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DEEMED-TO-BE UNIVERSITY

CENTRE FOR  
RESEARCH IN  
SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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# THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH  
IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND EDUCATION

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 3, JULY 2024



## BOOK REVIEWS



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**Fatal Accidents of Birth: Stories of Oppression  
and Struggle**  
**Harsh Mander**

Speaking Tiger, 2016; Revised Edition 2024  
Pp – 272. Price - 499

An unsettling query: What defines the trajectory of an individual's life in contemporary India—merit, virtue, or the capriciousness of birth? Traversing through the poignant pages of Harsh Mander's *Fatal Accidents of Birth*, one is drawn toward the compelling narratives that illuminate the intricate intersections of societal injustices. Harsh Mander, one of India's foremost social justice and human rights activists, in this revised 2024 edition of the book, delves deeply into the lives of individuals subjected to systemic violence and social wrongs purely due to the circumstances of their birth. The title, derived from Rohith Vemula's heart-wrenching final words that shook the nation's conscience, encapsulates the essence of the book: the harsh, often brutal realities faced by the marginalized in contemporary India. Through twenty-one meticulously detailed stories, Mander paints a vivid and distressing picture of a nation that, in many respects, has failed to uphold the promises of justice and equality made to its most vulnerable citizens.

The dynamics of peripheralization and exclusion causing violence—physical, socio-psychological, and economic—is underscored throughout, which, while evoking sympathy, calls for urgent systemic change. Through the lens of personal narratives, Mander critiques the socio-political structures that perpetuate systemic discrimination, humiliation, indignity, and neglect. The story of Mohammed Kasim Shaikh, for instance, tells the tale of a homeless rickshaw puller in Old Delhi who succumbed to a hit-and-run. "I own nothing. I am nothing." Lines of Bengali poetry that he had recited underscores the invisibility experienced by

the homeless, further exemplified by the bureaucratic apathy that left his body unclaimed in a morgue. Shaikh's life, captured in a moving video before his demise, reflect the intersection of poverty and callousness that Mander meticulously explores. The book's intention is unequivocal: to bring the stories of the oppressed to the forefront of public consciousness and to challenge readers to reflect on their roles in perpetuating or combating these injustices.

The book is well-organized, with each chapter dedicated to a different individual's story, creating a coherent and engaging narrative flow. Mander's writing style is straightforward yet evocative, effectively conveying the emotional and psychological impacts of the injustices faced by the subjects. The exploration of these stories is not merely descriptive but deeply analytical, probing the socio-political contexts that allow such injustices to thrive. The moral and ethical fabric of a society that remains indifferent to the suffering of its fellow beings by "looking away" is questioned time and again. This critical approach is evident, for instance, in his examination of the juvenile convict from the 2012 Delhi rape case, where Mander provocatively asks whether society should share the blame for creating conditions that lead individuals to commit heinous acts. Yet, some chapters, like that of Ishrat Jahan, Rohith Vemula, and Pehlu Khan, which are well-known public cases, might have benefitted from more intimate insights to further humanize the stories. Despite this, the book's overall use of evidence is compelling and serves its purpose well.

Mander employs a variety of sources, including personal interviews, media reports, and his extensive fieldwork, to construct the narratives in the book. Firsthand experiences and direct interactions with the subjects lend authenticity and depth to the stories. The intricate nexus of intersectional challenges faced by women like Sushila who, coming from lower socio-economic strata, face compounded vulnerabilities—abusive marriage, venereal disease, social stigma, impoverishment—is worthily encapsulated. Her battle against stigma and her ultimate reliance on an NGO for survival highlights the gaps in state support systems and the crucial role of civil society organizations. Yet, a deeper exploration of the institutional reforms required to address these circumstances could have added a valuable dimension to the book. The book's intense focus on suffering may be overwhelming for some readers, and incorporating more instances of positive change and successful intervention shall appeal to them.

Geeta Devi's story of manual scavenging in Fatehpur Sikri reveals the entrenched caste-based occupational segregation that persists despite legislative measures. Her daily ordeal, performed for mere survival, starkly illustrates the socio-economic marginalization and dehumanization faced by Dalits. This narrative is a powerful reminder of the deep-seated caste hierarchies that continue to dictate the lives of millions. The tale of Naseebahen Mohammedbhai Sheikh, who lost twenty-six family members in the Gujarat riots, highlights the profound strength amidst communal violence. Her transformation into a peace worker, despite immense personal loss, symbolizes hope and defiance against systemic hatred and violence. "You have to now make two hearts beat in your breasts, one that of a mother, the other of a father", she told other widowed women. These are thus not merely tales of suffering but of resilience. Varied hues of oppression that stem from fractured understandings and beliefs of gender, caste, religion, ethnicity, identity, and the like are thus presented which is particularly relevant for understanding and addressing contemporary social issues, making it a significant contribution to the discourse on social justice.

In conclusion, *Fatal Accidents of Birth* is a critical, thought-provoking work that challenges readers to confront the harsh realities of social injustice in India. The resilience of people like Thangboi Singset, whose forgiveness amidst hate exemplifies human dignity amidst adversity. Harsh Mander's dedication to illuminating the lives of the oppressed and advocating for systemic change makes this book an indispensable resource for anyone committed to the cause of social equity. The book's emotional depth and urgent call to action ensure its lasting impact on readers and its important place in contemporary literature on social justice. "From shadows to the stars," Mander's work beckons us to imagine a world where justice and compassion reign supreme, where every individual's dignity and humanity are cherished, upheld, and honored. In realization of the professed commitment of the nation to equality and justice, "a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice."