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A Call to Understand, Feel, and Act

By: Gita Ramaswamy

Bela Bhatia fervently urges privileged groups to recognise and respond to the struggles of the marginalised. She acknowledges caste's influence, but does not fully confront its pervasive role, instead advocating for a broader, altruistic expansion of democracy.

This is a big book, and its hardcover adds to its weight. As you flip it open and read the endorsements from some of the most brilliant observers of Indian democracy, you wonder if it needs a review at all. It seems the endorsers have said it all in glowing terms.

I write this review not just because Bela Bhatia's book deserves greater recognition—despite its formidable length—but because it carries the weight of lived experience and deep empathy. What are the fault lines of India's democracy? Where have its rulers and intellectuals failed the people? Many insightful books—M. Rajshekhar's *Despite the State*, Parakala Prabhakar's *The Crooked Timber of New India*, Subhashish Bhadra's *Caged Tiger*, Josy Joseph's *The Silent Coup*, and others—have meticulously documented how and why India lets its citizens down. These books lay bare the grim realities of realpolitik, offering a sharp understanding of systemic failures.

But how do we set things right? This is where Bela's work stands apart. Her book does not simply dissect the failures—it brings us face-to-face with their human cost and, more importantly, the courage of those who resist. Change does not always start in the mind; the mind rationalises, finds comfort in familiar patterns, and moves on. Real transformation begins in the heart—the heart that refuses complacency, that compels a person to step out of their comfort zone and act.

Bela's book does not just inform; it stirs, provokes, and inspires. It challenges you not just to understand the injustice but to feel it—and perhaps, to do something about it. Tender, moving, involved—Bela writes as possibly only a woman can. “For those of us who think from their hearts, feelings say it all,” she writes.

Bela's book takes readers on a harrowing yet essential journey through some of India's most pressing and painful realities. She delves into the brutal massacre of Dalits in Bathe, the struggles of Delhi's slum dwellers (a section that leaves you wanting more), 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—the last is one of the book's most profoundly moving chapters, and speaks tellingly of the failure of the Indian state.

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Even an issue as seemingly mundane as water scarcity in Gujarat is brought to life with such depth and empathy that you hang onto every word. Bela's call for public ownership of bore wells is not just a policy suggestion but a plea for justice in a country where water remains a privilege for some and a struggle for many. Throughout the book, the voices of the affected—likely transcribed from recorded interviews—cut through the narrative, making it not just a report on suffering but a living, breathing testament to resilience and injustice.

Bela's book offers deeply moving accounts of the violence in Gujarat, particularly in Sabarkantha, where she previously worked, and the harrowing plight of Muslim refugees. She does not shy away from addressing the difficult question of Dalit and Adivasi participation in the violence—a topic that often sparks controversy.

Does their involvement imply they lack agency? Or does it demand a deeper examination of the caste system and its relentless grip on those at the bottom of the hierarchy too? A more nuanced exploration of this aspect would have added further depth. There is another hard truth—that some Muslim traders, wielding economic power, had historically been oppressive toward Dalits and Adivasis, fuelling tensions that played a role in the violence.

Bihar and Bastar take centre stage in the book, accounting for nearly half its content. The Bihar chapters, in particular, stand out, filling a crucial gap in the sparse literature on the Bihar Maoist-Leninist (ML) movement. The level of detail is astonishing, offering

rare insights into the movement’s history. For a reader unfamiliar with the many ML factions—often a bewildering mix of acronyms—Bela’s detailed map serves as a much-needed guide, bringing clarity to a complex and often misunderstood struggle.

An interesting essay on violence presents a well-defined argument. The author acknowledges the complexities and ethical dilemmas surrounding organised violence against authority but does not entirely dismiss it as a viable alternative. She explores the ways in which violence has historically been used as a means of resistance while also considering its implications for movements seeking justice and systemic change.

