

ST.GALLEN SYMPOSIUM

Global Essay Competition 2024

Title: Scarcity of Fearless Voices

Essay:

The human civilization is around 6000 years old, but it has been only 150 years that the movement for women's rights came into place. According to a World Bank report published a year ago – only 14 countries have full equal rights for women and in the same report – India has been reported to have 74.4% rights for women. This number is surprising considering that in 2021 alone, India reported 6,589 dowry related deaths – making it around 20 dowry deaths per day. In 2020, one rape was reported every 16 minutes in India and it is estimated that 99.1% of sexual violence cases go unreported. Well, women's rights are not the only concern in a country with a population as huge as 1.42 billion, there are multiple pressing issues like the traditional Hindu caste system dividing society into hierarchical roles of Brahmins (the priests), Kshatriyas (the warriors), Vaishyas (the merchants) and Shudras (the manual labourers), with Dalits (the untouchables) at the bottom. While the constitution of India has policies to increase the representation of Dalits in educational institutions, government jobs and elected positions; Dalits continue to be a victim of caste-based discrimination and hate crimes, triggered by incidents such as eating food in a ceremony, drawing water from well and similar other trivial matters. In 2021, according to a NCRB report, India reported 50,900 cases of caste-based atrocities. Dalits represent 16.6% of India's population, and have been reported to face heinous crimes like minor girls being gang raped, families being attacked, systemic assaults in educational organizations leading to increased suicides by Dalit students, bodies being hanged and burnt, mob lynching and so on.

India's legal system has been continuously evolving, to address these social injustices towards various sections of society, but the implementation remains questionable. But how did these safeguards come into the legal system in the first place? It was due to the efforts of some revolutionaries who acknowledged the challenges and fought to implement reforms and social transformation. It was for people like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (a Dalit himself), referred to as the father of Indian constitution, who highlighted that Brahmanism was the enemy like capitalism and landlordism is in terms of class. He wrote critical literary works about the inequality of this system, asserted that Dalits should organize, educate and struggle to get equal rights rather than depending on sympathy; and as a chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian constitution, he provided constitutional provisions in the form of a reservation system to ensure representation of these historically disadvantaged sections.

When it comes to the women's struggles – it was for visionaries like Savitribai Phule, known as the 'Crusader of Gender Justice,' who along with her husband, started the first school for women in 1848. She also advocated for abolishing child marriage, female infanticide and promoted causes like widow remarriage. She was subject to attacks every time she went to school, stones and dung thrown at her. Savitribai and her husband Jyotiba Rao Phule were thrown out of their home by the latter's father for committing 'sin' as per the Manusmriti and Brahmanical texts. It was for the brother sister duo – Usman Sheikh and Fatima Sheikh, that they received shelter and together they contributed towards the education of Dalit and Muslim women in India. This also brings to attention the state of Muslims – a minority population in India, but a home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. In the years leading to the independence of India and partition of Bangladesh and Pakistan from India, the Hindu hatred against Muslims started to build leading to some of the gruesome riots like the Babri Masjid disputes in 1992, Gujarat riots in 2002, and the very recent New Delhi clashes in 2020 in response to the protests against Citizenship Amendment Act. Muslims in India have been facing discrimination in employment, education, housing, political representation, police bias in crime intervention related to Muslims, and enforcement of state laws to restrict their freedom. How is the world's fastest growing economy, boasting about developments in trade and business, strengthening international relations, failing to address this obvious and widespread social and political ostracization against the Muslim community? The roots of the same trace back to 1977 when the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi started favouring Hindus to ensure continuation of the Congress in power, which has successfully emerged into the extremist right-wing Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh aligned

Bharatiya Janta Party to come into power since 2014. BJP has been securing majority since the last two terms widely owing to their anti-muslim campaigning. A very recent Ayodhya temple inauguration on 22nd January, 2024, result of the Babri Masjid 1992 demolition and riots and deaths across the country, was celebrated like a national holiday – highlighting the dystopian state of India.

