

## HAPPY WE ?

### Barnali Pain

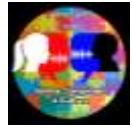
Etymologically, we have learned to distinguish between pleasure and happiness, knowing that pleasure is superficial and purchasable and happiness is priceless and psychological. India ranked 136 in the World Happiness Report compiled and released by the United Nations on March 18, 2022. This Report is being published by United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, since 2012. This Report is based on two key ideas – Firstly, happiness or life evaluation measured through opinion surveys and secondly, identifying key elements that determine well-being and life evaluation across countries.

Notably, happiness, hunger and the freedom of Press are inter-related. In the 2021 Global Hunger Index, India ranked 101 out of the 116 countries. In the World Press Freedom Index, India ranked 142 in 2020. Whereas India's level of hunger is consequential of poor economic policy and its faulty execution, India is home to the largest number of hungry people in the world. The latest World Inequality Report, 2022, was published in December 2021. It was coordinated by economic and inequality experts from France based World Inequality Lab. According to this Report, India is among the most unequal countries in the world -- India is a "poor and very unequal country, with an affluent elite ". With its high rates of poverty, India is marked by its corruption, an out of date caste framework, child malnutrition, environmental pollution, and gender inequality and rape culture.

Article 15 of Indian Constitution states, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them". The significant "only" put before "religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth" is conspicuous by its restrictions upon the grounds of discriminations. But the grounds of discriminations under Article 15 must be boundless and all –encompassing. Otherwise, no matter how comprehensive a medical prescription is, it will fail to be effective, if the medicines are fake.

We have helplessly eye-witnessed the unprecedented migration of workers and their families from large urban centers to rural India after the sudden announcement of lockdown during the pandemic from March, 2020. As reported by the newspapers, news channels and On-line news portals, the workers were forced to undertake hazardous journeys, sometimes covering more than 1000 kilometers on feet. Deaths happened due to exhaustion, dehydration, malnutrition while many got arrested for violating the on-going lockdown. With chronic underfunding in the rural healthcare and economy, the pandemic has highlighted the failings of rural infrastructure.

The political parties, as it is seen, do not represent the interests and demands of the entire electorate. In the recent elections, Party Manifestos hardly ever surfaced in the list of factors on which voters cast their votes. The politically disempowered people of India hardly have chance to feel equal in the eyes of Law. The commoners are mostly marginalized. They have to toil hard for minimum wages and are denied basic amenities of life. As it is famously said, public memory is short. There is an overall tendency toward hero-worship among the Indian electorate. The commoners are habituated with so much injustice that a politician's apparent good work and oral promises often melt their hearts toward deification of an individual



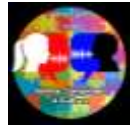
political leader. Illiteracy, hunger and unemployment turn the masses into submissive slaves at the feet of the politicians. One who once wins our hearts by charisma and dynamism is placed on a holy pedestal in course of time. The public unwittingly grant the politician complete immunity against criticism. This gives birth to autocracy and an individual politician in this way looms larger than her / his party and becomes harmful for a democratic set up. Glorifying the deified leader at the expense of public money / taxes becomes a prevalent trend. Even stopping an ambulance in a crowded street to pave way for the worshipped leader remains a common ritual in the daylight of a metropolis. In its subverted contexts, a different kind of hero-worship is regularly shown in commercial Indian movies and the frustrated Indian youth throng at the cinemas to get entertained by the larger-than-life hero, magically erasing all evils single-handedly.

When people look up to the worshipped leader for solving their problems, they can hardly think of any possible change in the prevailing system of rigidity. Such leaders cleverly use their image to project themselves as the doyen of generosity. As a result, all the moneyed parties these days are keen on distributing doles among their potential voters. They leave aside development and reform and prioritize on distribution of doles under various decorative names. Unfortunately, the recipients of doles are not always the poorest of the poor. In most cases, the monthly income of the recipient's family is not considered because the purpose behind such activities is to allure the voters and not to improve their standard of living. To win elections, the leader and her / his party strongly relies upon short term policies and stay away from long term development of the voters. Charities at governmental level are the ultimate denial of the proper scope for self-help at all levels. But the doles, it seems are here to stay while the government reels under huge accumulated debt burden.

That candidates with criminal records can contest election in India is definitely a mark of shame for Indian democracy. The constitution of India does not have any specific law barring candidates with criminal history to contest in the elections. This practice not only harms the nation's reputation and governance, but also increases crime rates and disrupts law and order in the country. Democracy entails the rule of law and the staging of free elections to determine the people's will. However, in recent years, this peaceful process of social development has become significantly tainted.

The age old patriarchal values and terms are reflected in India's state machineries. Culture and tradition have compelled the Indian society to marginalize the women. The women are largely fetishized in popular culture. The woman is not expected to raise her voice or take decisions. Through ages, she has been the target of various social evils like child marriage, sati, polygamy, purdah system, forced pregnancy, rape, prostitution, female infanticide. As reported in *The Times of India* ( May, 2018 ), Indian Nobel Laureate Kailash Satyarthi has called rape and child sexual abuse in India as "national emergency" with lakhs of such cases pending in the courts.

