

Amita Kanekar's new book 'Fear of Lions' focuses on a little known peasant rebellion known as the Satnami Revolt of 1672 that shook the mighty Mughal Empire during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb. She gives NT BUZZ a further insight

CHRISTINE MACHADO | NT BUZZ

Q. What made you choose the Satnami Revolt as the focus for your new book?

I wanted to write about social revolutions, or attempted social revolutions. And professor Irfan Habib mentioned in one of his books that this peasant rebellion of 1672 was one of the few overtly anti-caste movements that South Asia has seen. So, given that caste is the root evil at the heart of most of South Asia's problems, it seemed an interesting topic, also because few people know about it.

Q. You've mentioned that the experience of writing this book was very different from your first, mainly because there are far more historical records and sureties for the background of the Mughal period.

Although there is almost too much material on Mughal Hindustan - in the sense that new research is constantly being published, forcing you to revise your ideas - there is very little on the peasant rebellion of 1672 and the small but radical new society created by the rebels. So, while I had no problem with the context of Mughal society, my picture of the society of the rebels is based a few brief mentions in contemporary accounts - the veracity of which is discussed in the novel - and on a 19th century document which is believed to be of the same peasant community, found in the British Library and translated by Irfan Habib.

Q. One of the tasks when writing about history is to properly verify the source content so as to be able to differentiate it from rumour. How do you go about this?

My book is based on secondary sources and modern translations of Mughal-era accounts. One has to go for sources with credibility, which would mean respected international scholars in the field of history. As you say, the versions of history that get circulated widely are often just rumour, or, even worse, Brahmanical myth and prejudice. And the problem with a lot of so-called historical fiction in India is that it just repeats these myths and prejudices, basing itself on Brahmanical narratives rather than historical research. This effectively - deliberately or otherwise - bolsters casteist and conservative viewpoints, and today's politics.

Q. What are some other oft-neglected movements in India that you believe deserve more prominence today?

Well, the one that I am hoping to work on next is the religious conversions of Portuguese Goa, a movement towards social and spiritual liberation for many communities here.



#Press: Amita Kanekar interviewed by the Navhind Times

Q. Although you are writing about old revolutions, how, in your opinion are the learnings from these incidents of importance even today?

Because the past is not over, it informs everything we do. Our view of our past builds our present identity, our sense of self, which is why it is very important for politics. And in India, whether in fiction or school textbooks or movies, the stories of the past are mostly all from the dominant caste point of view, and centred around the dominant castes, ignoring the lives, and histories and struggles of everybody else. Such a view of the past strengthens the continued dominance of these castes even today, while dismissing others as worthless. These myths uphold the existing social hierarchies, and glorify existing privilege as natural, ancient, god-given, or whatever. But there are alternative historical views, from the Ambedkarite movement, the Pasmada movement, and other sections and individuals of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi society, which expose the privileged classes and tell the histories of the common people. These are growing, and their effect is to strengthen the struggle for social liberation and equality.

But I myself belong to the privileged sections of society, and certainly can't claim to speak for anyone else. So the novel does not aim to tell the story of the radicals, but that of the elites who faced these radicals, fought them, and tried to destroy first them and then their memories.

Q. What are some things you learned about book writing and publishing from the first book that helped you this time around?

The only thing that helped, I think, is that I was taken a bit seriously by the publishing world because I had a novel to my name. (The first time, when I didn't have anything to my name, I still managed to get an opening because I had a friend in the publishing world. Friends, relatives, background, contacts, nepotism... That's how Brahmanical society works and I benefit as much as any member of the privileged castes. It would be a different story if I had a different background.) The writing part, though, was as difficult as before.

Q. You began writing novels also as a way of getting your students interested in these historical events. Do you believe that there is enough interest in history among the younger generation today?

I can't say that they are not interested, though many are put off by the unending dates and names which is how history is often taught. The real problem, though, is what I've spoken

about above, that there is little real history available for popular consumption in India.

Everybody is a victim of the Brahmanical myths that are widespread in the name of history - like seeing the entire 500-year-old history of the Portuguese Goa as just the Inquisition, and completely ignoring the fact that the arrival of the Portuguese brought in modernity to South Asia. The dominance of the myth is the reason why politicians can speak nonsense about the ancient past and get away with it. My first novel, A Spoke in the Wheel, was in fact an attempt to take apart myths about the ancient past, or to separate the myth from the history.

Q. You've revealed that while working on your first book, your opinions about the historical events changed. Did this happen this time as well?

I've learned a lot of history while writing both books, especially about caste and anti-caste struggles. I have to thank a lot of scholars for this, including members of The Al-Zulajj Collective in Goa, the writers and editors of the web portal Round Table India, and members of the Pasmada movement. For example, I was completely ignorant about how Brahmanical the Mughal elites were. The Emperor Akbar is famous as an icon of secularism because of his interest in Hinduism and Christianity, but nobody mentions how he upheld caste privilege, something that was followed by all his heirs, including Aurangzeb, popularly seen as a fanatic Muslim. But it is also true that Mughal society (and the Delhi Sultanate earlier) was less Brahmanical than, for example, the Rajput kingdoms that followed. This is why you had many radical ideas and movements, and also communities being born in the time of the Sultans and the Mughals, who managed to survive long enough to leave their mark on the historical record. Like Kabir, Ravidas, the Sikhs, etc.

('Fear of Lions' will be released today at 4:30 p.m. at The Dogears Bookshop, Margao.)



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