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Book Review: ‘Transit Talks: Living through Difficult Times’

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Name of Book: Transit Talks: Living through Difficult Times
Author: Manoj Kumar Jha
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The Dadri mob lynching of September 2015 is a reminder of the deeply entrenched disease of intolerance in Indian society. Such instances cannot be mistaken for minor blips and should make us reflect on why communal violence is so rampant in India, a country that makes the constitutional claim of being a secular union of states. The book under review is a compelling attempt at scrutinizing the communal forces that are escalating from stereotypes, prejudice, rumours, murders, and massacres into full-blown genocide.

Transit Talks (Jha, 2013) is an account of conversations between a social work educator, Abhimanyu, and his student Noor. The choice of these names is notable as it is symbolic of the possibility of dialogue between Hindus and Muslims amid the prevailing ruptures. The book starts with a nostalgic email by Noor thanking her teacher for being a source of inspiration, then follows a heart-warming journey of email conversations between them.

The initial conversations in the book analyze and critically examine the inextricably linked nature of issues, such as hunger, poverty, failure of the public distribution system, food security, and starvation deaths. The reflections on these issues build around Abhimanyu and his student’s work experiences involving research, documentation, and travel while working with non-governmental organizations in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, and Gujarat.

Noor’s initial emails describe her work and engagement with consultations on the Domestic Violence Bill, which was part of her work in the women’s organization that she joined after her post-graduation degree in social work. In one of her emails, Noor also mentions being enthused to find an interesting collection of feminist literature in her organization and she subsequently shares her reflections on an essay by Phyllis Rackin titled ‘Androgyny, Mimesis, and the marriage of the boy heroine on the Renaissance stage’.
Interestingly, Noor’s work and reflections are indicative of her feminist inclinations. The initial discussions fascinated the feminist reviewer, as the book seemed to transcend stereotypes that discussions on feminist literature are possible only with female teachers with feminist inclination. With such raised expectations, the only disheartening point of the book, from the point of view of this feminist reviewer, was the use of pronouns ‘He’, ‘His’, and ‘Him’ while referring to God in respect of religion. The overuse of male referring pronouns like ‘he’, ‘his’ and ‘him’ to refer to both man and woman is evidence of invisibility of women from texts (Bhog, 2002). This absence and invisibility has been problematized and critically examined by feminists as the manifestation of system of patriarchy.

The conversational mode chosen for the book is its biggest asset, as it gives immense liberty to discuss a wide range of issues, places, people, and insights relating to everyday lives, contemporary concerns, and events. For example, rarely does one find a book that uses dissenting voices in poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and theorization by Zygmunt Bauman with equal ease, rigor, and passion in order to reflect on contemporary concerns like communalism. The book under review provides quintessential examples of theorization and comprehension of social reality using theory in order to create possible sites of theory-practice integration. This is notable contribution of the book to academia, across disciplines.

The writing style of the author also rejects the tendency of pigeonholing issues and is a step forward towards deliberation on their inter-linked nature. Pigeonholing creates artificial boundaries that dilute the real issues, result in superficial and only symptomatic interventions. Noor cites one such example in relation to this pigeonholing approach in the working of organizations. She writes, “I have had some meetings with a few NGOs, invariably all of them kept on emphasizing the difference between developmental issues (which they are committed to) and political issues (this is how they comprehended and describe the violence of 2002 in Gujarat)” (Jha, 2013, p. 170).

In the reviewed book, the author consistently reiterates the value of defying neutrality while quoting Dante Alighieri, “the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality” (Jha, 2013, p. 52). Although the presence and absence of hell is under question, the analogy still holds an important message about the ‘culture of silence’ (Freire, 1970) and its associated costs. The author, in his ‘letter to Narendra Modi’, aptly demonstrates an example of non-neutral positioning on issues and concerns of the contemporary society. In this letter, the author echoes the heartfelt feelings of each one of us who is pained by the attacks on ethos of plural living, tolerance, and secularism at the hands of communal traditions of the Sangh Parivar and Hindu fundamentalists.

