
THE UNJUST PRACTICE OF ARTHA IN *THE WHITE TIGER*

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Abstract : In Indian ethos *artha* (economic values), is one of the major goals of life. It stands for harmony, social justice and growth. In the novel *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga gives a good account of how the practice of *artha* takes place in neo-liberal India. The novel portrays the grim reality of corrupted entrepreneurs, who have economic success stories through murder, bribery etc. It paradoxically presents the practice of socialism and democracy in India. It vividly portrays the exploitation of the poor by the rich with the support of the unjust social and political system. The novel envisages a just distribution of *artha*.

Keywords: *artha*, globalization, socialism, inequality, poor, rich

Artha is one of the goals of life in Indian civilization. *Artha* means goal, worldly objective or wealth and it is one of the oldest words in Indian culture inherited from Eastern Iran (Scharfe, 249). Later it got the meanings of material property, social value and economic value of life, then added among *purusharthas*. *Artha* as a moral value makes the society free from exploitation, as a political value brings political consciousness among the citizens, and as an economic value equips everyone to attain material goals. In short, it stands for harmony, justice and growth. *The White Tiger* gives a good account of how the practice of *artha* takes place in neo-liberal India. It vividly portrays the exploitation of the poor by the rich with the support of the unjust social and political system. The two powerful and apt images used in the novel to convey the big chasm between the rich and poor are 'Big Bellies and the Small Bellies' (WT 64) and the terrific motives of the people are shown by saying: 'And only two destinies: eat—or get eaten up' (WT 64).

Politicians, bureaucrats, and socially privileged groups together oppress the underprivileged group and *The White Tiger* is the cry of the oppressed, which echoes for generations. The lifelong sufferings and hardships of the poor are reflected in their body. 'A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours are different. The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen' (WT 27). Balram, the poor is the hero of the novel and his hardships during his odyssey of life is the story of the novel. He calls the story of his life, 'The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian' (WT 10). Balram begins his life without name. 'She lies in bed and spews blood. She's got no time to name me.' 'And your father?' 'He's a rickshaw-puller, sir. He's got no

time to name me' (WT 13). The underdogs are nameless, meaning they have no identity as Indians. The death of the nameless poor on the road by Pinky also reflects the same. The behaviour of the landlords towards the servant is cruel and there is no professional dignity. 'The rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants' (WT 68). The dogs get better treatment than the servants. In India certain spaces are not opened for the underprivileged who are the children of the street. 'Is There No Space for the Poor in the Malls of New India?' (WT 148). The human being is valued not based on what s/he has but the very Being. But in the consumeristic world, priorities are different.

In today's Indian society everyone is judged by the position he or she occupies in the hierarchical scale. In the past, the caste hierarchy was prescriptive, positioning individuals in the social scale as a consequence of their birth. Today, various additional factors determine one's position in society. What was started in 1947 by the new rulers has caught the imagination of future generations of the powerful as well (GJH Admin, 2011).

When the sole aim of life is to become successful executives, people forget altruism and offer fellow-beings as the sacrificial victims for the goal. In 1947, India awoke to freedom at midnight with the great mission to serve the country, which 'means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty, ignorance, disease and inequality of opportunity' (Nehru, 2013). With this socialistic perspective, India began its journey and the word 'socialist' was incorporated in the preamble of the Indian Constitution by the Forty-second Amendment in 1976.

The novelist paradoxically presents the practice of socialism in India. 'The Great Socialist' is used as an allegory to mean all the corrupted politicians who make great speech about socialism. 'Lohia Universal Free Hospital' stands as a monument of the corruption and hollowness of the government welfare policies. It is written in front of: 'Lohia Universal Free Hospital' proudly inaugurated by The Great Socialist a holy proof that he keeps his promises' (WT 48). Contrary to this inscription, the working condition of the hospital is pathetic. The doctors are appointed on the basis of 'open auction' (WT 49) which may go up to "four hundred thousand rupees' (WT 49) and money goes to 'the great socialist' (WT 49). Balram's father passes away in the very hospital, which is built for the poor, due to the lack of medical treatment. Corruption in economic, social, political, and judiciary leads to injustice against the voiceless. The novel harshly attacks the inequality in economic distribution and becomes a voice to the voiceless.

