

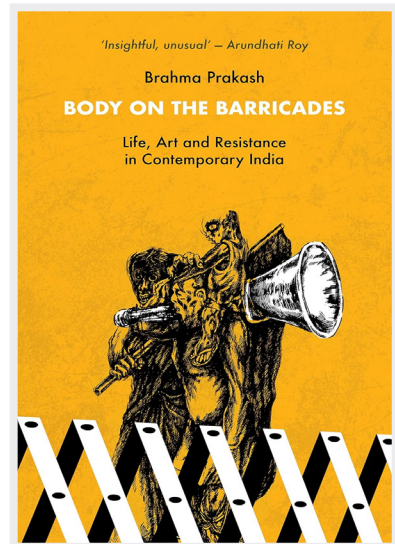
Fairytales of Hope and Solidarity
Body on the Barricades:
Life, Art and Resistance
in Contemporary India

Author: Brahma Prakash

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Brahma Prakash's book *Body on the Barricades: Life, Art and Resistance in Contemporary India* has been widely discussed and reviewed, receiving significant appreciation and praise. Published in 2023, the book emerges at a critical juncture in Indian politics, following the protests against the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019* and the *National Register of Citizenship (CAA/NRC)* the farmer protest against the three farm acts in 2020-2021, the suffering of migrant labourers during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the decade-long criminalization and intensified targeting of dissent and protests. As Christophe Jaffrelot (2021, p. 1) argues, the adjectives used to describe the politics of India have changed over the years from “conservative democracy,” to one of “democratization of democracy,” and recently, towards what he characterizes as a turn to “ethnic democracy,” defined by systematic attacks on intellectuals, universities and anyone who dares to dissent (Jaffrelot 2021). Prakash makes an intervention addressing critical questions within left-liberal scholarship about building solidarity across diverse resistance movements, while attempting to theorize this possibility of solidarity and hope within the context of systematic curtailment. In Prakash's words, “curtailment

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can be of many things: body, words, rights, dissent, arts, expressions. Barricading can come in many forms: walls, ghettos, merits, aesthetics” (Prakash 2023, p. 17). Against these barricades and curtailments, the author argues for hopes of solidarity not from a sense of freedom, but from a sense of suffocation. The book brilliantly explores and urges for hope where one is pushed to the limits of breathlessness.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter, ‘When We Can’t Breathe: Living with Curtailment’ provides an analogy between breathing and freedom. Here, breathing not only carries the fundamental act of life but also symbolizes the essential measure of rights and life of the mind. To live a life of the mind, according to Arendt (1978), is being able to freely think, will and judge—“the ability to say this is wrong, this is beautiful...is not the same as the faculty of thinking...but the two are interrelated, as are consciousness and conscience” (Arendt 1978, p. 193). Whereas in the Indian context, Guru (2013) argues that dominant forces in the public sphere actively suppress the conditions necessary for a Dalit life of the mind—“the Dalit moral struggle... is to negate this social ecology and move away from it to join the public sphere where they can realise the life of the mind. Their struggle is to move away from the sensational to the intellectual sphere” (Guru 2013, p. 43). Breathlessness and curtailment are examined in relation to the state of suffering with COVID-19, and Prakash suggests that as we feel suffocated by the situation shaping Indian society, it is believed that collectivism is impossible; it is impossible to build solidarity. In his opinion, the simplest sense of ‘we’ can bring about collectivism; the shared space and feeling of breathlessness can offer “the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage each other” (Prakash 2023, p. 28). Drawing from bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Ambedkar’s idea of ‘fraternity,’ Prakash sees the possibility of a ‘we feeling’. For hooks, this ‘we feeling’ arises through a shared emotional universe which transcends racial, sexual, class and gender difference to provide the grounds for solidarity: “To build solidarity in our struggle to end domination and oppression it seemed vital to draw attention to a shared humanity, and one location of that unity was present in our emotional universe” (hooks 2015, p. xii). Similarly, Morrison situates solidarity in terms of a shared moral occupancy of the world: “Of course there is cruelty. Cruelty is a mystery. But if we see the world as one long brutal game, then we bump into another mystery, the mystery of beauty, of light...there seems to be such a thing as grace, such a thing as beauty, such a thing as harmony...all wholly free and available to us” (Morrison 2019, p. 48). Ambedkar’s concept of *maitri* (fraternity), as interpreted by Prakash, similarly points toward a ‘we feeling’ that brings us together an ethical mode of collective belonging. He draws strength from this feeling, citing examples such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and highlights the state of breathlessness—‘I can’t breathe’—of Black lives within the White ideology of the

United States, as well as that of the Dalits and Muslims lynched by the Brahminical body politics of the Indian state. In this regard, Prakash notes that “the presence of bodies on the barricades indicates that they “are positioned in an extreme situation, teetering on the edge of hope and hopelessness” (Prakash 2023, p. 26).

It feels positive to see the passionate evocation of the ‘we feeling’ across all the sections with regard to suffering. This ‘we feeling,’ according to S. Reicher and Y. Jogdand (2017), is not the result of identities and emotions emerging from individual contemplation and appraisal; rather, it is actively constructed by mobilising agents. “We see them (the we feeling) as interlinked elements in a representational system which says who we are, where we stand in the world, and what we could or should do given this position” (Reicher and Jogdand 2017, p. 113). In this sense, this ‘we feeling’ emerges when individuals come to see themselves not as isolated individuals, but as members of a collective whose interests, experiences, and struggles are shared. I do wish to materialize that ‘we’ feeling, the hope, and solidarity on the ground. I do wish it to be true that “if the slogan captures George Floyd’s murder, it can also capture the shortness of breath that suffocates Indian sanitation workers to death” (Prakash 2023, p. 30). However, this idealized construction of the ‘we’ feeling, while compelling, raises questions about its historical grounding and practical applicability. When I delve into history, it suggests something else. The parallels drawn between Negro Slavery and Shudra Slavery, between racial and caste-based slavery, were first jotted down by Jotirao Phule when he dedicated his book *Slavery* to the emancipation of the Negroes and Shudras. Later, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his analysis of *Slavery and Untouchability* argued that untouchability in India was worse than slavery, studying and citing the Roman practices of slavery. However, the reality is far worse than the hopeful parallels drawn. In the words of Urvish Kothari (2020), “But the protests after George Floyd’s death, joined by a large number of White people in America and elsewhere, have shown hope for change in the US. However, these agitations are yet to inspire any movement for Dalits in India, except hashtags on Twitter.” A closer examination of the history suggests something else—while some Whites may stand strongly against slavery and with Black Lives Matter (BLM), the upper castes in India always find conditions to stand with the lower castes. There is no one from the upper castes who stood against casteism and Brahminism completely, without any conditionality.

This can be better understood by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s critique of caste society, where he observes why have the Brahmins not produced a Voltaire? According to him, “As is natural, every Brahmin is interested in the maintenance of Brahmanic supremacy be he orthodox or unorthodox, be he a priest or a grahastha, be he a scholar or not. A Voltaire among the Brahmins would be a positive danger to the maintenance of a civilization which is contrived to maintain Brahmanic supremacy... For, he fears

that it may affect the interests of his class and therefore his own” (Ambedkar 1990, vol. 7, p. 240). Prakash manages to capture this essential spirit of the two seemingly parallel yet markedly different moments or ‘practices’ of history.

In the second chapter ‘Words and Demagogues,’ Prakash beautifully explores the role of words, and how words function with examples, emotions, rationality, and historicity. Specifically, he delves into how demagogues or regimes of authoritarianism, and fascism operate through language, and how words can be manipulated to serve their agendas. Prakash emphasizes on how demagogues want to hear praise instead of criticism from art and literature. He argues that poets, writers and activists will have to play a crucial role in challenging the word’s meaning when their meanings are being twisted or erased. The chapter pays particular attention to the words being repeatedly uttered by the Prime Minister and the government leaders. Prakash highlights how the language of genocide can enter our discourse through these utterances, and how demagogues can appropriate historical figures like Kabir to further their ideology. In the case of Kabir, Prakash describes how Kabir’s words are used to attack Muslim religious practices while idealizing Hinduism.

While I agree with the analysis of this act of distortion and appropriation of subversive figures like Kabir, an examination of who has historically controlled the interpretation of Kabir’s words and teachings would have added to the analysis. Addressing these fundamental questions might provide insights into how such appropriation and distortion becomes possible and how it might be prevented. In this context, Milind Wakankar’s work (2010) becomes crucial, as he interrogates the relationship between subalternity and a religion, and how figures like Kabir cannot be viewed merely as a voice of resistance, which gets reinterpreted in the discourses of modernity, especially nationalism, which aims to fix Kabir into their cultural and ideological forms. In his words, “he has tried here to write a history of the traditions of Dalit (untouchable) sapience, which is to say the mystic traditions that are associated with the poetry of low-caste peoples. In instances such as the ‘Kabir’ corpus, which has grown over five centuries...” (Wakankar 2010, p. vii). According to Wakankar (2010, p. 75), “the name “Kabir” has today become synonymous with a typically postcolonial question in India...when Kabir arrived in Dwivedi’s *Kabir* as its eponymous hero, he seemed neither Dalit nor Muslim, and appeared unmarked by caste or religion; it was instead his uniquely Hindu and Indian way of being that was proclaimed by Dwivedi as the great event in Indian history, one that marked the birth of the modern Hindu subject.”

The third chapter, “Muslim Hating in the Bone of the Nation,” delves into the emergent hatred for Muslims—the Islamophobia prevalent in the country. Delving into his own family and his own experience around his village, Prakash in this chapter

conscientiously highlights the Islamophobia and contradictions around hate towards Muslims in a family. While reading the chapter, I felt that the narration of the author's family represents today's Hindu family. Prakash illustrates how hate gradually takes on a majoritarian character, affecting people's everyday negotiations with one another. With regards to that, the author does refer to how in the school in his childhood there was chanting of 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai,' and 'Vande Mataram' along with prayers to Hindu Gods and goddesses (Prakash 2023, p. 77). "One who eats beef can't be believed by Hindus"—this same thought was taught through pedagogy, in every school. While Prakash traces how this 'hatred in the bone' developed, he does not completely address the structural questions of why these attitudes became embedded in the educational system or examine who was instrumental in allowing such perspectives to become part of the school pedagogy. Without interrogating the ideological forces that allowed Islamophobia to enter the classroom, shape the curriculum, the critique of the hatred may remain superficial, limited to personal level, rather than addressing the fundamental systemic structures that produce hate.

In the second and third chapters, the author either misses or refrains from addressing the root of this issue, from where this hate or distortion derives its moral and ethical power? It is the underlying epistemological premise of the liberal-left, as explained by Gail Omvedt, "it is necessary to go beyond this debate which poses 'secularism' or a 'reformed Hinduism' as the alternative to Hindutva" (Omvedt 2011, p. x). Another important point I would like to make here is that, even while acknowledging the appropriation of Kabir and his conversion into a tool for spreading Hindutva has failed, nevertheless this failed attempt seems to place the moral responsibility on those who have safeguarded the real spirit of Kabir—those very communities, who have, in fact, preserved Kabir's legacy all along—given the fact that the followers of Kabir mostly belong to the so-called lower castes (Ranjan 2008). Conversely, the onus of perpetuating this authoritarian Hindutva should rightfully rest on those who have actively generated and nurtured this ideology from the very beginning.

The fourth chapter, 'Dance of the Migrant Laborers' captures the mass exodus of some of the most precarious laborers in the world when the Indian authorities suddenly announced a lockdown amidst COVID-19. It was a ghastly scene—"Crawling, crying, hiding, they were walking. The ill and the elderly were limping and walking. Small kids were crying and walking...pregnant women were pulling their bodies and walking, and so were the women on their periods" (Prakash 2023, p. 95). Prakash accurately brings to the fore the horrendous reality of migrant workers/labourers from the village and the cities against the conventional/stereotypical image of "the Indian village as an enduring space situated within an ideal past—the last refuge of sanity, order, and values in times of global disarray, a resilient idyll" (Prakash 2023, p. 100).

He poignantly argues that the migrant workers are neither part of the village nor the city. The Indian village has always made the lives of women, Dalits, disempowered castes, and other minority communities an unspeakable hell. Migration to the cities was a response to this deep-seated socio-cultural malady, but there also they remain outsiders. The city neither counts nor recognizes migrants as citizens. He rightfully states, “If Indian villages are dens, Indian cities are colonies, both in terms of thinking and in relation to spatiality” (Prakash 2023, p. 106).

The author advocates for workers to take a pause, to disrupt the mobility of capital for new possibilities, for a new movement, in a new time. Again, it must be addressed whether such a disruption has truly come to fruition. In my opinion, for this pause or disruption to be materialized, there must be a cultivation of values towards labor, life, and dignity. Without such values, any pause, whatever it may be, will be doomed to fail. Drawing from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s analysis of Indian caste society as a diseased society, one could argue that such a sick, infected society is incapable of responding to and upholding the basic principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Unfortunately, the Indian collective conscience has yet to fully embrace these values. Moreover, in the context of caste and labor, Ambedkar argues that caste divides labourers, disassociates work from interest, disconnects intelligence from manual labor, and devalues individuals by denying them the right to cultivate vital interests. Caste prevents mobilization, resulting in a division of labor that is not based on choice or individual preference, but rather on the dogma of predestination (Ambedkar 1990, vol. 03, pp. 67-68). To argue that this new pause disrupting mobility—where immobility, alienation, and isolation already exist—will create new possibilities, merits critical examination, particularly given the existing structural constraints.

