

Unofficial Takes on the Reactionary Backlash

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Bachwali in Uttarakhand.

Noma in eastern UP.

Dévpura in South India.

These are places I couldn't point out on a map of the country. My reluctance to travel may be to blame, or perhaps these names appear on no map.

But all of them feature in the geography of stories well known to me, where I could pinpoint their location to you. Bachwali is situated in Rakesh Tiwari's *Phasak* (Loose Talk, 2017), Noma in Chandan Pandé's *Vaidhanik Galp* (Official Myths/Formal Version, 2020), Dévpura in Githa Hariharan's *I have Become the Tide* (2019).

Each has its peculiar identity. Going from one to another, I never had the sense that I was back in the same place.

But they do have something profound in common: they are places where the *achchhé din* have arrived with a vengeance, where the new India is festering.

In Bachwali, the *achchhé din* are marked by the return of superstitions, of played-out, hackneyed thinking. The popularity of platforms called Facebook and WhatsApp, accessed on a device called a smartphone, means that reasoned thinking has been halted in its tracks and turned around back to where it came from—the two processes unfold almost simultaneously. Serious readers and questioners like the character P-3 (Prem Prakash Pandé) were never wildly popular to begin with, but there was a time their strangeness had drawn respect, even if shown from a safe distance. Today, people aren't ready to tolerate them. The red know-it-alls (pun: *lal bujhakkad*, for wiseacres) who imprudently go ahead and attack what is not safe to mention in company, are frequent victims of violence. Such people are suicidal loonies. The protagonist Teju may not be a full-blown loony, but his opposition to a mob blindly set on violence leads to his house being surrounded in the dark and pelted with stones.

It is as though people, having come through a dark time, had decided it was a magical experience and wanted the darkness restored. An enveloping darkness. People spreading themselves like carpets to welcome its return.

Bachwali, renowned for its love of gossip—as you learn during your stay—has seen the eco system of gossip transformed to its roots in recent years. Earlier, loose talk had helped pass the time. It was an entertainment, an enjoyable stab at satire that, at worst, would degenerate into personal recriminations. But there was no question of a whole community feeling hurt or taking offence as one. Gossip may have done nothing to secure the public good, but it wasn't a public menace either.

By 2014, there came about a fundamental change.

A lot of tales now arrived in readymade form. Sometimes, the parts were manufactured elsewhere and you assembled them as per local needs. The lazy and the hyperactive, both became equal participants. Among the lazy, dissemination occurs by word of mouth—somewhat akin to the shruti tradition. Among the lively, the smart crowd, it's a matter of posts and touchscreens. They transmit remotely, over unimaginable distances. And the new rumour is rather different from the customary sort. Earlier, you might have suspected even the truthful bits in what you were told. Now you'll readily swallow the most far-fetched details. Because rumour now is joined to faith and divorced from skepticism. The new gossip features both heroes and villains. The villains always have furrowed brows (*bal padé*: possibly callused brows). They are scary, deceitful, unreliable. The heroes are omnipotent, they are prodigies of virtue, public spirited and true, their destinies glowing—like their foreheads—with auspicious lines.

This transformation of the nature of gossip is a deeply political process, steered by the likes of Bhaiyya-ji, Chandu Pandé and the fraudulent baba Chunni Maharaj. Nearly 300 young men in the locality are maintained on monthly stipends from Bhaiyya-ji, which come in the form of a recharge coupon of Rs 300, handed to each. Bhaiyya-ji, who knows in his heart that gau katha recitals are the new scam, spots possibilities of political consolidation in every little fast and ritual of the calendar. He says, “Till a public gathering generates boundless faith among observants and fear to a like degree among the others, its success is doubtful. What's the point of worshipping quietly,

deep within your own burrow? Puja must be congregational, a public institution.” He channels Nannu Maharaj’s hatred of modern education: “When the kids’ talk turns wayward, they are clearly on the wrong track. Somebody is misleading them. They must never be sent into fortresses that fly the red flag.”

The rapist baba Nannu Maharaj is leagues ahead of Bhaiyya-ji. Chandu, who goes to pieces before educated and articulate opponents, receives an unfailing mantra from the Maharaj: “Rudeness will paralyse them. Bellow, drown their voices. Oppose them so vehemently,” continues baba, “that they can’t get a word in. They should have the right to speak only so far as is appropriate.”

As you wander the lanes of Bachwali you are left in no doubt that this place keeps its special character even as it turns into a microcosm of the new India, the universe in a nutshell. Often, when the writer says Bachwali, it sounds like a slip of the tongue where he meant to say Bharat:

One day he said, apropos of nothing: “Something like a volcano is stirring under Bachwali’s arse.”

Someone caught him by the throat: “What are you talking about, bé?”

“About Pakistan! Bachwali slipped out of my mouth,” the twice-battered Lalu quickly replied.

It is the novelist’s skill that you hear India in the word “Bachwali” as soon as it replaces Pakistan. Right through the novel it persists in an undertone you can’t ignore. That’s why news walks off the national pages every so often and recurs in Bachwali.

