

EDITORS
NOTE

This week's SLR is a special feature on journalist and writer Salil Tripathi whose first trip to Bangladesh in 1986 culminated into a book of 375 plus pages, 28 years later. His is a particularly pertinent literary journey to consider on this month. We also welcome Farah Ghuznavi's column, this month preparing the young writer on his/her journey into the wider, writing world. A retrospection, a preparation – a good way to start winding down 2014.

MUNIZE MANZUR

THE MAN WHO MUST BE READ: an interview with Salil Tripathi

SALIL Tripathi is a journalist, writer and human rights advocate. He is the director of the think tank, Institute for Human Rights and Business. He has been a correspondent in India, Singapore and Hong Kong and his work has appeared in several publications, including the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, New Republic, New Yorker, Guardian, India Today and Far Eastern Economic Review. His writing has won a Bastiat Prize and the Citibank Pan Asia Journalism Award. He is also a contributing editor at Mint and Caravan.

His book "The Colonel Who Would Not Repent" was launched at the Hay Festival Dhaka 2014. It recounts how the first victims of Operation Searchlight fell in Dhaka. Salil Tripathi travels the length and breadth of Bangladesh and offers an unforgettable portrayal of a nation whose political history has been punctuated more by tragedy than triumph.

Since the rise of the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India, Salil has warned that it signals a shift away from secular India. In this interview with Naushad Ali Husein, he talks about the trajectory of 'the idea of India', his connection with Bangladesh and the underlying urge that made him write "The Colonel Who Would Not Repent".



You referred to the Modi craze as "the death of an idea called India." What was the idea?

ST: That is being renegotiated now. But that idea was born as one of a secular India that is home for everybody—regardless of their faith, language, caste, political orientation, gender, and so on.

Now you have a party (Bharatiya Janata Party) that has come to power, which has its own view of India, which is a more nationalistic, more Hindu oriented. I don't want to call India a Hindu nation yet, because I don't know the trajectory it will take. Modi's support base is not only made up of Hindus, but also people who are secular, and who are sick of the dynastic politics of India.

But clearly Nehru's idea of a secular India has started taking a retreat. And it had started happening to some extent since 1989, at the end of the Cold War. Economically India's old model of socialism had to change with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as did the foreign policy of non-alignment. That made some people ask, if the old order has changed in terms of economics and foreign policy, then why not look at the way the society is governed and built? Should the society be built on a constitution, or faith?

Do you think this was almost destined to happen, with BJP having been the only large alternative to Congress?

ST: You could argue that the left, or the so-called third front, was always an option. In 1977 a coalition of parties came to power. It happened again in 1989 briefly, then again in 1996. So parties other than Congress and BJP have come into power. The BJP rose since 1998. However, while it has been part of governments in the past, this is the first time the BJP is in power entirely on its own, and doesn't need the support of any of the other parties.

Nehru's idea of India was itself was not without flaws, and drove him to take over all the bits and pieces of India that were independent. Nehru's vision to build bridges and dams uprooted a lot of people.

Nehru's development discourse was very top-down. But there was the development paradigm. He wanted to build dams, rather than airports and stadiums. He wanted to build dams to harness the water, and produce more food and electricity. So he was driven by the need to overcome poverty, and he wanted to use scientific means of doing that. He was irritated that progress was slow. Upon hindsight, perhaps he could have done it in a more consultative way.

I don't know whether the figure that

Arundhati Roy quotes—that 55 million people have been displaced in India for development projects—is true or not. It may have been 55 million or 5 million, and in a sense that number isn't relevant. But the fact that people had been pushed from their homes against their will was wrong. That violated human rights. And I think that acknowledgement needs to be made. But you have to look into the fact that the Nehruvian model had a purpose, which was development oriented.

The part about absorbing other parts of India and making them part of the whole union: Yes, the princely states were smaller parts of the old British India and what became the larger Indian union. But at the same time it wasn't as if the smaller parts wanted to democratically oppose the idea of a unified India and become independent states. The people who wanted to become independent were often unelected, despotic rulers, supported by the British. The larger majority did not necessarily want those rulers.

Consider the Nizam of Hyderabad. Had Nehru overridden a democratic state of Hyderabad which wanted to remain independent, that would have been wrong. But he didn't do that. What Nehru did was to say, look, you are a Nizam, and you are in power because of British patronage. They were in India, and the British had colonized it, and now that their rule is over, this (Hyderabad) is going to be India again. To some extent this argument has validity.

In the states to the east of Bangladesh, the Indian state has struggled for popular support, and resorted to the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, and similar measures, for years. Is that much better than an unelected, autocratic government?

ST: There is no justification for continued use of AFSPA in any part of India. Human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and indeed domestic human rights groups have opposed it. Why, even some retired army officers are opposed to it. The Act contributes to the feeling of alienation and subjugation in the parts of India where it is used, and the sooner India stops using it, the better it is—for the people and for the Indian union.

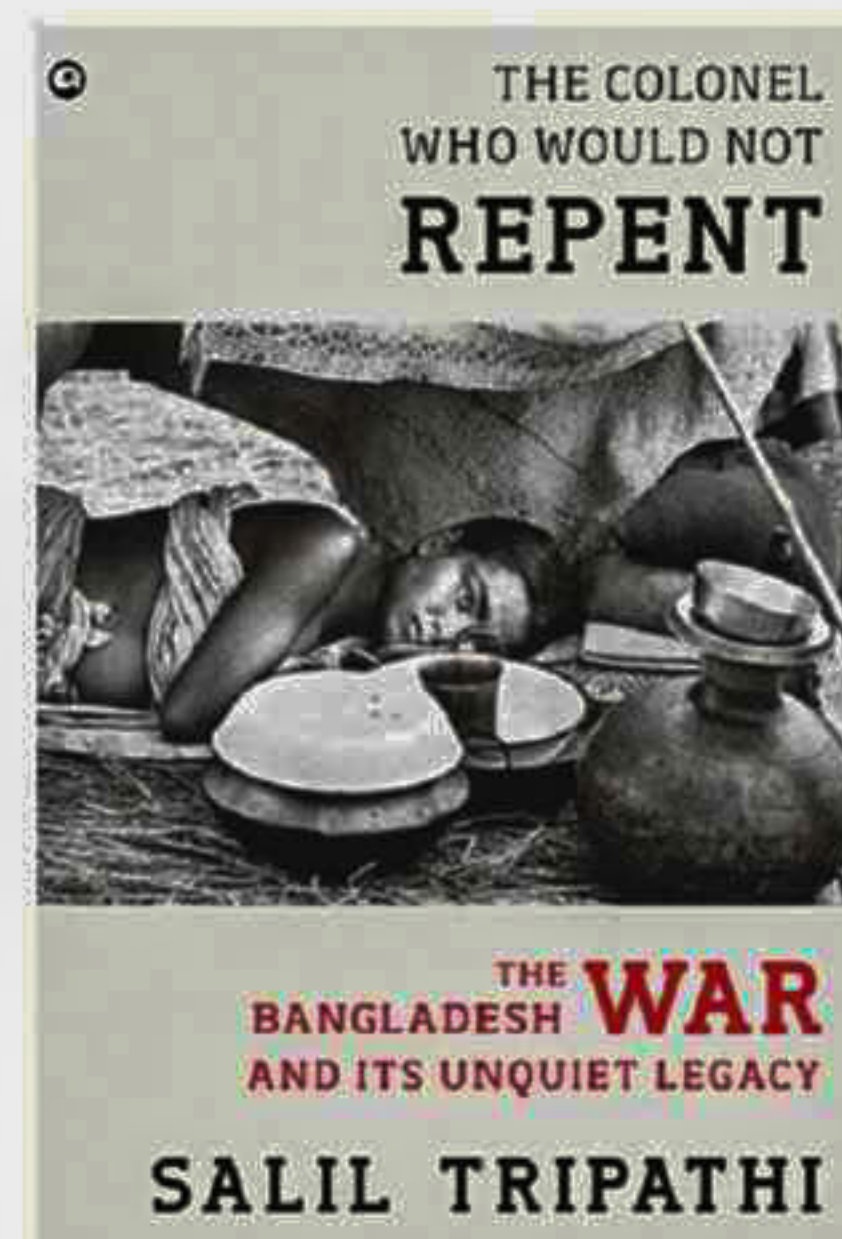
Is the rise in nationalism part of a global trend?

