

India of My Dreams

(Trigger warning: Mentions of homophobia, sexual assault)

With an impalpable sense of melancholy, my fingers weave this essay. Probably somewhere in the back of my head, I've already considered this a confession rather than an essay I write for a competition. Though the title might be similar, my words may not be congruent with what Gandhiji wrote in his book in 1947. Yet, here I write. Now all that I write shall be as raw as the dreams I harbor.

"Vanshika, I want to leave this country that smothers me," my friend's words still deafeningly echo like tireless chaos around me. The same friend I bid farewell to a year back when the first drizzle painted Delhi in a hue of an approaching monsoon. My friend is a gay man and when I say that he's suffered, I underestimate the depth of the word 'suffer.' He uttered those words on a call after his family had thrashed him for his harmless existence threatened to corrupt their honour. The reason for the outrage? He wore nail polish. I believe that I need not sketch out the gruesome imagery that followed. That night I dreamt of a place where my friend could dress up in a flowery gown or a pretty skirt that he found his identity in. I dreamt that he felt safe, returned home unharmed and stayed unharmed. I dreamt of a place where he wouldn't be met with raised eye brows if he sought a home with a husband instead of a wife. I dreamt.

My father always instructs me that I must read newspaper and I always answer that newspapers are probably more depressing than Khaled Hosseini's sadist works. He laughs but he doesn't notice the article on the front-page shrieking in bold letters: 'A Six-Year-Old Gangraped in Delhi.' I do. I also notice the unashamed, unabashed eyes ogling at my breast, the shameless groping by a man who could be older than my father. I do notice those who witness yet look away for they have grown so accustomed to the familiar scene. No one says anything. And while I scrub the horrendous touch away under shower, I dream again. Then I wake from my

reverie and bear witness to my mother hiding her face under a dupatta in family functions. And how while she rots away in the kitchen with hardly a fan drying her sweat drenched body, the men drink and get served. It just seems so natural that nothing looks out of place. How ridiculous is that? I am sent to help my mother for I need to learn. Need to learn what? The shards of patriarchy that shall never cease to exist? And *Bharat Mata*, they audaciously said.

I saw a comment of an Indian under an explicit picture of a woman on Instagram. It proudly declared, 'in our country, women aren't this shameless,' while ironically, he was among those who liked that picture. I don't believe that anything further needs to be stated with regard to such sheer, naked hypocrisy.

In the India that I dream of, the six-year-old would be still alive for her tiny body wasn't objectified. When I hug my mother, her body wouldn't always be covered in a blanket of sweat that just never seems to dry, weighing her down with a force I can't see. When I walk past men, no hand would come forth to dirty me. That would be the India of my dreams.

Newspapers tell more tales. The past articles narrate a reality that refuses to fade into the past: casteism. Some people will never be treated as anything more than tissues that are used and disposed of. From the separate utensils and restriction on entry to places of worship to society's despise for inter-caste marriage, this bitter divide will hang over those born unfortunate till the end of history. How many more Valmiki families from Uttar Pradesh would continue to sob without their daughter and without justice? Had I the power to materialize dreams into reality, we would all be humans devoid of a tag that separates the so-called servant and the served. Had I the power.

Since I first begun writing essays like this, the standard solution that would be extended for all concerns would be 'increase literacy rate.' I beg to disagree. I believe that it is not literacy that would sail us towards the vision of a better home, it is education. There exists a slight yet

insurmountable difference between these two. Literacy tells you how to read your text book which says 'untouchability is unconstitutional.' Education makes you ask that scrap collector to sit beside you on the couch, not on the floor for she wouldn't dirty the sofa if she sits. Education makes you keep the glass she drank from among other utensils, not separated. Ergo, what I dream of is an educated India. But while literacy can be judged in percentages, who will measure education? The actions I have witnessed by the hands of those so pathetically uneducated are too many to count.

A certain incident has engraved itself in my memory and it would not wane no matter how much I desire to forget it for the peace of my mind. Thus, we arrive to another dynamic of the India that exists in my dreams.

A few years back, I woke up with a jerk on a road trip to a ruckus outside. A mob had surrounded us with *lathis* and knit eye brows. I had been too young yet curious so shakily I peeped outside to see the dead body of a cow. Now, I feel little awkward writing this because in Gandhiji's 'The India of My Dreams' he'd titled chapter number thirty-two as 'Cow Protection.' Yet for I had declared that what I write would be raw and unfettered, I continue:

If there's one snippet I recall as clear as the day is of the mob asking my father his name. When he uttered a name that fortunately didn't trigger any rabid emotions, the *lathis* lowered. Police that came saw my father's ID and not so surreptitiously took some of my father's hard-earned money. Then, we were 'allowed' to leave. For ages I couldn't figure out what was so special about my father's name.

Now I know. It's because he is Naveen, not Nasiruddin. And I almost find myself one with that little girl at the back of the car again and I wonder, what would have happened if we worshiped Rahim instead of Rama. Would an accident become a murder? Would our lives become lowlier than the carcass?

Shakespeare once asked, 'What's in a name?' Had he been alive, I would have answered. Plenty rests in a name. Your security is in a name. Your identity is in a name. Your privilege is in a name. So, what's not in a name?

How beautiful would this place be people were brought together by religion, not torn apart. Swords would stop before piercing for they would sympathize for a fellow human, and look beyond that *tilak* or that *taqiyah* or that turban. How beautiful would that country not painted in communal blood be.

Alas, dreaming is a poisoned chalice, to wallow in a reverie is one's greatest escape. If I begin to mould a nation in my head and pen it down, I will never stop for the comforting dream is too deceiving. Still, there is a lot more I wish for in my country. I wish for people to be happy in the truest sense. Mental health should be addressed before more take their own life. I do desire better leaders, those who wouldn't see politics as an opportunity to fill their paunch from the flesh of the poor man and stolen money. I do hope for a place where no more children on the streets will starve and knock on the window of cars, their palms extended amidst traffic. Women in villages would be guaranteed basic sanitation and health care so they wouldn't lose their dignity and life. Water is a basic right so families should never be parched because water couldn't be bought.

Furthermore, our off handed and insensitive attitude pollutes the environment beyond repair. The air is toxic and fatal. Water in holy rivers no longer is pure. Awareness, efforts and commitment could change that. Awareness is aided by a noble job that is journalism which needs to stay unhampered and responsible. Touch of malice to this noble task can dwindle a foundation to a tumbling card castle and trigger a change in the direction of the worse. I dream of a country of a change for the better.

Yet, I acknowledge that reality is not so insurmountably harsh and dark. It is shades of grey. During Covid 19 second wave, we saw people united by a common sense of humanity, helping fellow Indians. Among the crowd that thrashes my friend, maybe one arm would extend to support. Among the eyes that ogle lasciviously at my chest, one person silently stands in front of me and blocks the prying eyes. For those accustomed to be treated inhumanely, there would certainly be one embrace of humanity. There is hope. There is always hope and I will awake and look towards that dream churning into reality. One day it will. I know it will.

The room where I am seated is laden with darkness. Yet there is a ray of light that shines from the door left slightly ajar. It makes me believe that I will be drenched in light once I open that door. But for now, my fingers weave this essay (if I can still call it that) of an 'India of my Dreams' with an impalpable sense melancholy.

Brimming laughter from every household,

Not crimson roads still with muted screams.

Marching unhindered towards a better tomorrow together,

Not being ripped apart by vile corrupted schemes.

From the mountains to the great ocean, a country held together

Not merely clutching onto aspirations and unity falling apart at the seams

I look towards a homeland like that,

Such will be the India of my dreams.