

Revisiting Our 'Tryst with Destiny'

Before I begin, let me ask you this: Are you prepared to be shaken out of your complacency? Is your conscience willing to ache? If yes, then read on.

The pandemic has left us all vulnerable. It has exposed us to a storm of issues that is going to be incredibly hard to allay. We're all struggling. Or, are we? Maybe ponder over it as you devour some steaming ravioli, complaining of the inconvenience this pandemic has caused in the comfort of your homes. But here are the hard, cold facts. Nearly 16,000 children die of hunger each day. Almost half the world – over three billion people – live on less than \$ 2.50 a day, and 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day.¹ The GDP of the 41 impoverished countries, abode to 567 million people, is less than the wealth of the world's seven richest people combined. Isn't that disturbing? And today, while the pressing question in our lives is whether to go out or to not go out, billions out there answer something more pressing: to be or not to be? Ravaged bodies enfeebled by hunger and distress constantly fight this dilemma. Isn't poverty the worst form of violence? Think about it when you eat tonight. Think about it when you eat at Collins or at the Athenaeum, or when you complain about being locked up in the security of your homes, because for 3 billion beautiful people, it would be nothing but a privilege. But that is not what I'm here to write about today. I am only putting things into perspective.

Just before you start your meal, I want you to feel the pangs of hunger gnawing at the pit of your stomach. Now take this feeling, intensify it, prolong it, and imagine feeling this day in and day out. Insecure about your next square meal, salivating at the thought of some leftover *dal* and *roti* you would be lucky to lay your hands on from the bin across the road. Now imagine someone robs you of the little you could gather and laughs in your face. Wouldn't it shake your soul, shatter your dignity, and annihilate any remaining self-esteem? And that is exactly what happened during the Bengal Famine of 1943.

An estimated 3 million people died of starvation and disease breakout.² Millions were impoverished as the crisis catastrophically disrupted the social fabric. Studies have established a clear argument asserting that it was Churchill's war-time colonial policies that caused the

famine.³ Churchill deliberately ordered diversion of food from starving Bengali civilians to well-supplied British soldiers, and even to top up European stockpiles for yet to be liberated Greeks and Yugoslavs. More Bengalis died through the course of this famine than Jews in the Holocaust. And what was Churchill's response to the few conscience-stricken British officers? "Why hasn't Gandhi died yet?" That. That was his response to disintegrating bodies, parched faces – haggard, drawn, half-dead.

Britain ruled India for 147 years. She went from being the 'golden bird' to a poverty-stricken nation with billions to feed. India's share in the world economy was 23% when Britain arrived at its shores and was down to below 4% when we attained independence. India's weavers became beggars, for example, when its famed handloom industry was crushed with export duties and import recessions. India was thus forced to export raw materials and import finished goods. Fine muslin cloth – the hallmark of Indian craftsmanship – woven light as air flooded global markets as a British product. By this time, she was Victorian England's biggest cash cow. In fact, the Industrial Revolution in Britain was premised on the de-industrialization of India. Its policy of 'divide and rule' caused irreparable damages between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Our rich social fabric was stained with the horrors of riots and bloodshed. India and Pakistan were partitioned and remain in a constant state of war. Kashmir is one of the most heavily militarized zones in the world. It has since been a breeding ground for terrorism and unrest. Soldiers are martyred every day. Children, in their youthful exuberance, are told to pelt stones and fire weapons. Yes, such are the so-called 'gifts of Britain' to India. But I digress.

Poverty was a consequence of Britain's imperialist policies. People were forced to live in uninhabitable slum colonies. This propagated the practice of 'slumming'. Popular in Victorian England – slumming began in London as a way to clean up narrow lanes and run-down tenements. It spearheaded sanitation reforms and promised to alleviate the conditions of the desperate poor. It then reached New York, and in 1884, a headline in *The New York Times* proclaimed: "A fashionable London mania reaches New-York. Slumming parties to be the rage this winter."⁴ Except – a group of filthy-rich people partying in a marginalized settlement – not so fashionable, right?