No one can feel safe in an environment in which rape has been embedded in the mainstream and rape culture is perpetuated through the use of abusive language, blaming the rape survivor, body shaming, publicly scrutinizing the woman's mental state, motives, defining womanhood as sexually passive, assuming only promiscuous women get raped, generalizing manhood as sexually aggressive. Typically, sexual attack is not about sexual gratification but more about exercise of power. A rape survivor suffers from acute post-traumatic stress

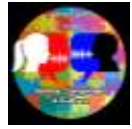


disorder. Rape has become such a norm that minor girls are regularly raped these days. All the protests in the shape and form of sit-in movements, flagging banners, candlelight marches, asking for proper judicial actions gradually slow down while the worshipped political strongholds keep passing loose comments mostly on the character of the girl who was raped. Due to lack of proper sex education, the potential rapists imbibe these rotten values of patriarchal society at ease and for them, rape is a tool to overpower and degrade their targets. Patriarchy in the long run does not favour men against women. It nonchalantly produces gender stereotypes which are clearly cultural constructs internalized and normalised through years of hegemony. For girls, it is rape or sex for food and medicine, for boys, it is drugs, brutality, violence and yes sexual abuses and rape too. How do the trafficked children, the sex slaves, the hungry population deal with life? Human trafficking in India, although illegal under Indian law, remains a growing problem. People are frequently illegally trafficked through India for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced/bonded labour. The whistle blowers can rise up to the occasion to expose illegitimate activities, alleged corporate malpractices, corruption and misuse of power in the organizations.

The protection of the whistle blowers is crucial for the success of the detection of corruption. This is because in the absence of required protection instead of admitting to corruption and mending their ways, persons implicated in corruption can choose to attack or retaliate. The whistle blowers in India are continuously threatened, harassed or even murdered for exposing crimes. Those who volunteer with great courage for the benefit of our country to raise their intelligent and honest voice against wrong doings are reportedly often the pain in the neck of the power hierarchies.

The period movies show us the colonisers' torture on the Indians which we now see almost as a welcome relief, for, the torturers are all white skins. In reality, after 75 years of the end of Colonial rule, the Nation state has shown extreme intolerance against peaceful, positive criticism and has never thought twice to arrest and torture the Human Right Activists. The repackaging of Rowlatt Act (1919) has made history repeat itself time and again. The Washington Post on July 18, 2021 wrote "India's cruelty to its critics shows the deterioration of the world's largest democracy". The law of sedition, we all know was introduced in the Colonial India by the Britishers. The Government of India however has shown by its recent actions that criticism of government must be read as seditious. As the Supreme Court is hearing fresh pleas challenging the legality of Sedition, it has asked the government to explain its validity in the given time under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (The Hindu, May 3, 2022). Section 124 of IPC deals with punishments for Sedition offences. In a historic order, Supreme Court has put on hold Section 124A of Indian Penal Code which criminalises the offence of Sedition. This is the first time in 162 years that the operation of provision of Section 124A has been suspended. The Supreme Court also says that those who are already booked under Section 124A can now approach competent courts for appropriate relief and bail. It is time to keep our fingers crossed and watch what happens next.

Indians, at root are not happy over the prevailing Fear factor that troubles them at workplace, neighbourhood, during elections, communal tensions and court cases. Indian commercial movies highlight the crisis but end up with the superman- like heroism and success of a single man. As we all know, the Indian Education System has many things that are not ideal for a good education system such as corruption, bribery, and inequality between rich and poor on



the one hand and completely syllabus bound, theoretical education on the other being imparted in an examination-oriented system. Though on paper, as for example the 2020 National Education Policy states that “recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student, by sensitizing teachers as well as parents to promote each student’s holistic development in both academic and non-academic spheres” must be the avowed goal of education. The change, which must begin from pre-school level still promotes learning by rote and the entire educational trajectory produces generations that do not learn how to ask questions. As a whole, Vocational training is still less preferred than theoretical education. Unemployment and underemployment in India are caused by more basic structural factors such as lack of capital, use of capital-intensive technologies, lack of access to land for agricultural household, lack of infrastructure, rapid growth of population. Growing inflation and lack of work opportunities and job securities make life uncertain, unstable and apprehensive.

Even in this situation, no matter how one leads an apparently comfortable life, there has to be some deep pricks of conscience for people who suffer for no fault of their own. Unless one has vested interest to support autocracy and corruption, one cannot perhaps maintain apathy in such bleak situation. Even if we feel the danger of harmful regressive policies, can we really stand up to question the insensitive, irresponsible men of power? Do we get media support? Most people would disagree. The Police force is required to pacify the politicians and brutality remains an intrinsic part of police practices. Similarly, the media here has to accommodate themselves with the whims of the ruling party. The Constitution of India on paper protects the Freedom of Speech and the Freedom of Press. In practice, sponsorship and advertisements for a certain channel or newspaper is curtailed or stopped if that channel or newspaper chooses to speak the truth. A free press is a potent factor in the socio- cultural, socio political life of a country. In India various restrictions have always been imposed on the media by the people of political power. When sponsorship or advertisements are affected, there is no question of media coverage. Both Police and Media, the two strongholds of a democracy helplessly go by the policy of appeasement at the expense of their image.

All angles of the current discussion may induce us to disbelieve the very idea of happiness. Are we fond of blame game? Are we not satisfied with what we have or we really don’t know what we deserve! The answers can be varied and we need to read them as an open text. It is always proper to acknowledge the immense felicity of laughter. The repressed mind must be set to ventilate its anxieties. Let us first learn to laugh at ourselves. Only then perhaps we will understand the significance of remaining the members of the largest unorganized sector of thoughtful degree-holders who cannot combat regimented corruption and feel demotivated to sail through challenging situations.