Similarly, in one of her other e-mails, Noor questions, “What is the use of experimenting with Self Help Groups (SHGs) and development plans, when the village has yet to resolve centuries’ old humiliation inflicted on a section of its population? Wouldn’t the development initiative reflect the images of humiliation and subjugation?” (Jha, 2013, p. 85). Feminists too contend that social issues cannot be treated singularly because they do not exist singularly. For example, the issue of religion and gender are inter-linked by ways of endogamy norms on religious lines in India and other parts of the world too.
In their analysis of contemporary events and social issues, both Abhimanyu and Noor derive credence from the works of theorists, poets, writers, social thinkers, and philosophers, such as Faiz, Ghalib, Manto, Karl Marx, Foucault, Pablo Neruda, Adorno, Althusser, and Bauman in order to substantiate their own critical reflections on contemporary issues. In reference to such credence building, it is worthwhile to quote hooks (1994) who reflects on the use of theory as liberatory practice and writes that “I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me…I saw in theory then a location for healing” (p. 59). Thus, it can be noted that the act of reflection, theorization, or comprehension using theory within the book provides a healing touch. This kind of theorization and reflection using theory as deployed by the author can also be understood to aid in surviving the difficult times because it is act of finding solidarity in theories and theorists.

This solidarity building is a key aspect of the book, as Abhimanyu and Noor engage in critical reflection and rejection of the non-sense that circulates around them by supporting each other. One such example of solidarity building is an email by Noor in which she says, “I am highly sore with hoaxes and pranks like the one which says:

Why do Muslims hate pigs?
Because pigs produce babies faster than they do…
It’s an ego problem!” (Jha, 2013, p. 37).

Generally, such reflections on everyday happenings are trivialized, ridiculed, and often captioned ‘over thinking’. Such trivialization is unsettling because it makes people shut their eyes to the construction of truth, meaning, and values constituted in language and in non-verbal texts. It also leads to the denial of simmering undercurrents of prejudice, stereotypes, othering, and intolerance towards difference – the very ethos of democratic living. Unlike the common practice of ridicule, Abhimanyu supports Noor in her reflective prowess and writes to her “we should not be indifferent to such biases and stereotypes which cause immense damage to inter-community interaction and understanding” (Jha, 2013, p. 41). Thus, this book is not a dry or didactic commentary on the problems of Indian society, but rather a breathing account of varied dilemmas and reflections of two people supporting each other in their efforts for social change that is their full time commitment and occupation as social workers.

Alongside conversations on practice engagements, communalism gradually becomes the central theme in the book under review. Many conversations between the teacher and his student examine communal prejudice and its varied manifestations in the society. One such manifestation that is significantly examined is the role of cinema and media in fueling communal prejudice and stereotyping. In several emails Abhimanyu writes to Noor about the problematic of ‘media nationalism’ while scrutinizing films like Gadar. The Bollywood action movie and love story Gadar: Ek Prem Katha was released in 2001. It was set in the time of partition of India and aggravated the anti-Pakistan rhetoric and communal feelings across the length and breadth of the nation. Thus, Gadar is cited by the author as an example of shunning of responsibility by the entertainment industry that it shoulders as a medium to maintain pluralistic values in society. It is emphasized in the book that cinema is the great interpreter of the past and not a mere source of entertainment. Cinema is indeed an important tool in the creation of collective memory of
momentous events like the Partition of India by mobilizing memory of its audience for an imagining of the community—both national and local (Bhaskar, 2005).