ST: I think there will always be a nationalist narrative produced by the elite. And it will be challenged by others. Those who do the challenging should have the right to present their view.

The state should be magnanimous to let all

viewpoints be heard, because when you let people share their ideas, you have to give them a chance to express any idea—even their foolishness, and that's the way best ideas can win.

For example, you have people like Modi saying completely outlandish things—like there was plastic surgery in the time of Shiva and Ganesh, because how else could Ganesh have an elephant's head? That completely misses the point that it is mythology, and



mythology is not history; it is a story.

But they're introducing these follies in the textbooks. How will children discern myth from history?

ST: That has to be challenged. Romila Thapar (the great Indian historian) has given a great speech saying that it's the job of historians to challenge [prevailing histories]. I have enormous respect for Romila Thapar. But at the same time, during the Congress years there was a blind acceptance of the Soviet and the leftist world-views in the textbooks. You had some pretty outrageous and weird things being said in the past. The textbooks overlooked how many people died in China during the Great Leap Forward. Stalinist purges were not talked about openly. The evils of communism were left out. As a student of history, you should know that the bad guys were not only Hitler and Mussolini. That's a valid criticism of the history books during Congress's time. But it

doesn't mean that you go a full circle and do the exact opposite.

In the 2014 election, Indian voters were faced with a choice between a government that had been ineffective for many years, and the BJP, whose history they might have found repulsive. What does an electorate do in a situation where the options are limited?

ST: You can challenge the narrative that India was doing badly in the last ten years. Yes, in the last three years the economy suffered. But while India's growth rate slowed to around 4 per cent from nearly 8 per cent, the rest of the world was struggling at 1 and 2 per cent. It was not a great performance, but there was still growth. And given that Indian population growth has now come down to about 1.2 per cent a year, the economy had shown real solid growth. Congress simply was unable to tell its story well. And Modi was a great and very effective communicator.

But let's assume that Congress was ineffective and Modi was promising heaven. What does one do? I'm afraid the real answer to that is very long term. It's a T-shirt slogan that Gandhi never said, but it's the kind of thing he would have said—be the change you wish to see.

I give full marks for all those people who stood in elections for the Aam Admi Party. Many of them are really good people. They are anti-nuclear activists, one woman is a banker, a first-class grad from INSEAD and Harvard, a fine actress, a human rights defender, and people like that. The banker (Meera Sanyal) stood from South Bombay. People like her should be in the Parliament. Okay they lost—but maybe after the second, third, fourth try some of these people will start winning.

Do you think Aam Admi Party will survive?

ST: It's very tough to tell. The more it dilutes its message from a specific set of values, to saying that we are not Congress and we are not BJP, the less likely it is to succeed. But if it retains its values about being a party committed to anti-corruption, to free, liberal and secular India, where everybody has a chance to prosper—I think there is a market for ideas like that. In fifteen to twenty years a party like that may even have forty-fifty seats in parliament and be part of a coalition. But that's of course one scenario; I'm not good at predicting things.

Changing gears now, what made you write "The Colonel Who Would Not Repent"? Why was this subject matter important to you?

ST: This is one war of which I have vivid memory. I was too young during India's

earlier wars - 1965 and 1962 - and abroad in 1999 during the Kargil episode. But in 1971 I was a schoolboy, and I remember helping my parents paste black paper on the windows of our apartment in Bombay, so that our lights, and the city's lights, wouldn't show, and the Pakistani Air Force wouldn't be able to identify where Bombay was. This was in the pre-satellite, pre-GPS age. I remember collecting funds for refugees who had come to India. Sheikh Mujib and Mukti Bahini were very popular in India, and many kids went about saying "Joy Bangla" to each other, and not only in Bengal.

But the book isn't about me; it is about an important principle - of the responsibility to protect, of fighting impunity, and opposing immunity. India acted responsibly during the 1971 war, and the way that war played out offers a lesson for the international community, a point Gary Bass, who wrote The Blood Telegram, also makes.