The concept of slum tourism can be dated back to the phenomenon of slumming, and assumes the definition, “to spend time at a lower social level than one’s own for curiosity or charitable purposes.” This practice is facilitated by tour and travel companies operating in cities like Rio De Janeiro, Manila, Johannesburg and Mumbai. These tours, also referred to as reality or adventure tours, claim to channelize a sizeable percentage of their profits towards slum-development. Reality Tours and Travel, for example, works with communities in Mumbai and Delhi. They insist that no photographs are taken and employ underprivileged locals as guides for the tour. Moreover, Dharavi slum in Mumbai, spanning across 2.1 square kilometers, was rated the favorite tourist experience of 2019 in India. It even beat the Taj Mahal, according to TripAdvisor’s Travelers’ Choice Awards. Owing to Danny Boyle’s blockbuster *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), impoverished districts in Mumbai have been gaining traction. One of the tourists remarked, “Dharavi, which featured in the film, is a shantytown of more than 400 acres and a million people. As for the slum dwellers and workers themselves, they struck me as far too busy to even notice the occasional bunch of awkward tourists. Dharavi is just about the most energetic and kaleidoscopically productive place you will ever visit.” Sure, but does this vibrant picture painted by tourists offset the neglect and objectification cast upon the poor? No. So, before you draw conclusions, here’s the other side of it.

Proponents of slum tourism argue that it raises awareness about the daily lives of the poor and propels individuals to fight for the advancement of slum communities. But let us, for a moment, take a more result-oriented approach to the issue at hand. I challenge the supporters of this claim to back their arguments with concrete evidence. Have these travel companies done enough to fight the cause? I don’t think so. And I believe that it is in their confounded interest to *never* do so. After all, they thrive on the suffering of others. To me, slum tourism sounds like a group of privileged tourists feeling good about understanding – for a few minutes – how the other half live. They, including us, feed our curiosities and mistake that for having lived up to our social responsibility. All we’re actually doing is combining the frivolous nature of the term ‘tourism’ with poverty, trivializing the problem and reducing it to a zoo-like scenario. But isn’t this the very definition of voyeurism?

I have often felt that slum tourism glorifies, even romanticizes poverty. And I have disliked that. People debate the ethics surrounding slum tourism. Many claim that it is exploitative and

undignified. That it amplifies shame. Some think that it bridges the disparity of today. I have a slightly different take on it. I question its existence: why it came about in the first place. It provokes a thought on man's hunger to conquer – even at the cost of humanity. Strange, isn't it? We propagandize the idea of poverty and sell it to feed our own hunger and greed. We politicize it and depoliticize it at our own convenience. We deliberate over it, criticize it, and even romanticize it but do little for the people facing the atrocities of our actions. The time to act is now. We must, here on, rise by lifting others.

Instead of glorifying the idea of poverty, we must act upon it. Let's take Dharavi for example. Did you know that this shantytown of squatters sustains 20,000 small scale units that generate close to \$1 billion in income?⁵ 80% of Mumbai's plastic waste is recycled here. Artisans and embroiders from far-off regions of the country practice their craft in its dilapidated alleys. It has over 15000 single room units for production purposes, with the leather industry occupying a dominant share in the Dharavi market. Leather shoes, bags and jackets are exported to Europe and other parts of the world. However, these industries and labour are part of the informal economy – it is not taxed, it is not monitored by the government, nor is its contribution accounted for in the country's GDP. As it is outside the purview of the government, interventions to improve the dismal infrastructure, provide sanitation, drainage, and electricity facilities are overlooked. Therefore, the government can start by formalizing this segment of the industry and devise a rehabilitation plan for the area. Developing infrastructure and education facilities will further its growth potential and will cater to an inclusive growth model. Education, in particular, will allow its recipients to contextualize poverty, propelling them to escape its vicious cycle. Moreover, tourism companies should ethically be converted into proactive non-profit organizations. Any socially useful work can thus be accommodated, and the proceeds will be duly channelized in the upliftment of the lives of the marginalized. Tourists, who feel ever-so-strongly about the plight of the poor, should dedicate their resources and efforts towards the service of the 'glorified'. Students should volunteer to work for non-profits. These measures, unlike slum tourism, will ensure that poverty is not ignored, denied, romanticized, de-politicized or de-contextualized. It will ensure true freedom – just as was spoken of by the first Prime

Minister of independent India in his parliamentary address, “A tryst with destiny”, an excerpt from which reads as follows:

"Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance..."