In the fifth chapter, ‘The Trial of Art,’ the author delves into the status of artists, writers and poets in the country. From Perumal Murugan’s declaration of his artistic death to the arrests of several activists (artists of Kabir Kala Manch, the Telugu poet Varavara Rao, and others) related to the Bhima Koregaon Conspiracy case, the author argues how the state’s problem with poets and artists is not about individual aberrations but in their fundamental social identities. Engaging with the whole saga of Bhima Koregaon Conspiracy case, the cacophony of the Urban Naxals, the condition of poets in prison, and so on, the author states that it is about the deteriorating health of democracy and the curtailment of breathing spaces (Prakash 2023, p. 129). He makes a point that “the poets and the state are in a ceaseless fight. They fight like a snake and a mongoose, with neck and noose, with words and bullets, with bodies and spectacles on penpoints and gun-points” (Prakash 2023, p. 130).

My contention here is how we perceive the character of the state in the Indian context. Speaking on the Village Panchayat Bill, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar mentions, “India is not Europe. England is not India. England does not know the caste system. We do”

(Ambedkar 1990, vol. 02, p. 114). Of course, today's state or the nature of the state in general, is oppressive. In the words of G. Aloysius (2010), it is the modernization and institutionalization of Brahminical societies as nation-states under the auspices of colonialism, where Brahminical ideology became the bedrock upon which multifaceted and modern institutional dynamics unfolded. However, considering the different manifestations of society and the state, I would like to say that in the context of a society in which the upper castes control the means, production and distribution of everything, this is the result of a society becoming more powerful than the state. In line with Ambedkar's discussion on the Village Panchayat Bill, "A population which is hidebound by caste, a population which is infected by ancient prejudices, a population which flouts equality of status and is dominated by notions of gradations in life, a population which thinks that some people are high and some are low—can it be expected to have the right notions even to discharge bare justice? Sir, I deny that proposition, and I submit that it is not proper to expect us to submit our life, our liberty, our property to the hands of these *panchas*" (Ambedkar 1990, vol. 02, p. 109). Unfortunately, the state has always been under the control of these *panchas*. The word *panchas* comes from the Hindi word *panch*, which literally means "five." *Panchas* traditionally, refer to five members of village councils (*panchayats*), who are usually from upper castes and act as decision-makers or arbiters in local disputes. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar argues that the upper caste Hindus largely controlled village councils; therefore, these local governing bodies reproduced caste oppression rather than delivering justice. For this reason, Ambedkar is deeply skeptical of the view of Indian village societies as democratic units. From this perspective, I argue that the modern Indian state has remained shaped by the same upper-caste *panchas* that historically controlled what we now consider 'society'.

The sixth chapter, 'March of the Mustard,' is centered around the farmers' protests in Delhi, drawing parallels with movements such as the Shaheen Bagh protest against CAA/NRC in 2019, the Dalit Protests in April 2018, the student protests following Rohit Vemula's death in 2016, and the Una protest in Gujarat after the flogging of Dalit youth. The author has huge hopes for these protests as they have shattered the image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and forced the government/the authority to reconsider its stance. In the words of the author, "A protest does not end in immediacy. It travels unknown paths. It leaves its shadow" (Prakash 2023, p. 145). Prakash highlights the significance of the historical protests, such as the Mahad Satyagraha led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the farmers' protest led by Mahendra Singh Tikait. However, in my opinion, no matter how inspiringly the language is used, the question remains: who remembers Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha, and who remembers Tikait's farmers' protest? What are the reasons for suppressing one history, and attempting to erase and downplay another? Even before we ask these questions, we must contemplate:

can there be unity among these protests? Without grappling with these challenging questions, the optimism and poesy of utopian language may prove fleeting.

The seventh chapter, titled 'A Siege Against the Siege,' delves into the Una Strike in 2016 and the Bharat Bandh strike on 2 April 2018, essentially focusing on how Dalits have protested caste atrocities and the Hindu social order. In this chapter, Prakash foregrounds caste ideology and the Hindu moral framework most explicitly in his discussion of Dalit movements, while in earlier chapters, he engages extensively with demagoguery, Islamophobia, and the plight of the migrant labourers, treating the same structural forces more implicitly and indirectly. This treatment of engaging with various issues raises a broader question: if caste ideology and Hindu social norms shape the social order so profoundly, should they not also be considered as structuring forces across all chapters? Scholars such as Aloysius (2010) and Ambedkar (1990) have argued that Brahminical caste values permeate not only social life but the state, economy, and its institutions. If one takes this perspective as the analytical premise, one may ask whether the book would benefit from articulating these structural connections more consistently across all chapters, rather than highlighting them primarily in this Dalit-focused chapter, primarily in the discussion of Dalit movements. If this perspective is taken as an analytical premise, it raises the concern whether the book might benefit from drawing these structural connections more consistently across its chapters, rather than highlighting them primarily in the discussion of Dalit movements. Doing so would also strengthen the book's claim to offer a coherent account of how caste ideology shapes multiple crises and suffering in India.

The eighth chapter, 'A Show for the Dead,' is about the concerns that connect us to mourning and its curtailment by an authoritarian regime centering around the situation in Kashmir, and also regarding the Hathras gang rape case of 2020 in Uttar Pradesh. Mourning, unlike grieving, is a collective expression and has been subject to ban in many countries. Mourning was banned in Kashmir as well as in Hathras. According to Prakash, "When the last refuge of humanity—grieving—itself is perceived as a threat. The one who grieves is placed under surveillance" (Prakash 2023, p. 184). Here again, with the ban on mourning in Hathras, Prakash mentions how caste society functions, "In Indian caste society, this comes with a serious warning: mourning and vulnerability should not become permanent emotions" (Prakash 2023, p. 199).

Moreover, my contention with such writing or the liberal notion of suggesting that everyone suffering should come together is that the suffocation presented as universal is not genuinely universal. The suffocation experienced by the well-to-do class is not equivalent to that experienced by sanitation workers, for instance. T.M.

Krishna's struggle with darkness cannot be equated with the suffocation endured by sanitation workers. Of course, the author does not attempt to equate them; rather, he speaks about universality, aiming to create solidarity among them all. For example, he highlights that "farmers from Punjab were not asking for liberty and freedom. They were fighting to defend their life and sustenance. The question of *Jal Jangal Jameen* for the Adivasis is not one of love and freedom but a matter of survival" (Prakash 2023, p. 40). My point here is that without a clear understanding of who the real perpetrators of this darkness are, the hope and solidarity Prakash speaks of needs further detailed and critical examination. An anti-caste perspective might help us understand why certain opportunities for social transformation remain unrealized. This recalls Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's (1990 vol. 17, pp. 141-147) questions in "*What Way Emancipation*": "Is there any Sympathy for you in Hinduism? Is there Equality for you in Hinduism? Have you had any Freedom in the Hindu Religion? Is internal reform of the Caste System virtually impossible?" Perhaps we might ask, how many fairytales of hope and solidarity will we be presented with before realizing that there's such an erroneous understanding? Do we realize that something is clearly amiss and needs sincere intervention? Utopia is powerful, but it must claim some kind of reality, the reality of possibilities and of being possible, as demonstrated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar through his conversion to Buddhism and Kanshiram by conceptualizing a "*Bahujan* society;" as the language of imagination was made possible by Gail Omvedt through her "*Seeking Begampura*." It may be argued that hope and acknowledgment have to go together.

In conclusion, Brahma Prakash's *Body on the Barricades* stands out as a significant intervention in today's Indian political and cultural debates, blending personal reflection, cultural analysis, and critique. Across its eight chapters, the book maps out recent movements—from the (CAA/NRC) protests and the farmers' movement to the COVID-19 migrant labourer's plight to the targeting of artists, activists, and the rise of state authoritarianism. The central argument revolves around the possibility of solidarity arising from shared experiences of "breathlessness" and curtailment, linking diverse struggles across caste, class, and religious lines. Beyond documenting key moments of resistance, the book also provides a sharp lens on state repression. General readers interested in understanding India's current political moment will find accessible entry points through Prakash's narrative style, while academic readers may want to engage with the work's theoretical claims more critically. Ultimately, the book makes an important contribution by sparking discussions around resistance, hope, and the possibility of transformative change in India today.

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