

WE are Indians
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As I sat in the car hoping to recall and remember certain duties that were must-dos for the day to come, my eyes in its usual wandering gaze caught a scene outside. The light had turned red – would be for a few good seconds to come- and there they were. Little, square flags of our nation – India, one of the largest democracies in the world- being sold on the street. Monday is January 26, 2009 – the day we celebrate as the Republic Day, every year. The day when the Constitution of our country was drafted 61 years ago, a dream of a secular, democratic country – a dream of a country, which would be ‘for the people, of the people, by the people.’

It is amazing how these flags bestow in us a quiet pride – the feeling is almost instantaneous. But that feeling went dead, the minute my eyes witnessed the hands that held them. It was sudden, bitter, remarkably contradictory to the point of being rudely ironical. Yes, the hands belonged to those whom we refer to as beggars- ‘bhikaaris’. Black, wrinkled, unwashed hands, with nails devoid of care, with rims of dirt outlining its ends. Clad in ragged shreds of colours, black and red amongst others, going from one car window to the other- men, women, children, young and old. No, they do not mix up refusals with a hurt to their sense of self respect. They don’t own it - they can’t, I mean.

Sometimes a father would buy 2 flags for his child sitting at the back of the car – secured, safe. It is a little want, that can be met. And affordable. The difference is taut. The only similarity being that the hands that sell are that of a child, and those that take, are also of a child. That remains disregarded– naturally!

I saw it, I’ve seen it before - I still see it vivid as I write this piece. My pen doesn’t cease to etch the scene as it was. And questions run hither and thither in my mind – betraying my talent at calmness.

India is independent. We’ve been to the moon and back. WE have earned many laurels, have been lauded with titles galore. WE are a democracy. WE go out on candle light vigils against inept politicians when thousands of innocent lives are lost in the hands of gruesome terrorist attacks. WE are responsible citizens. WE think of global warming- and carve out ways and means by which this earth can stay clean and green. These, amongst the innumerable other things, are positive things that we have achieved so far. WE are proud to be part of this immense country, whose identity is as unique, as unified, as it is diverse. We attach an assurance to it. Such a comfort it is, to be able to spell our own names, to call ourselves Indians?

But what of ‘them’? These people on the streets, who sell the flags, each priced at Rs 5 or Rs 10? Do they do it because they love India? Do they do it because they know what Republic Day stands for? Is it their attempt to glorify the future prospects of a nation? Or is it just to earn a day’s or half-a-day’s meal to be eaten in ‘thaalis’ – if they can be called that? How much will they earn? For each day it is going to be the same. Isn’t it? Today they have the flags – tomorrow they will return with little, crooked, scratched and stained

tin bowls which they will hold in these same hands. A sick child, its gory wounds bandaged, may also act as a substitute, or an empty plastic bottle, where there should have been milk... Yes, they shall return, with faces that will desperately be seeking the sympathy of the 'able givers.'

Some would choose to ignore; others will appreciate them for the intelligent choice they made of not bringing down their car glass windows. A few others will consider. For a few others, the clink of a Rs 2 coin will mean an assurance of God's blessings, or otherwise- oh! What a sin!

When one dies- one is beyond possibilities, beyond purpose. Can the same not be said of these people? Does our ignorant, unspoken lack of commitment adorn them with any identity? Even if we give – does that become a boon for the better? Is not their future obscure – beyond a chance- lost beyond the possibilities of being found?

No, I do not sympathise with them. I do not pity them. I only feel that somewhere, the prettification of our country, is somewhat blighted with this living truth. I feel like reproaching. But who do I reproach? I do not know.

January 26 is the Republic Day. A day of speeches, parades and a reckoner for a grand future that is to be India. But where do we go from here? Where do 'they' go from here? Or is finding it, too much of a task – best left undone?

More importantly, I ask myself, what do I do? What do I think? Do I, in not buying a flag, lessen the sanctity of the Republic Day, a day so important in a country's life? Or in this denial, in my full consciousness, I deny one a chance to earn a better day in his or her life? No matter how anesthetized they are of the arrogant paucity of responses. I ask - where do 'I' go from here? From work to home- to a nice bed, after a full meal – to the world of my dreams - habitual, consistent and perhaps never changing? It is my right to happiness, isn't it? And why not? And I say, so be it. Safe and selfish – prudence, I call it. Who am I? I ask. I am an Indian. 'I' am a human being. But, am I?