

Hope and Survival of Subalterns in Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*

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In Postcolonial literature, subaltern concerns have been quite aptly portrayed in some of the recent Indian English fiction with reference to those groups that have been subordinated in manifold ways. Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* purports that norms are established by those in power and imposed on the 'Other' who has had no voice because of race, class, or gender. This paper presents the subaltern community living in the slums in the midst of murder, thieving, extortion, communal conflict, prostitution, and beggary and mafia rivalry.

Vikas Swarup is an Indian writer and diplomat who served as official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs of India. He is best known as the author of the novel *Q & A*, made into a film called *Slumdog Millionaire*, the winner of Best Film for the year 2009 at the Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards and BAFTA Awards.

Before speaking about the slum-subaltern, question arises what a slum actually is. A slum may be defined as an urban area heavily populated by poor and usually disparate group of strangers living substandard housing and filth. Such people live in a state of constant migration, face problems due to unhygienic conditions, leading to outbreak of diseases. They live in constant poverty, and are easily prone to crime and evil practices. A slum-subaltern or 'Slum household' is described as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area lacking durable housing, sufficient living area, secure tenure and access to clean

water and sanitation. Danial Howden speaks about the existence of slums:

Segregated slums for the poor are an aftermath of Industrial Revolution, today one-in-three of all city dwellers live in slums. Over 90 per cent of this underclass is in the developing world, with South Asia having the largest share, followed by eastern Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. (1)

Dharavi is the biggest slum area in Maharashtra (India) and stands at number one position in Asia. But whatever the position given to slum, slum-household and slum-subaltern they also are giving a rosy picture of developing India because of potential human resources availability while many consider, slum and slum area, no more than a dreaded place full of beggars and criminals. According to Echanove, slums are not known for their criminal activities alone but they have some positive aspects as well which directly or indirectly contributed to the economy of the country. He opines:

The slums bustle with commercial arteries and form a lively part of an incredibly industrious city. People have been very creative in setting up a highly functional recycling industry. Dharavi's resourcefulness has been proven in the past 60 years of its growth from a small village in the marshlands to become a million-dollar economic miracle. It has been built by immigrants fleeing rural poverty, political oppression and natural

disasters. Its economic success is an inspiration in the midst of global depression.(1)

In *Q & A*, Swarup's portrayal of his protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas from a slum background, defines forcefully the concept of the slum- subaltern. It is a case in point to prove that slums are no more a threat to growing global poverty, but an asset to economic growth if given strategic direction. And this is amply proved by the fact that Ram Mohammad Thomas wins a billion rupee quiz brain game. This is a proof of the resilient spirit of the slum-kids, who are intelligent and earnest in whatever they do.

Ram, the first-person narrator of *Q & A* conveys genuine anger and frustration. He has a first hand knowledge of the slums and slum life because he happens to be a slum dweller. He tells the reader, "I live in a corner of Mumbai called Dharavi, in a cramped hundred-square-foot shack that has no natural light or ventilation, with a corrugated metal sheet serving as the roof" (133).

The novel reveals that social inequality and injustice keep widening the poor-rich divide in society, leading to escalation of violence, crime and evils of all kind. It is an undeniable fact of life that in a society like India which is at present, gradually moving towards the capitalist system, money plays a vital role and in fact, it becomes the be-all and end-all of life. Those who are affluent flourish in such systems while the poor are deprived. The novel focuses on the deprived section of society and becomes an in depth and riveting tale about the less fortunate people of India. When the narrator, Ram Mohammad Thomas is arrested he explains:

"My departure from Asia's biggest slum would make no difference to their lives. There would

be the same queue for water in the morning, the same daily struggle to make it to the seven-thirty local in time. They wouldn't even bother to find out the reason for my arrest. Come to think of it, when the two constables barged into my hut, even I didn't. When your whole existence is 'illegal,' when you live on the brink of penury in an urban wasteland where you jostle for every inch of space and have to queue even for a shit, arrest has certain inevitability about it. You are conditioned to believe that one day there will be a warrant with your name on it, that eventually a jeep with a flashing red light will come for you" (2).