*...The ambition of the greatest man of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us, but so long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be over. And so, we have to labour and to work, and work hard, to give reality to our dreams. Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world."*⁶

- An excerpt from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech “A Tryst with Destiny” on the eve of 15th August 1947.

Only if we spent real time with ‘the other half’, we’d know what it means to live life on the edge. Poverty pushes people to live life on the edge. And that edge is the threshold that leads us into a world full of realizations and learning. Growing up in India, I have been surrounded by economic disparity. However, this disparity presents parallels and contrasts that are worth a closer look. As I write this essay, a strong undercurrent of socio-political and religious tensions flows through the country. However, Mumbai’s slum dwellers continue to defy religious constraints. They continue to share *Biryani* on *Eid*, light *Diyas* (candles) on *Diwali*, and sing the national anthem on the 15th of August. Even as religion takes the form of separatism, poverty and hunger ironically play a unifying role. And these are the facets of poverty that need to be celebrated. Not hunger, not the shame, but their graceful handling of it all. Their ability to smile freely. Their resilience. So, if there is anything that should be glorified, it is the good fight fought by people bearing the brunt of man’s exploitation – all with grace and humility. So let me take you through an entry from my collection of vignettes to explain this better. It reads so:

“A wide field of naked brick structures stretched toward a low, golden sun. Tiled walls and squat toilets lay half-buried in rubble. As three half-naked, hunger struck children playfully fought with each other, their laughter became the livewire of the slum colony. Next moment, Ramu Kaka, their father, walked toward them with a book and a few pencils. His children’s eyes lit up and elicited a joy so powerful, almost as if their lives had changed. They ran toward him and greeted him with a smile, the most beautiful smile I have seen thus far. I watched this from a distance, and escaped into a sequence of thoughts that continue to enthrall me till day.

Ramu Kaka, our helper, has been working in our house for over thirty years. Take fifty steps from my house and you will arrive at the colony he resided in. One can see tightly packed plots covered in tarps and metal roofs as if it were a mash-up of Legos. Now picture broken doors, exposed water pipes and bits of insulation poking through the crevices. This is where he had grown up, got married and had children. This is also the place he calls home, and the smile he says it with resembles that of his children.”

I thus remain intrigued by Ramu Kaka’s smile. I remain intrigued by the irony of life.

My education has always encouraged social service. I would often go to slum colonies and teach underprivileged children. It always felt like the right thing to do. But here is where I was mistaken. I always thought that it was *me* teaching *them* something. This summer, the fellowship presented me with an opportunity to reflect on what I thought was a one-sided relationship. And I was amazed at the revelations. I realized that I had learned more from underprivileged kids than I have from any textbook. Textbooks have given me knowledge, true. But these children have given me a new perspective on life. They taught me what duty means. They taught me what loyalty means, what service means. All this while, I was a fool to think that those who have too little are the ones who are poor. I was so wrong. Spending time with Ramu Kaka’s kids made me realize who the poor one really is. It’s me. It’s us. Why? Because we take things for granted. Those kids don’t. They’re alive to each moment. Their eyes sparkle at the sight of a book. They come running – excited to learn, bubbling with joy at shooting the right answer. New ideas,

albeit simple, make them come alive. Opportunity makes them come alive. They value the gift of life. And they hustle to retain it.