I've tried telling the story from the perspective of the people at the bottom of the hill - the witnesses, the survivors, the victims, the observers - with a view to tell the narrative as it was experienced. Many people have stories they haven't been asked to tell; it is time for all of us to listen to what they have to say.

Joining the dots between being a journalist and author, tell us about the connection you feel with Bangladesh. How did it come about?

ST: My first visit to Bangladesh was in 1986, when I was a young reporter. I did a piece on the country at 15; reporting on the elections that made Gen Ershad president. I interviewed Col Farooq Rahman at that time, and heard his extraordinary story from himself - a man openly talking about how he planned and executed the assassination of the nation's first elected prime minister. I later wrote about him when he, in turn, was executed a few years ago; and that article, which was published in the Indian magazine Caravan, led to this book - which talks not only about the assassination, but the war, what led to it, including 1952 and, indeed, 1947, but also 1905 and the first Partition of Bengal, taking the story all the way up to the present time, and the international crimes tribunals.

So the connection began with a feature, led to a detailed, long-form narrative non-fiction piece, and culminated in a book that extended to more than 375 pages.

(Salil Tripathi's book will be available at The Bookworm soon. You can read an excerpt of it at <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/>)

Q&A WITH FARAH GHUZNAVI: The Writer's Wilderness Survival Kit

QTN: How should a young writer prepare himself/herself for the wider writing world?

ANS: This is a difficult question to answer. Not because a young writer shouldn't attempt to prepare herself or himself, or even because there is any lack of ways in which she can do so, but because no matter how much preparation is undertaken, the wider writing world can be a brutal place. The challenges it offers are, at times, tough for any writer - young or otherwise - to handle, but perhaps young writers in particular will need to develop an invisible set of armour to help them emerge in one piece!

One of the key skills that will assist a young writer in navigating the literary world is patience. Earning recognition takes time in most professional fields, but there is an element of luck, of random happenstance, which is particularly prevalent in the creative arts. A writer may have talent, but unless that talent is recognised by an agent or a publisher, she may find it hard to actually reach enough readers. While social media and self-publishing provide alternative routes, they involve a great deal of hard work and provide no guarantee of success. And the latter can be elusive, even for those whose work is picked up by a publisher or agent. So unless she is one of the fortunate few who receive early recognition, the young writer must be prepared to pursue her goals against



the odds, and to be persistent in her pursuit of them for however long it takes.

A degree of humility and openness can help a young writer to develop her talents. The literary world owes no one any favours, and arrogance is a particularly unattractive character trait - it will not make it any easier for her to gain the assistance of others. So, while confidence and self-belief are undoubtedly useful, a willingness to learn is essential. That is particularly the case for a young writer, because while she may feel that

her interests and talents lie in one particular direction e.g. fiction or poetry, a willingness to experiment may enable her to discover new gifts.

When I first heard about flash fiction (usually defined as a story of less than 1000 words), I found the concept absurd - how could you possibly tell a complete story within such a tight word limit, I wondered. After trying it, I have learned that it is an exceptionally effective way of teaching you to use words sparingly and well, because in flash fiction every word counts. And ironically (and very unexpectedly), it was a piece of flash fiction that subsequently earned me the honour of seeing my name on the winners list of the Commonwealth Short Story Competition in 2010.

Finally, the capacity to recognise and utilise constructive criticism (as opposed to negative feedback, which is all too common in the writing world), is an important weapon in the young writer's arsenal. It enables her to analyse the feedback she receives, to thicken her skin a little so that she can survive the critiques better, and to actually use criticism to improve her work. As a result, no matter how harsh the comments, she has - at the very least - the consolation of knowing that she will emerge a better writer as a result of facing those trials.

Queries on writing may be sent to Farah Ghuznavi at DSLitEditor@gmail.com

SLR WRITING COMPETITION

Aspiring writers are invited to send in a **short story or poem** on the theme of **"BEGINNINGS"**.

You must be over **18 years old**.

Only **ONE** entry per person.

Entry title should not include the theme word.

WORD LIMIT

500 words.

DEADLINE

30th December.

Winning entries will be printed in the SLR page. Attach your story as a .doc with the email subject line: "3rd SLR Competition". Send your entries to DSLitEditor@gmail.com.