The same situation obtained in Mulk Raj Anand, one of the founding fathers of Indo-Anglian literature, who has portrayed the condition of the outcaste's colony in pre-independence India, in his classic novel *Untouchable*. Anand exhibits the dismal surroundings of the colony:

A group of mud walled houses that clustered together in two rows under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leatherworkers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, [...], now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up[...]and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides[...]And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the

outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in. (1)

On comparing the picture of Pre- and Post-independence India there is virtually no visible change or difference in the living standard of the subalterns. However, in *Q & A*, unlike *Untouchable*, Swarup has presented the slum where one is not designated by caste but by poverty. Ram reveals the miserable condition of the downtrodden—they are completely ostracized from society. Like in the days of yore when the Hindu Caste System was rampant, they have truly become pariahs who are assumed to participate in at least one felony in their lifetime. It exposes the effects of poverty. Poverty is a great stigma on the poor. They are not counted subaltern on the basis of caste, creed, color etc. as per the designation given by Hindu caste system. But here everybody is counted subaltern who money wise is not very 'strong'. George remarks:

If caste system is cruel enough to create untouchables among human beings, class system is no less cruel to humanity as it makes the rich, richer and the poor, poorer. It turns the poorest one in society a mere "brother to an ox". It segregates and enslaves thousands of people into endless misery and eventual extirpation. Class system is a greater evil than caste system. This is obvious from the fact that the rich low-caste is better placed in society than the poor high-caste. The caste victims can at least draw sympathy and support from members of their own caste whereas the class victims have no such consolation and have to suffer perpetual deprivation. (51)

The rawness of Ram's tone presents the facts. Ram portrays the monotony of day-to-day

life of poor people. Hence, we get a sense of pathos and justice as we realize that these horrors heaped on the poor have become a natural, necessary part of living in the slums.

The prologue underlines the plight of the subaltern. The narrator protagonist, Ram, narrates in matter-of-fact prose: "I have been arrested, for winning a quiz show. They came for me late last night, when even the stray dogs had gone off to sleep. They broke open my door, handcuffed me and marched me off to the waiting jeep with a flashing red light. There was no hue and cry. Not one resident stirred from his hut. Only the old owl on the tamarind tree hooted at my arrest" (11).

It is a commonplace of our society that police often falsely implicates slum dwellers in criminal cases. The show organizer is scandalized and cannot digest the fact that an uneducated slum dweller has won the brain game quiz. Show organizer to prove himself right, he seeks the favour of the Police commissioner and remarks: "I want your help to prove that Thomas cheated on the show. That he couldn't have known the answer to all twelve questions without an accomplice. Just think. He's never been to school. He's never even read a newspaper. There's no way he could have won the top prize" (18).

The show organizer is a 'colonizer' of sort and cannot digest the fact, how an uneducated, poor uncivilized person can win an intellectual game. But here Ram Thomas Mohammad proves that even an uneducated slum-kid could show his worth and succeed in life since knowledge is not the monopoly of the educated elite. This notion is the reminiscent of the story of Karan, a legendary fighter in the great Hindu Epic Mahabharata, and Eklavya, an outcast subaltern. They were restrained from getting education from

Dronacharya, the guru of the privileged Pandvas and Kauravas. However, their self-tutoring was able to change their life from state of subjugation to liberation. It is a mistaken belief that the subaltern as the unrepresented group of the people in the society, or people of inferior race or low caste are not fit for making any real contribution to the society and therefore they lose the right to speak. But in reality, in the present day scenario, the subaltern can speak though others do not have the patience to listen to them. This becomes evident when Ram Mohammad Thomas remarks: "Well madam, we poor can also ask questions and demand answers. And I bet you, if the poor conducted a quiz, the rich wouldn't be able to answer a single question. I don't know the currency of France, but I can tell you how much money Shalini Tai owes our neighborhood moneylender. I don't know who was the first man on the moon, but I can tell you who was the first man to produce illegal DVDs in Dharavi. Could you answer these questions in my quiz?" (29).

Ram Mohammad Thomas's situation may be compare with that of Karana, who is capable but ultimately he is Suta Putra. Being healthy and energetic in village he could be judged as an outstanding boy from far in his childhood. For getting education when Karana went to Dronacharya, he was simply ignored because he does not belong to the royalty. He felt aghast. To console Karana Adhiratha his caretaker father replied:

My dear son during your education you will surely study scriptures and find out for yourself that they don't sanction any kind of discrimination. These divisions are all man made and tools used by those people who

wield power to subjugate those who are weak and less fortunate. Let me assure you, my son, being a Suta is not a crime. We earn our living by fair means and struggle hard to make both ends meet. Be assured there is no dishonor involved in all this, but you and I are not in a position to change the system. My advice to you is that you can earn recognition by hard work and dedication and outshine everyone by your superior capabilities. For that you have to work very hard and convert your anger into the will to overcome the handicap of discrimination. I am sure one day you would achieve such heights as are aspired for only by the best of men. (*Zutushi, 69*)

Education or self-analyzed experience can led a person to achieve extra ordinary height. The great Hindi writer of the fame of *Joothan (1997)* Om Prakash Valmiki, an untouchable subaltern, transform his life by means of education. Valmiki aspires for education and knows that education is the only window through which one can escape from the mire of untouchability and caste based hate and eventually his personal success in education is viewed as a success of the entire 'Chuhra' community to which he belongs. The powerful tool of education gave him the courage to refuse to crawl backwards with a broom as his ancestors have had to do literally in the past. But in spite of the many successes, he realized that education could erase the boundaries fixed by caste 'only to an extent.' His academic skills and technical expertise often failed to grant him immunity from victimization in a casteist society. He says, as long as "people don't know that you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes" (134).