It was during the pandemic that I understood what struggle is. Indian media was bombarded with heart-wrenching stories of the migrant labour crisis. These are people from rural parts of India who travel to metropolitan cities in search for jobs and better opportunities. They have no social security, meagre government benefits and live on less than \$2 per day. Nearly 45 million informal, invisible labourers lost their jobs due to the industry lockdowns. With no means of commute back to their villages due to nationwide lockdowns, they decided to traverse 750 miles (from Mumbai to Bihar) on foot or on cycles. With empty pockets, starving bellies and feet bleeding profusely – they marched back home. Some met with road accidents, some died of the blistering winds of hunger, while others made it back home. For weeks, mothers carried their children on their backs, and older children cycled their families back to their villages. All of this out of pure love for their families, to protect them. 750 miles on foot. Let that sink in.



A migrant laborer breaks down at the loss of his one-year-old child, who he couldn't see for the last time before she died due to the Coronavirus.⁷

On 26th January 1950, India adopted its constitution, which promised “to secure liberty, equality, fraternity to maintain the unity and integrity of the nation.” It was on this day that she was declared as a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic. Today is the 15th of August. 73

years earlier, on this day, India gained independence from the *British Raj*. As I listened to our Prime Minister's I-Day address to the nation today, a thousand-odd thoughts raced through my head – yes, we are an independent nation – but are we really free? Free from the monarchical era when the King's son would be crowned King and the sweeper's son would be born and die a sweeper? Are we free from the captivity of discrimination, shame, poverty and hunger? And if not, then why, instead of doing something about it, are we sitting and romanticizing the existence of poverty?

I'm sorry. I'm probably being too harsh. I know things are changing. Slowly but surely. And we're a 73-year-old young nation that already holds consequential influence in the global fraternity of countries. Splendid progress has been made in the fields of Artificial Intelligence, Space, Medicine, Defense etcetera. It's just that I am a patriot and I will exercise my right to present constructive criticism. But again, I digress.

Every year, India faces the turmoil of communal riots. Intolerance towards different ideologies and religions is fueled, voters are wooed on the agenda of communalism, and vote banks are secured. 73 years since independence, since the provocative 'divide and rule' policies of the British, and yet, we are not free. Persistent attempts are made to distort our social fabric in the form of mob-lynching, rioting, and politics. Educated people, in their quest for power, perpetuate facets of inhumanity that are innocently defied by uneducated people. Learning about slums in Mumbai taught me how the poor continue to live each day in harmony, how they exemplify, in the purest form, the strength of India's pluralistic fabric: '*unity in diversity*.' It's simple. Because half-clad, hunger-struck bodies don't know any religion. They don't know their rights or the words of the constitution. They only understand survival. And this raw phenomenon provokes a thought. I begin to see how powerfully indigence blurs man-made barriers of caste and creed. People embrace each other's differences, and in the process, become less different. Driven by their humble desire to garner a square meal, they allow the world's cultural mosaic to blossom. It enables me to imagine a world that is divided by borders yet fused by humanity. One where different languages are spoken, yet the voice remains one; where dissimilar elements are interwoven to create a fabric that drapes us all in love.

Certain stories of struggle that surfaced during the course of my fellowship broke me. They inspired me. They taught me. I realized that it is these people who beat the odds day in and day out. They give it their all to survive the immediate moment, then the next, and the next. They remind me that it's all about how bad you want it. That's how the wheel of life rotates. And for them, the wheel stops rotating the moment they don't want it as bad. What if we applied this stoic resilience to *our* lives? Wouldn't we all complain less and appreciate more? No. That's not it. We wouldn't stop until the world were what we all dream for it to be. And what if this unfazed spirit met the promise of equal opportunity and meritocracy? Ramu Kaka's children shouldn't then have to downgrade their dreams *just* to fit their reality. Instead, they could reinvent their reality to match their dreams. None should then be a slave of their destiny. Instead, be a rightful master of it.

But until then, I'll say this:

Some people get opportunities on a platter. That's the world and that's okay. But most people don't. So they have to hustle, self-create, self-believe, and self-validate to survive. But if one day, those who do and those who don't somehow wind up in the same place – only one will know how to *make* a platter – and it'll be they who come from nothing.

~ Viksit Verma, Dr. K. Brown

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