

Stinging caterpillars and poisonous news

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I received a WhatsApp forward from multiple groups last week. It showed a man poking a large green hairy caterpillar, resting on a mango leaf, with a stick. He warned viewers that this was a dangerous, poisonous insect – anyone who touched it would die a horrible death within four hours. The “deadly insect” in this video is the common Baron caterpillar, which hatches into a mud-coloured, gently beautiful common baron butterfly. It certainly causes intense itching if you touch it – similar to the kambli hula, which we all know too well – but you don’t need to poke it with a stick. It’s not going to kill you. All it seeks is to be left alone, melting inconspicuously into the background of the mango leaf, completing its journey of transformation into a pretty butterfly.

Some ants sting, but we need ants to turn over and aerate the earth so that other things can grow. Some caterpillars cause itching, but without them, we would have a world without butterflies, and that would be a shame. Some snakes are venomous, but if we kill each snake we see, we will end up with a world full of rats and bandicoots. Things that cause you discomfort are often good for you – remember your grandmother’s efforts to make you drink bitter kashaya?

In a year filled with tragedy, the last couple of weeks have stood out, filled as they have been with bitterness, anger and the loss of hope. One way to deal with it is to shut the doors on the news. Another is to drown out the important stories with an overdose of Bollywood and Sandalwood scandals. But looking away, while it may spare us discomfort, will make things worse. The changes we see today have not come upon us unexpectedly. They are the result of structural problems simmering within society for generations – inequalities of caste, class, gender, compounded by the fact that absolute power corrupts absolutely. The atrocities we see around us have gone on for centuries. Even a day longer is too long. But we cannot root them out unless we understand why we are in the place we are today.

Can books on nature help us? I turned to an old childhood favourite: TH White’s classic, *The Sword and the Stone*. The book chronicles the boyhood years of the young King Arthur. Adopted and raised in a foster home, young Arthur is sent by the wizard Merlin on a magical journey to learn about animal life. Turned into a fish, an ant, a hawk, an owl and a goose (and late in his adult life, into a badger), he learns about the use and misuse

of power. As the Bhagavad Gita warns, Wart also learns about the danger of letting bloodlust overtake you. A lust for war and killing can camouflage itself as a desire to see justice. But unless we subsume our violent instincts, and work together for the greater human good, there is no hope for humanity. These are powerful lessons that Arthur keeps in mind when he becomes a powerful monarch, holding the lives and happiness of his subjects in his hand.

Watership Down, another childhood favourite I turn to, follows a group of rabbits as they escape from danger. In their search for a new home, they experiment with many forms of social organisation, before they finally reach safety. While humans, in this book, are enemies, they are helped by a loving little girl at the end. Human societies hold the potential to wield power with gratuitous cruelty, or with compassion and kindness. But first, we need to identify and tear down the walls of power, cruelty and unkindness that divide us. Only then can millions of beautiful Baron caterpillar flourish as butterflies, and millions of beautiful young Dalit village women walk without fear into a brave new world.

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