Education plays an integral part in the development of a country and it is regarded as a fundamental right of the people. No one can dispute that denial of education based on caste or any form of caste-ism is a serious violation of human rights. And in the Indian context, it is a flagrant violation of the Constitutional guarantee of equality. But in practical terms, the violation of this declaration has been clearly seen in matters concerning dalits. Very often, dalits are excluded from the field of education because of the hegemonic class' impression that they are destined to do menial jobs. Valmiki ruminates over the grievous episodes of his school days and unfolds them in his autobiographical novel *Joothan*. In school he was prohibited from sitting along with his upper class/caste companions. He was forced to sit on the dirty ground aloof from the upper class/caste lads. In another episode, he talks of being dragged out of his studies by a high caste landlord to do unpaid labour. He was also excluded from extra-curricular in the academy. He writes: "I was kept out of extra-curricular activities in school. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door" (16).

When at school, Valmiky was not allowed to attend the class most of the times by his teacher which is a kind of irony that even after being in the temple of education, he is deprived of education: "I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brother.... The second day, as soon as I reached school, Headmaster again put me to sweeping the

school. I swept the whole day. I was consoling myself that I will go back to the class from tomorrow"(5).

The life experiences the quiz winner Ram Mohammad Thomas can be compared with those of the legendary king Karana and the writer Om Prakash Valmiki. All these three are the true representatives of the subaltern class. They all earn and establish their identity by means of their self-experience. Vikas Swarup wants to prove how even an uneducated slum-kid could show his worth and succeed in life since knowledge is not the monopoly of the educated elite. Through a series of episodes the novelist tells the story of modern India through a quiz programmer. In an interview Swarup says:

I read a newspaper report that street children in India have begun using the mobile Net facility. That gave me an idea. They had intuitively understood technology. You normally don't expect street children to surf the World Wide Web. We think they are uneducated people who do not go to schools. How can they think about the Internet? Here it was a reality. I thought why not unlettered people have appeared on a quiz show, where difficult questions are asked and through his real-life experiences he answers them all. (*The Rediff Interview*)

Ram Mohammad Thomas recollects how he had fallen into a trap by overstepping his limits by taking part in a Quiz programme meant for the educated lot:

There are those who will say that I brought this upon myself. By dabbling in that quiz show, they will wag a finger at me and remind me of what the elders in Dharavi say about never crossing the dividing line that separates the rich from the poor. After all, what business did a penniless

waiter have to be participating in a brain Quiz? The brain is not an organ we are authorized to use. We are supposed to use only our hands and legs. (12)

He comes to the realization that the trap was laid by the organizers conniving with the police to continue the TV gimmick. Once again a quiz is organized in the precinct of jail to test the level of his intelligence. Police grill Ram Mohammad Thomas with a barrage of questions, he answers them all wrong. But the Commissioner of Police is more practical by suggesting to the organizers to pay Ram Mohammad Thomas some money and force him to withdraw from the quiz. After several hours of torture with different instruments, Ram is told to sign a confessional statement:

I, Ram Mohammad Thomas, do hereby state that on 10 July I was a participant in the quiz show Who Will Win A Billion? I confess that I cheated. I did not know the answers to all the questions. I hereby withdraw my claim to the top prize or any other prize. I beg forgiveness. I am making this statement in full control of my senses and without any undue pressure from anyone. Signed: Ram Mohammad Thomas. (24-25)

Once again an innocent was proved wrong by the colonizer. He confesses to the crime which was not done by him. In police custody, Ram is tortured through different inhuman methods to get a forced confession that he cheated at the show. The Inspector of police suspects that he has been wired up with some network to get the right answers. He cannot come to believe that a Slumdog without any formal education can answer questions which Professors, Lawyers, Doctors, General Knowledge Wallahs never answer. The

subalterns are/were made to believe that they belonged to an inferior race and so not fit for making any real contribution to the society. The colonial settler always emerged as champions of the superior race. Such type of comparisons subjugated the will and aspirations of the subalterns.

