
There But For Fortune, Go You Or I

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THE LOTTERY OF BIRTH: ON INHERITED SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

By Namit Arora

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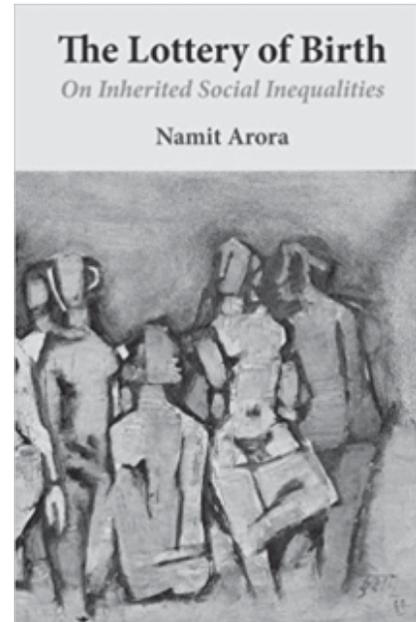
An old ballad sung by Joan Baez many years back went something like this:

Show me the prison/Show me the jail/Show me the hobo/who sleeps down by the rail/ And I'll show you a young man/With so many reasons why/There but for fortune, go you and I.

Baez was gently telling us, in her beautiful, elegiac voice, that we are made not by genes alone, but by contingency and above all by our environment. Around the same time, erupted a nasty debate called the Bell Curve debate when psychologist Richard J. Herrnstein and political scientist Charles Murray argued that human intelligence—and therefore employment, incomes, involvement in crime etc.—is largely an outcome of inherited factors and went on to discuss racial differences in intelligence. Even during Trumpsian times of political incorrectness, it is doubtful if such claims could be made today.

Yes, slightly modified, it is commonplace to hear arguments in India that only slightly recast those scientifically discredited assertions of prejudice. Who does not remember photographs in the national dailies at the time of the Mandal agitation showing upper-caste medical students at the prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences shining shoes in protest against affirmative action for the OBCs? What were these students, considered some of the most intelligent in the country, so unselfconsciously, but symbolically saying? Who has not heard the argument, from so-called meritocrats, that reservations of seats in higher education for lower castes compromises merit? Political correctness of course demands that they do not say that Dalits, adivasis and the OBCs are genetically less intelligent than themselves.

Arundhati Roy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, in an aside of no particular significance to the plot, notes that three men had been crushed to death in India's burgeoning capital city as they lay down to sleep exhausted after a day's labour, on the side of the road. New immigrants to the city, casual workers with no assured work or wages, they could have died of the heat, or dengue fever, or any one of the misfortunes that make the lives of these millions.



‘Careless motherfuckers. Who asked them to get in the way of the truck?’ (Roy 2017: 259)¹ is another way of looking at these deaths.

What Roy is alluding to is a feeling of not just arrogant privilege among the middle and upper middle classes in India, overwhelmingly upper-caste, but how pervasive these ideas are among those who ought to know better, in the media, in the judiciary and indeed in academia, also predominantly upper-caste. This is called victim blaming and elides what is called structural violence.

To understand what is structural violence and what causes it, is this remarkable book of essays, *The Lottery of Birth: On Inherited Social Inequalities*. Namit Arora is an unlikely writer of a book such as this, and thus is all the more convincing. A graduate of IIT, who gets into IIT on the basis of a high all-India rank in the notoriously difficult entrance exam, he goes on, as many from IIT do, to the USA, where, with financial aid, he obtains a Masters degree from an American university and then finds economic success in that land of milk and honey, Silicon Val-

¹ Roy, Arundhati (2017), *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Penguin, New Delhi.

ley. Most people, he notes, would see this as a just reward for his knowledge and hard work.

But as Arora notes, 'If I'm honest with myself, I can't take much credit for it.... I happened to be born in an upper-caste household, inheriting eons of unearned privilege over 80 per cent of all other Indians, I was a fair skinned boy raised in a society that lavished far more positive attention on fair skin and boys. I neither suffered any caste discrimination, nor faced any social and physical restrictions on account of my gender or sexual orientation' (p. 6). What bothered him was that life's outcomes depended 'on the lottery of birth, where people were, marked in the womb for worldly success and failure, based on their accidental inheritance of caste, class, caste, gender, region, religion, sexuality, language, and more' (p. 7).