The smell of rot from a teacher’s speech was slowly transformed into the fragrance of a story. The story of a theatrical troupe being chased and hunted in full costume was recounted like a ballad of derring-do.

It is something of a surprise— a happy surprise even though the subtext is an unhappy one—that within three years of the arrival of our achchhé din, this novel came into existence.

The settlement called Noma, the location of Chandan Pandé’s *Vaidhanik Galp*, is quite different in this respect: no attempt was made to transform it into a mini-India. It

shows not as a microcosm but an exemplar of the New India. Rafeeq, teaching at a local college, and also directing plays with a crew of amateurs, has gone missing for some days. His wife Anusuya, a former lover of the narrator's, having failed repeatedly to get the police to register a missing person's FIR, turns to the narrator for help. You arrive on the scene along with him, from faraway Gurgaon, to Noma, seventy kilometres from Gorakhpur. Slowly, a chilling tale unfolds, one that has merely to unfold in order to leave you chilled. Rafeeq's drama company had prepared a street play based on the story of a recently suspended sub-inspector, Amandeep Singh. The play had even seen a couple of performances. Amandeep Singh's mistake was saving a Hindu girl from a communal mob enraged by her falling for one Niyaz. After this, Amandeep was found guilty of some financial irregularity and relieved of his post. In trying to take his true story to the public, Rafeeq's company found itself targeted by another mob. But he was stubborn about continuing with the performances. He even wanted to stage it at the qasba's famous Dol Méla. Just before the fair, Rafeeq vanished. Then, one of his students, a girl in his troupe, also vanished. The way the story develops, you begin to discern a pattern in the disappearances and to see that it follows a design. The communal elements have a stranglehold on the local administration and police, even the college, which greatly eases their spreading of a fabricated story. Rafeeq, an experienced criminal, was single-mindedly waging a love jihad. He had first eloped with a Hindu girl and brought her all the way from Haryana to eastern UP, where he dumped her and ran away with his next victim. Once you're in Noma, this news reaches you in a variety of forms. A video clip doing the rounds on WhatsApp will show up on your phone. You will see Rafeeq making love to the missing girl. You learn later that this was actual playacting; the clip came out of a play in rehearsal. But the damage is done. The video has been widely shared, watched by nearly everybody. The public knows what it has seen, love jihad. Following your arrival, two more members of the troupe vanish, one after another. It is as if the tale kept reaching into the dark and plucking out details, bit by bit, to lay before you. The story ends all at once, where you are given to understand that the play led to everything else, everything that the police and municipal administration are determined never to uncover, quite determined to cover up in fact.

This short novel, which you might finish in a couple of sittings, uncovers the operating code of hindutva-vadi fascists who have taken over the state machinery.

Gripping as the mystery is, pooling drip by drip from the dark, it is rich in insight and instructive as well. We see the site where rumour and lies are turned to advantage by fascist forces. We recognise the site is us, we the consumers of news, its viewers, readers, listeners. Gaining this vantage point is important, for a large part of the population will have to learn how to extricate itself from an unfavourable situation. Readers discern that being surrounded by the mass media is a trap. This awareness is a step towards destabilising the hegemonic narrative, rendering it suspect; and to enable this realisation is the novelist's art. A reader coming away from this novel will think differently about the news, about, for instance, a snippet from August 29 where the UP chief minister instructed the home department to take cognisance of the growing incidence of "love jihad", to track its spread and frame a law to stop it. Also the additional chief secretary's remark that "action needs to be taken against the accused, and the administration must get tough with them. Social media is everywhere these days and such things have an effect on the mind." (*Indian Express*, Aug 29, p. 8.) Here is the statutory myth or official lie (vaidhanik galp) being manufactured by the administration. What tragedies it is preparing the way towards can be imagined. Noma awakens our senses to this.

After Noma, come, let us go to South India. Dévpura. Prof P S Krishna teaches at its university. Two bike riders shoot him dead on campus. The two youths are members of an organisation committed to creating a Hindu Rashtra and believe they have "slain" a "rakshasa", fulfilled their highest duty. But wait, the "slaying" won't happen till some 300 pages after your arrival in Dévpura. Till then, we should say Prof Krishna teaches at the university. His teaching, his commentary based on research, and his challenge to established beliefs is acutely disliked by the Guru (Sri Sri Sri) Santhosh, the Hindu Rashtra Sabha, the Dévpura Hindu Séné, and sundry others. After another of his much-discussed papers:

Guru (Sri Sri Sri) Santosh is in a state that combines, in equal measure, anger and excitement. The charges against Krishna are clear. The so-called professor has described Kannadeva's glorious choice of Jal Samadhi as suicide.

