the dissenters are wind-socks, and the gale has forced even the highest constitutional office-holder, President Pranab Mukherjee, to speak out twice on the waning of tolerance, close on the heels of Vice President Hamid Ansari. On Tuesday, Jaitley appealed for 'debate, not vandalism'. He spoke at some length about the need for civilised discussion. "I feel it is extremely important that people indulging in this (vandalism) are strongly criticised ... those who are using these methods must introspect whether they are adding to the quality of Indian democracy, or reducing the credibility of India as a country before the eyes of the world," Jaitley said. He seemed to be echoing the writers who he had just accused of being hypocritical. Jaitley said Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah had strongly admonished ruling party leaders who had "made some statements on sensitive issues". But one of them, the fiery Hindu monk-MP Sakshi Maharaj, who has been elected to Parliament five times, told a newspaper he had not been reprimanded. "I am a sanyasi (ascetic). He (Shah) looked at me and I looked at him. That was it."

The wind is rising inexorably. A few hours before Jaitley spoke, a Dalit house in a Haryana village on the outskirts of New Delhi was set on fire by upper-caste attackers. Two little children were burnt to death and their mother is fighting for her life in hospital. Last Saturday in Bengaluru a young Australian tourist was nearly lynched for sporting a tattoo of a goddess on his leg, and forced to sign a letter of apology by local police. Earlier this month a young Hindu zealot who had forced the closure of a slaughterhouse in Karnataka was hacked to death by eight Muslim men. And in Punjab, seven incidents of desecration of the Sikhs' holy book led to violent clashes, a few deaths, and political ructions. Meanwhile, across India, devout Hindus were celebrating the Navratri festival, which marks the triumph of good over evil. It culminated on Thursday on Vijaya Dashami – coincidentally, the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the mother lode of India's ruling ideology.

"Small incidents happen. They get blown up into big pictures," said RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat in a long, state-of-the-union speech broadcast live, like last year, on state television. "An atmosphere of disappointment and lost faith, which existed a couple of years back, has evaporated. An atmosphere of expectations has come to the fore, generating a sense of optimism," Bhagwat said.

So while things look a bit fraught in the nation's capital, they look more cheerful in Nagpur, where the RSS is headquartered. But these are all sub-plots. The big drama is being staged in Bihar. Things are often not what they seem in India. The arousal of this or that section of the population could well be ingredients to be tossed into the Bihar

ZAHID



## REGRESSIVE THINKING

Instead of worshipping the god of economic growth & prosperity, we are drowning in a pool of religion, caste, & identity stereotypes

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election cauldron. Voting for a third of the 243 seats in the state legislature has been completed, and three more polling days stretch over the next two weeks. Turnout was over 55% in the first two phases; women came out in huge numbers to vote. So far, the signs are that the election is going to be a tight race, with the BJP and its allies holding a slim edge. Bihar has grown at a smart clip over the past decade under Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, whose political star has dimmed; he is now seen as another power-seeking politician and not the reformer who brought in better roads, less thuggery, and thought up game-changers like free bicycles for girls to ride to school. That is because Nitish's first burst of development was not enough: Bihar is impatient to clamber out of centuries of backwardness. It still has high rates of unemployment and is still India's third-poorest state. Cram schools in Patna and other Bihar cities are bursting with young people, many of them girls, eager to learn English, mathematics and science so they can better their job prospects. Young Bihar is between 18 and 29, many of them first-timers, make up 30% of Bihar's 66 million voters. They want out of the traps of poverty, caste, religion and rancorous politics.