This book of essays is on inequality along the various axes of caste, class and gender in the country, on the distortions these impose on Indian democracy, on the writings of some of the people who have suffered the indignities that are mounted on pre-existing inequalities and on those who have attempted, with varying degrees of success and disenchantment, to overturn this unjust order. The essays argue that these are indeed man made, not divinely created. They have been published for the most part in an on-line journal *3 Quarks Daily* over the last seven years. These are essays written with honesty, intelligence, sensitivity and with ease. Arora has read all the relevant literature in history, anthropology and political theory and writes for the general reader. What is significant above all, is his respect for data, skillfully analysed.

Consider the essay 'Delhi: The City of Rape?'. Arora looks at the horrifying media projections of rape in India's capital city after the brutal gang-rape and murder of a young woman in December 2012 that led to massive protests across India and the establishment of the Justice Verma Committee to re-look at rape policy. How is it, Arora wonders, that this rape gathered so much media attention when the equally horrifying rape, castration and murder of the Bhotmange family in Khailanji in 2006 took a week to be even reported? Is it because this horror took place far from the national capital? Is it because the Bhotmange family were Dalits, and the media and the general public, is inured to the daily rapes of Dalit women? What the media attention did was to create fear—fear of public spaces, fear of going out in the evenings, especially for young women, and fear of the poor and the Other.

Arora looks at the data on rape in India and as reported by the Department of Justice in the USA. Delhi in 2012 reported 4 rapes per 100,000 population; the rates were 107 in Minneapolis, 88 in Cleveland, 58 in Philadelphia, 43 in Boston, 36 in Houston and so on. The US average was 29 rapes per 100,000 population in 2009. London had rape rates 13 times higher than New Delhi, which was christened the rape capital of the world.

What is even more significant is that about 40 per cent of reported rapes in India involve consensual sex between consenting unmarried adults. These young people have violated caste codes in forging relationships and thus find themselves in criminal courts with rape charges filed by young women's parents. For what these young couples had violated were endogamous caste codes of marriage. Of the remaining cases of reported rapes, the vast majority had been committed by family members, neighbours and so on, people known to the victim. Stranger rapes were a miniscule proportion.

This of course explains the poor conviction rate too as victims frequently refuse to testify against family members they are dependent on. So caste, class and gender inequality are built into and shape not just the occurrence of rape but also how it is reported, if at all, and how long and tortuous the road to justice is.

How did caste originate in India? How did colonial anthropology and laws shape it, and indeed cast it in stone? Do the Vedic scriptures both create and nurture the system, despite its immorality? Yes, indeed, finds Arora, adding to the voices of those labelled anti-national today. But how reassuring it is to find an anti-national emerging not from JNU, but from the hallowed nationalist portals of IIT!

An extremely interesting essay discusses the controversy that erupted after Navayana published Ambedkar's classic *Annihilation of Caste*, edited by S. Anand and with a monograph-length introduction by Arundhati Roy. A section of single-identity-wedded Dalits vented their spleen that non-Dalits had appropriated Ambedkar. Arora gently chides these mono-identitarian voices, while equally chiding Roy for voicing reservations about Ambedkar's views on adivasis. I felt Roy had done a singular service to Ambedkarite politics by doing so; by resisting what Ambedkar would have resisted, namely his deification. Indeed, Ambedkar had decried how the caste system itself leads to the proclivity of hero-worship of men with feet, and much else, of clay. It would have done this cause better if Roy had also in-

cluded some of Ambedkar's dolorous views on Muslims and the Partition of India.

When voices are being silenced, when debate is being stifled, we need more argumentative Indians than we have. Namit Arora's brilliant book has contributed to this, and we must thank him for that. I only wished the cover did not feature a painting by one of the most prominent painters of India, M.F. Hussain, although he was hounded out of his beloved country by Hindutvavadis primarily because he was a Muslim. The works of not so well known artists, who happen to be Dalits, such as Savi Savarkar or J. Nandkumar might have been more apposite. Both of them bring startlingly refreshing ways of seeing Gandhi, and Nandkumar, like Hussain, has a penchant for horses and Hindu goddesses.

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