This is a minor offense compared to what Krishna has said about some palm leaves he claims to have found. Krishna has brazenly claimed that Kannadeva was called Kannappa in his earlier life, and that he was the son of a

washerman whose father skinned cattle. Santosh feels a rumbling in his stomach. Is there no end to this distortion of saints' lives? Of Hindu history? The arrogance of these Hindu-bashers! Of course those padris and mullahs will do anything to disrupt the march to a glorious Hindu nation. That goes without saying. But these rats at home, the rats within the Hindu fold, are the worst of all. This man's name is Krishna. He teaches epics like the Mahabharata, the body of wisdom with the shining soul of the Bhagavad Gita. Isn't he ashamed to foul it like this? Shit in the most sacred room of his own house?

This is an open challenge. He, Santosh, Guru to so many, cannot ignore it. It is also a chance to make an example. Traitors, like rakshasas, must be suitably dealt with.

Thus, Prof Krishna's offence is that he is engaged on a project to distort Hindu history, the lives of Hindu saints. The real problem being that the medieval saint Kannadéva is being repackaged as an icon of hindutva. His true biography has been erased. A fact that has been buried deep, away from popular recall, is that he was a descendant of dalits who stripped the hide off dead cattle. Someone for whom literacy became possible only because an emancipatory sect had arisen, which was committed to ending brahmin dominance. And Prof Krishna had caught glimmerings of this history in his reading of Kannadéva's verses. His research moves towards establishing that, contrary to the common understanding, Kannadéva's life had not ended on a beatific jal samadhi, but he had killed himself in despondency after being ostracised and excommunicated by powerful forces within the anti-discrimination sect.

Of course, someone with this kind of research programme, generating such conclusions, and propagating these ideas, had to be seen off with a "cohesive strategy"! Accordingly, the slaying of this demon became a priority with an underground organisation—and you may spot glimpses of the Sanatan Sanstha here. Two young men were picked to execute the mission. The organisation has worked out a list on which Prof Krishna's is the fifth name. In the words of the Sanstha's Dr Rajesh, the figures on the list are all "hardcore anti-Hindus. They are activists and communists. Even, I'm sorry to say, poets and musicians, teachers and professors."

With their roles decided and a 7.65 mm pistol procured, the two youths travel to Dévpura and stay there for a few days, keeping the Professor's daily routine under watch. Then, they pick their moment and put a bullet through his skull.

Were the story merely reminiscent of Prof Kalburgi's assassination, it would have been worth reading for its fine detail alone, but we have two more stories running parallel to this one, which ultimately interweave with the strand about Prof Krishna and add to the punch of the novel. (He writes, *vyapak phalak*. Literally, effective propulsion.) One story, from eight centuries earlier, is about Chikka/ Chikaiyya and his son Kannappa/ Kannadéva. It portrays the rise and decline of a remarkable anti-caste movement: how a dream takes shape, sustains itself, and, eventually, falls to a decisive attack from reactionary upper castes. The other story is of three dalit youngsters, two men and a woman. The humiliations and harassment they undergo in the course of their studies, the impediments from within and beyond themselves that they must overcome, such is the texture of this moving story. The most brilliant of the three, Satya, dies by suicide. The apparent connection of this story to the other two may seem slender—just that they find Prof Krishna's work helpful in developing their understanding of dalit history, and, following his death, the two surviving students, Ravi and Asha, join massive protest demonstrations—but their connection to the structure of the novel is integral, substantive. (*Antarvastu ki drishti sé unka sambandh, in light of content their connection...*) Running parallel to the story of Chikaiyya and Kannappa, the story of these three students tells us what has changed and what hasn't in these eight hundred years. As also what awkward truth is that which turned the scholarly Prof Krishna into a target. The Hindu Dharma Sabha and the Dévpura Hindu Séné are doing to dalits today what brahminical forces did to caste emancipation centuries ago, and which drove Kannadéva to end his life.

There is a sense in which *I have Become the Tide* is the story of three murders, two of which may superficially be termed suicide. The forces that murdered Prof Krishna are also Kannadéva and Satya's killers. Lodging this with us as an emotional truth, not merely one of logic, is what makes this a major novel. Of the novels I have read this one alone views the rise of hindutva as a phenomenon of anti-dalit hatred in place of an anti-Muslim one, standing it at the centre of the story. It is as if the novel were telling us that each time an anti-caste movement arose in India, uprooting it became a matter of mission with status-quoist forces. Hindutva's ascendancy today is merely a

link in a long chain. It is truly, virulently against the Constitution which imagines an India liberated from caste inequality.

These stories, of Bachwali, Noma and Dévpura, constitute an unofficial knowledge of today's India. Incidents we receive in the lifeless cast of news here shed those corpses as we watch life unfold in vivid detail. It is small wonder that as I read these books two matters kept playing on my mind. With a hammering emphasis. Neither of them finds mention in these stories. And how could they, since they happened later—the Delhi riots and Bhima Korégaon! Perhaps they were an indication that at a time when the official account is a pack of lies, such informal reckonings are essential. Of course, we should bear in mind that the significance of creative work lies not in its choice of subject but its treatment. These three novels may be grouped together for their common theme, but that does not make them significant. The existence of inferior novels on the same subject is entirely possible. I count myself lucky that I haven't come across them.