*Transit Talks* is a poetic journey embellished with poems of Faiz and Ghalib. In the convention of the book, no review of it would be complete without these lines from Kabir, which aptly convey the message of the book:

Sadhu dekho, Jag baurana (Oh seekers! See the world is mad)
Hindu kahat hai Ram hamara, Musalman Rehmana (Hindus claim Ram as the one, Muslims claim Rahim)
Apas mein dou lade marat hai (Then they kill each other)
Maram koi nahi jana (Knowing not the essence)
Mala pahire topi pahire, Chaap tilak anumana (With prayer beads and caps and brows of holy paint)
Saakhi sabde gawat bhule (They lose themselves in sacred hymns)
Aatam khabar na jana (Know not their own souls)
Ya vidhi hasat chalet hai humko, Aap kahawe sayana (The world goes on like this yet they call me mad)
Kahe sabira suno bhai sadho, inme kaun deewana (But Kabir says, listen, Who’s the one insane?)
Sadhu dekho jag baurana (Oh seekers, See the world is mad)

In my opinion, this book is a must have for all disciplines, such as sociology, political science, and media studies that need to look at the contemporary issue of communalism from close quarters. It is also a necessary addition to the book shelves of all those who are working in defiance of communal traditions, as it offers extensive groundwork, reflection, and analysis to locate the issue of communalism in India through the lens of historical events (e.g., genocide in Germany, Bosnia), national events (e.g., Gujarat genocide in 2002), and international events (e.g., 9/11 attacks), especially their interplay in the accentuation of the process of ‘othering’ of an ethnic or religious community. It offers a comprehensive overview by deriving from theorists of various disciplines like philosophy, sociology, political science and by discussing poets like Faiz and Ghalib. Such in depth, comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the issue of communalism using theory, poems, and literature to reflect on social reality (e.g., religion), lived experiences (daily life experiences), and current happenings (Gujarat genocide and controversies around Ram temple in Ayodhya) would be helpful for social workers to learn the art of critical reflection in their everyday engagements in social work practice.

Noting that practitioners, such as social work respond to current issues of their times, especially pertaining to human rights and social justice, they would also value this book. This book is an example of or submit an application a social work educator’s way of responding to and reflecting on various recent socio-political events of his times, including romanticism around the Anna movement, Hindu fundamentalism, and controversies around Ramanujam’s essay ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’. For example, with respect to Anna movement, the author highlighted that mobilisations and utopias propounded by the anti-corruption movement under the leadership of Anna Hazare were based on oversimplified logics and showcased contempt for democratic processes.
Such reflections on contemporary socio-political events are important. They offer perspectives and opinions from the point of view of a social work educator to the social work students, educators, practitioners, and society at large with respect to the currents happening in India (e.g., Anna movement and December 2012 Delhi gang rape case) and the world (e.g., 9/11 attacks, issue of terrorism, current situation in Afghanistan, Palestine). These reflections reiterate that social work is not an apolitical profession. It is a historical, contextual, and very much a political endeavor.

The book is penned down by a social worker educator and is based on a fictionalized interaction between him and his social work student on issues that concern contemporary societies, such as communalism. It is a significant contribution in defense of secular traditions, using the art of storytelling and fiction (drenched in facts) to deliberate on social issues. Telling stories, true or imaginary, offers immense hope for this world because stories end only to remain with us as lifetime friends. Story telling can be important for practitioners working for social change to ask pertinent questions about injustices in society, challenging them and creating possibilities of social change.

Considering the recent global trends of migration, all societies across the world are increasingly becoming plural with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This trend towards increasing plurality in societies poses certain challenges, including rising tensions on communal and ethnic lines. It is in this respect that the book is also noteworthy for all social workers working with plural societies because it analyses the roots of such tensions and offers ways to address these tensions with emphasis on values of tolerance and faith in plurality.

Author (of the Review) Biography:

Namita Jainer has completed her Masters in Social Work and is currently a Research Officer under a research project titled ‘Sustainable Development of Mountain Communities’ at the Department of Social Work, University of Delhi (India) and funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). Her research interests encompass social work education, critical pedagogy, reflective practice, feminism, feminist social work practice, sexuality, identity discourse, and issues of social exclusion particularly gender and caste in India.
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