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In a world where states have become increasingly militarised, equipped with advanced surveillance systems, and reliant on cutting-edge technology to maintain control, movements for social and political transformation face significant challenges. Given this reality, the question arises—how can these movements develop internal democratic structures that not only foster participation and inclusivity but also effectively counterbalance the overwhelming power of the state? The essay invites reflection on the strategies that movements must adopt to navigate these complexities, balancing the need for resistance with the principles of democracy and collective decision-making.

Bela’s book is a master class in combining meticulous scholarship with accessible, engaging prose. Academics, in particular, would do well to learn from her ability to distil complex issues—violence, justice, and the philosophy of life—into language that resonates with a wider audience. It is rare to find someone who, despite earning a doctorate from Cambridge, has remained deeply rooted in the struggles of ordinary people, dedicating her life to telling their stories.

This book is more than just a compelling read—it is an invitation. For young people from privileged backgrounds, it offers a window into an India they might otherwise never encounter. For scholars and general readers alike, it serves as a reliable and deeply authentic account of some of the country’s most pressing issues.

Though many of these articles were written more than 15 years ago, they feel as fresh and urgent as ever, shedding new light on problems that have only intensified with time. The fault lines Bela traced decades ago—through her journeys across India’s most conflict-ridden regions—remain painfully intact, making her insights all the more necessary today.

There are some questions that I would like to have had addressed.

In the Bihar accounts, Bela highlights a chilling reality—the Ranveer Sena’s targeted killings of Dalits were only possible with insider information. In the dead of night, identifying specific homes would have been nearly impossible without informers from within the community. This unsettling dynamic reappeared later in Andhra Pradesh, where state repression of Naxalites evolved beyond brute force. Instead of indiscriminate violence—beating villagers, ransacking homes, and instilling terror—the police relied on precise intelligence from informers embedded within the Maoist-Leninist movement. Armed with superior technology and insider knowledge, they could strike surgically, identifying where cadres were hiding, and eliminating them.

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These patterns raise critical questions about resistance movements in today’s India. How do they truly understand and protect their own people? How can they build systems that address every facet of the vulnerable lives they seek to uplift? And, most crucially, how do they cultivate trust and compassion while guarding against the ever-present threat of betrayal? Revisiting these questions is essential to grasp the shifting nature of power, resistance, and survival in contemporary India.

Bela’s book focuses primarily on the margins of North India and Bastar, which is technically in central India but shares deep socio-political ties with the North. In contrast, the South has seen widespread reform movements that have dismantled caste untouchability in its most brutal forms and significantly reduced bonded labour. Economic shifts have also created more opportunities for unskilled employment than existed two decades ago.

As a result, the South has become a major destination for migrant labourers from Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, leading to a starkly one-sided pattern of migration. This imbalance raises pressing questions about the nature of India’s north. What

does it mean when entire regions serve primarily as labour reserves for others? How does this affect the country’s economic and social fabric?

Bela’s book makes a strong appeal to the libertarian gentry, urging them to recognise and respond to the struggles of the marginalised. While she acknowledges caste as a factor in the conflicts she investigates, she stops short of fully confronting its overarching role in shaping India’s social and political landscape. Instead, the book leans on an altruistic call for the expansion of democracy. But can true democracy exist in a society where caste continues to dictate power, privilege, and opportunity?

Reliance on altruism is also fraught with challenges. At a time when thousands of educated and skilled individuals from marginalised backgrounds are seeking personal advancement, often breaking away from traditional community ties, appeals to collective empathy become increasingly complex. When individual aspirations overshadow shared struggles, how can movements for justice sustain themselves? Without directly addressing caste as the foundational structure of inequality, the vision of democracy remains incomplete—an ideal that struggles to take root in a society still bound by rigid hierarchies.

Gita Ramaswamy is best known for her work with Hyderabad Book Trust that has published over four hundred and fifty titles in Telugu since 1980. She has authored several books in English and translated extensively from Telugu into English; most recently her memoirs Land Guns Caste Woman: The Memoir of a Lapsed Revolutionary.