

A review of Bela Bhatia's book India's Forgotten Country: A view from the Margins

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A fascinating account of how Indian rulers and the elite have failed the people at large.

This six hundred and thirty-five pages' book (including notes and name index) by Bela Bhatia is a fascinating account of how Indian rulers and the elite have failed the people at large. The book chronicles her own lived experience filled with empathy and dissects the failures of the state by bringing before us the grim realities of how ordinary folks struggle for their basic livelihood issues, a dignified living and in the process also highlights the stories of courage and selflessness.

India's Forgotten country capture's Bela's "early years as an activist in rural Gujarat, her research on the Naxalite movement, her investigations of violations of democratic rights in different regions and her recent years dealing with the ongoing conflict between the state and Maoists in Bastar. The essays build on first hand investigations conducted in various states, including, Bihar Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Nagaland and Kashmir.... the essays are stories of life death and despair that also serve as inspiring accounts of resistance, resilience, courage and hope".

The book is not written in a manner of litany of woes but is provocative enough dispassionately looking at some of India's most pressing and painful realities and challenges one to not only understand the injustices but attempts to explain why such injustices often lead to a volatile form with violence being used to end violence. Bela delves into the brutal massacre of Dalits in Bathe, the struggles of Delhi's slum dwellers, the atrocities against Muslims in Sabarkantha, the perils of Uranium mining, the displacement caused by the Narmada project, the ongoing turmoil in Kashmir, the deepening divide in Manipur between tribals and non-tribals, and the haunting conflict in Nagaland, all of which point towards the failure of the Indian state.

In the midst of all this there are inspiring stories of courage, resistance and selflessness. "The Darbars who sheltered Muslim victims of communal violence in Sabarkantha, Babulal Bairwa when he defied upper-caste norms to bathe in the chakwada pond, Rampuneet Devi, who stood up for her right, the community leaders in the Narmada Valley who refused to be bought, Marwari Mallah who opened his house to terrorized Dalit neighbours in Bathani Tola, Grikseng Mark who braved police firing in Tura to help others and Bilal who risked his life to take his injured friends to a hospital in Srinagar—all showed humanity at its best", writes the author.

The book combines meticulous scholarship with accessible, engaging prose. As someone with a doctorate from Cambridge, living in Bastar, a predominantly tribal area of south Chhattisgarh, Bela has shown the mirror on the struggles of the downtrodden, particularly, the Dalits and Adivasis with immaculate story telling based on facts and on ground reporting.

She ends the book with the section titled "Hope" where she refers to O.Henry's immortal story of hope titled "The Last Leaf". A poor art student who is ill with pneumonia believes that she

will live as long as a leaf remains on the ivy on the wall outside her window. 'When the last leaf withers and dies, I shall die too', she tells her friend. One night when there is wind and rain, the last leaf is seemingly bound to fall, but it is still there in the morning, renewing her will to live and helping her recover. It soon emerges that that cold night had claimed the life of her elderly neighbour and artist friend who had caught pneumonia, but not before he had successfully painted a leaf on the wall after the last leaf fell.

In these dark times, the author puts her faith in the goodness of people that she has seen in the midst of all the struggles of the people she chronicles in this book. This is where one ponders whether altruist actions can be trusted upon in a caste ridden society. Even the basic constitutional rights and privileges are more often than not, denied to the majority of our country women and men and it will take considerable active, affirmative and dedicated efforts of a greater number of the privileged few to redeem India's tryst with destiny which was pledged by Jawaharlal Nehru.

Having said that book is a must for those who wish to understand the ground realities of life, primarily, in North India and deserves more prominence and coverage by the media, which seems to have completely wasted itself, thus far, in inanities.

India's Forgotten Country: A View from the Margins, Bela Bhatia, Penguin Viking, 2025

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