The welfare of the poor was neglected because of the corrupt democratic system. 'We all live in the world's greatest democracy. What a fucking joke' (WT 170). In the novel, the grave sins of Indian democracy are narrated in its

nakedness. Representation through election is the basis of a democratic country and the voters portrayed in the novel speak about elections as ‘the worst disease’ (WT 98) in the country ‘like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra’ (WT 98) and ‘people make talk and talk about things that they have no say in’ (WT 98). Balram’s father ‘has seen twelve elections—five general, five state, two local’ (WT 100). Balram is an eligible voter (WT 102) like his father. Ironically both of them have not voted or ‘have not seen the inside of a voting booth’ (WT 102). If someone turns to oppose the Great Socialist, the politicians will, ‘hit him and the policeman stamped on his face’ (WT 102) and they ‘made his Benaras that day’ (WT 101). The poor are cheated at the time of election by different promises. Yet Indians ‘entrust the glorious Parliamentary democracy ... That’s the whole tragedy of this country’ (WT 10). There is no system to evaluate the performance of the elected members after their election victory.

The most agonizing part of corruption is that, the police who have to protect the justice of the poor, stand for injustice. The duties of the police are to ‘knock the rickshaw-puller down’ (WT 102), ‘writing slogan on the wall outside the temple’ (WT 35) for ‘THE GREAT SOCIALIST!’, and ‘slap boy’s belly’ (WT 310). They make false charges against people who stand against politicians and ignore the howling of the innocent. “A man on a bicycle getting killed—the police don't even have to register the case. A man on a motorbike getting killed—they would have to register that. A man in a car getting killed—they would have thrown me in jail” (WT 309).

Through the globalization policy of 1991, the practice of artha got a new dimension. Globalization is a hope and a trap. The reforms opened job opportunities, foreign consumer goods, banking facilities, shopping malls, foreign trade, and capital flow. It also helped to increase Indian’s GDP from 5.6 of 1980-91 to 6.4 in 2001, and 2002-07 it was 8.0. At the same time, the growth brought by the liberalization policy could not benefit everyone. Due to the desirable and undesirable consequences of globalization, the gap between the people increased. “A relationship between liberalization, corrupt lifestyles, the criminalization of the poor, growing civil strife including caste “wars,” commercialization of expectations and the resultant cultural disarray and breakdown of civil society is slowly becoming clear” (Kothari, 1997). *The White Tiger* presents Bangalore as the icon of globalization with its light and dark sides. For the poor, Bangalore is like the old wine in new bag. ‘when you come to Bangalore, and stop at a traffic light, some boy will run up to your car and knock on your window,’ (WT 6). Bangalore gives birth to a new brahminic ‘class of people, named entrepreneur’ (WT 319). The novel portrays the grim reality of corrupted entrepreneurs, who have economic success stories through murder, bribery, the unjust police system, and inaccessibility of the poor. To create a just society in the epoch of globalization, India should move away from corruption.

Entrepreneurs turn impossible into possible with the help of corrupted bureaucrats. ‘To break the law of his land—to turn bad news into good news—is the entrepreneur's prerogative’ (WT 58). The narrator ironically reads the inscription in front of Vidhan Soudha: ‘GOVERNMENT WORK IS GOD'S WORK’ (WT 297). There too, corruption prevails and justice is denied to the poor.

Globalization also leads to virtual imperialism. Bangalore stands for new colonizers' capital because bangaloreans work according to their masters' convenience. Now Bangalore becomes ‘A small bit of America in India’ (WT 204). Even in the 21st century, colonization continues in its attractive form. The life's rhythm is determined by the American timing because Indian slaves are working for them. In spite of these trades, globalization may not lead to the real interaction of culture with mutual respect and may not intrude into each other's space.

It is western, particularly, North American culture which is being termed as a global culture. All other cultures are termed 'ethnic', which is a replacement of the term 'native' of the colonial days. The term 'ethnic', like the term 'native', carries a sense of backwardness and something not in keeping with the acceptable trend. Thus, for all practical purposes, 'globalization,' is westernization or, to be more precise, Americanization (Engineer, 94-95).

Today, the sign of the elite class in India is the ability to speak English in its American form not in British form. Mr. Ashok speaks English like Americans, so he is a baked Indian whereas Balram speaks ‘pijja’, maal etc., and failed to answer to some general knowledge so he is a half-baked Indian. Indians send their children to English medium schools. ‘He goes to a good school here in Bangalore—an English school. Now he pronounces English like a rich man's son. He can say "pizza" the way Mr. Ashok said it. (And doesn't he love eating pizza—that nasty stuff?)’ (WT 204). The real attitude of the narrator towards the mimicking of master's life style is: ‘I hate that whole fucking Bangalore attitude’ (WT 46).

One of the major reasons for these inequities is the unequal distribution of *artha*. The government has to play a pivotal role for the welfare of all. For Kautilya “the state or government has a crucial role to play in maintaining the material well-being of the nation and its people” (Kautilya, 13). The novel sets forth the critical failures related to *artha* and tries to reset the priority of values. The early part of the 21st century Indian ethos may be controlled by *artha*. However, according to Indian ethos, *artha* is not the end of human life but liberation is the ultimate aim.

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