The legacy of fearlessness

It is truly shocking that India with its ever-largest youth population has been ineffective in tackling the underrepresentation and targeted hate crimes against a significant population comprised of women, Dalits, and Muslims; with a much higher intensity towards intersectional strata of Dalit and Muslim women. Why are we failing to become a fairer and a more inclusive society, despite having legal and constitutional reforms led by visionaries in the past so many years? The cause is starkly rooted in the scarcity of fearless voices. Fearless voices historically have led to some of the most important transformation across the world. The likes of Martin Luther King Jr., who played a key role in the American Civil rights movement; Nelson Mandela, an anti-apartheid activist who fought tirelessly against the racial inequality in South Africa despite 30 years of imprisonment; Gloria Steinem advocating for women's liberation movement; Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist, who was shot in head by the Taliban continuing to advocate for women's education; Marsha P. Johnson, a pivotal figure for the LGBTQ rights and the Stonewall riots of 1969 played a crucial role in the acceptance of transgender individuals and homeless LGBTQ+ youth effected by HIV and AIDS; and many other extraordinary individuals whose contribution helped to shape the cultural, political, economic and social structure of the world.

The Scarcity

There is a need for contemporary leaders with a vision to implement social changes, and the role of the common people is equally important in shaping public opinion. In the turbulent landscape, when the stakes are high, there exists a scarcity of fearless voices who can - lead revolutions, confront misinformation, demand justice, question the status quo, mobilize protests, fight discrimination within the bounds of their family, friends, and communities, educate and lead conversations in classrooms, advocate for truthful media reporting, dominate social media narratives, and support and build strong institutions paving justice. This imperative is undoubtedly required to be supported by a robust judicial system, dismantling oppressive governments, and systemic changes in the societal and political structure. The path to victory might not be smooth, yet it is ordinary individuals who show extraordinary courage, kindness, and resilience to bring transformative changes. It is in the collective actions that the seeds to discourse are nurtured, ultimately shaping the course of the present and future. In an Indian context, instances of transformation can look like – not segregating utensils for Dalits in their households, support inter-caste and inter-religion marriages, abstain from laughing at sexist WhatsApp jokes, question the usage of derogatory words towards LGBTQ+ people, leading to understanding how these micro actions pave way for a more compassionate society.

What can we do?

How do we confront the glaring scarcity of such fearless voice? How do we ensure advocates rise to speak up? How do we take measures to break through the barriers suppressing dissent and promoting the culture of silence? How do we activate the conscience of the ordinary people? How do we make an environment that encourages voicing opinions? To address this dire scarcity and to make the world fairer and inclusive, a myriad of solutions need to be embraced but there are some solutions to address the same as discussed in the following paragraphs.

Fostering Empathy Education

It is essential that empathy is imbedded in the educational system, along with critical thinking skills into the curriculum. Such foundation is required from an early age and it can be achieved through empathy workshops and training – for educators, students, and parents to understand respect different perspectives and people from diverse cultural backgrounds. There should be a diverse representation in teaching material and contributions of marginalized communities should be highlighted; community engagement projects pushing people to interact with different sections should be made necessary;

evaluation metrics for empathy should be a part of assessment processes; all of this normalizing empathetic approach from a very young age.

Empowering Grassroots Movements

Grassroot movements have the power to bring huge social transformation. There should be mechanisms to highlight these initiatives by collaborating with local leaders and NGOs. These causes should receive financial support, legal support, governmental support, access to technology and training programs to build capacity of individuals engaged in these movements. Their efforts should be highlighted by the media – both journalism and through social media; recognize and give awards to celebrate achievements of these leaders and initiatives.

Study of history and critical thinking skills

The study of history becomes very important so that people are aware about why are we at the present state of any underlying situation. In context of India, it is important that children are taught how the caste system came into place and how it has continued to take thousands of lives till date, how the Hindu and Muslim rivalry begin and why is it still existing? Who is benefiting from this and how are discourse planted in ordinary people's minds? The contribution of women in all facets of history and the statistics and reality of gruesome crimes like dowry deaths and gang rapes, and underrepresentation in education and politics, with issues such as unequal pay.

The role of institutions like judiciary system, media houses, political parties

And no matter whatever other things are done, the role of these institutions is always going to be the most important – judiciary should be free of bias and empower sections of societies. Media needs to be truthful and courageous even in the face of fascist government. Political parties should have a sole incentive to serve people and not win vote banks for personal gains.

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