In the novel, Ram's ordeal ends as a young woman lawyer named Smita Shah comes to his rescue. The rest of the story is recounted through his confession to the lawyer built around thirteen questions of the quiz show. It is to be noted that every question Ram answers has its history of episodes connected to various stages of his life. Through his life story from childhood to adulthood, he narrates and brings into prominence the life stories of the females, the children and, of course, his own, and tells us how all these subalterns can carve their life from subjugation to liberation. Through the stories of the females, the children as well as his own, also exposes the dark and seamy side of Indian society.

Ram is like a picaresque hero who moves from one place to another, coming in contact with people from different strata of society. Given his background, his itinerary largely taken him thorough the underbelly of urban India where he comes in contact with petty criminals, pariahs, pimps, prostitutes, gangsters, dacoits, and so on. But because his heart is always in the right place and because the core of his personality is informed by childlike innocence, honesty and empathy coupled with a streak of divine idiocy, he faces no difficulty in jostling shoulders with people belonging to the 'respectable' upper stratum of society as well.

Ram has had no formal education and yet he succeeds in answering the questions at the Quiz Show. There may be a bit of luck in his success as he himself suggest. But more than luck, it is his humanity, his tendency to reach out to those in distresses or in pain that prompts them to share their experiences with him, thereby augmenting his corpus of knowledge as well as widening his experimental horizon.

It is said that individual transformation leads to social change. In this case however the protagonist grows as a person, develops and feels sympathy, love, care, etc. but still as a social being he is not able to revolt. After winning the Quiz, in retrospect he recalls all the images of his past in sharp contrast to his present. Ram's life course from childhood to his adulthood is crowded with so many incidents which induced anger in him. Expression of anger in silence is best evident in Ram's revolt when the Quiz Show organizer and Police accuse him of cheating to win the Quiz. He burns in anger when innocent Ian, Salim and Gudiya were sexually molested. He burns in anger when Nita, and Neelima Kumari are victimized by the patriarchal society. But he fails to break his silence. And a sense of 'revenge' starts growing in him.

What is revenge? Some definitions and views define it. The Oxford English Dictionary defines revenge as both an act and a desire. In the act of revenge, individuals respond to a wrong by harming the transgressor. Revenge can also refer to the urge to pay back wrongs; thus, a person can have 'revenge in his heart'.

In Ram's life, the idea of revenge crystallized into place when Ram was staying with a famous actress Neelima Kumari. She always has this 'mysterious man' around at all times of the

night. He seems to be a sexual pervert and a sadist and the tell-tale signs of torture are visible on the face and other parts of her body. To Ram this is just unacceptable. That is where Ram decides to get revenge on this mysterious man who is no other than Prem Kumar, the would be Quiz master. It's always in the back of his mind and as he continues through life. Silent anger changes into revenge when Nita was victimized manmade society. Revenge was for innocent Meenakshi who was victimized in the moving train and for Gudiya, her only fault was that she was a girl. His heart was full of revenge for the pathetic condition of the forcibly paralyzed children who were pushed into beggary. Revenge was there in his heart for Ian and Salim who were victimized at the hands of the powerful. Because of the exploitation of the subaltern a kind of revolt and silent anger bought him to the level of revenge. Every experience that Ram goes through leads him to being a contestant on 'Who wants to be a millionaire'. Ram's idea of revenge makes him stronger. It gives him drive and passion to continue through life and survive. Game show winning brings him power, power of money. He himself remarks in the Epilogue of this novel:

I realized a long time ago that dreams have power only over your own mind; but with money you can have power over the mind of others. (359)

By means of self-experience of life Ram changes his life from subjugation to liberation. Ram says: "What I discovered after receiving the payout was that with money I had power even over the police" (359).

Power of money not only changes the life of Ram but it also changes the life of Nita and Salim. Nita got proper surname, Nita Mohammad Thomas. And Salim has landed the role of a

seventeen – year-old college hero in a comedy film directed by Chimpu Dhawan. Ram’s life now moving with hopes like a sticker written on the bumper of his car “my other car is a Ferrari” (360).

It is tempting to speculate about the message that Vikas swarup tries to convey through this novel. Swarup is an administrator and a career diplomat who knows inside out how government schemes work and to what extent government intervention can redeem the situation arising from rampant corruption, pervasive poverty and inhuman exploitation. Through his protagonist narrator, Swarup suggests that solution to these problems has to come from within rather than from without. History tells us that different political arrangements over the past number of centuries have failed to solve these problems. Similarly, social revolutions also have failed. The solution lies, Swarup suggests, in cultivating humanity, treating others more humanely and more selflessly and, above all, in always practicing that basic spiritual tenet which says that the ‘Other’ is the extension of the ‘Self.’ It is a story of the ultimate triumph of hope, virtue and perseverance, an affirmation that in spite of all its contradictions, India will go on.

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