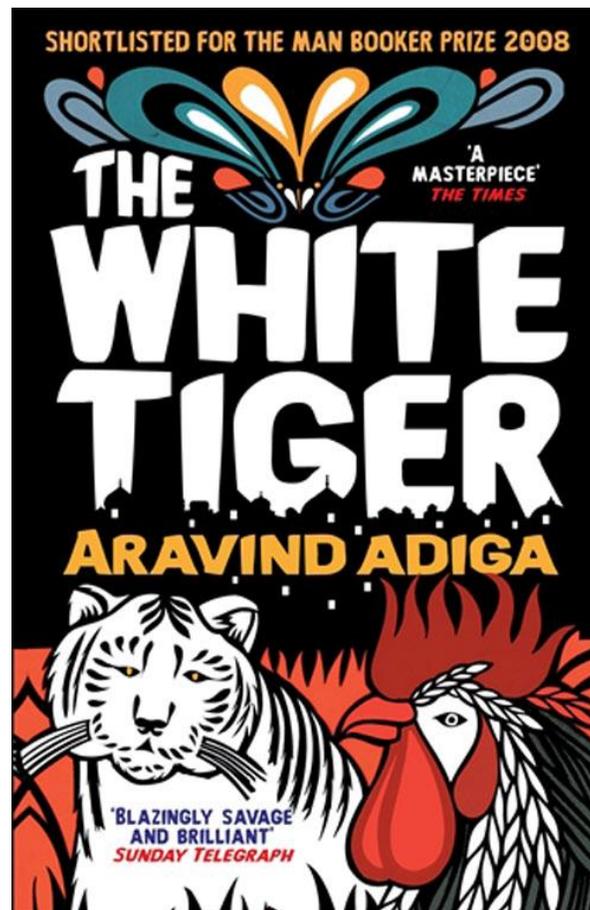


## A Critical Analysis of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: A Socio-Political Perspective

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### Abstract

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is the story of a man named Balram Halwai and his journey of redemption from regression and suppression. The writer paints a sardonic and dark picture of India and this article is an endeavour to bring out the truth behind his representation of the nation. Adiga views India as being infested with servitude and swath, where a man born in a poor family finds his chances of progress being limited and the conditions prevailing in India are such that propel the self of an economically deprived individual to justify a crime like murder,

and become a legal as well as social criminal. Adiga has raised many issues in his work and it is a fact beyond contestation that India is being confronted by most of the issues put forth by him. But what concludes his work as an unacceptable representation of India is that he has increased the magnitude of the problems manifold, so that they seem to be the dominant factor in Indian society. It cannot be argued that his work is devoid of reality, but it is indeed the exaggeration of reality, which makes his work liable to criticism and splenetic reactions. My paper would critically examine and bring about clarity between Adiga's India and the real India.

**Key words:** Aravind Adiga, *White Tiger*, Light, Darkness, Servitude, Defunct.

### **Indian Diversity and Indian Writing in English**

The worst of times usually brings about the best in nations. And India throughout its glorious history, has encountered its fair share of adversities, whether they be in the form of invasions, slavery or famines and so on. Each part of history is unique, in its own way and the consciousness of the nation has always found an effective medium to express itself through the writers of the age. Same is the case with modern-day India in which the Chetan Bhagats, Vikram Seths, Amitav Ghoshes have become the voice of the nation. However, the new age writers of India will probably find the task more difficult than their predecessors, primarily because of India's diversity and divisions existing in its social, economic and cultural areas. India one of the most diverse nations in the world is almost incomprehensible and cannot be limited within the realms of a single book. Its facets are just too many, to be amalgamated into one single work. That is why Chetan Bhagat has more or less focused on college students' life, mainly that of engineering students in his novels. In the same manner, a far too dangerous endeavour was undertaken by Aravind Adiga in his work "The White Tiger", that was to become the voice of the poor, downtrodden, the colossal underclass of the world's biggest democracy.

### ***White Tiger* – A Riveting Tale of the Realistic Anti-hero**

Aravind Adiga, an Indian born, Australian educated writer, shot to fame with his very first work "The White Tiger", which went on to win the Man Booker prize in 2008, defeating stiff competition from the likes of Salman Rushdie. Mr. Portillo the chairman of Booker prize panel 2008 stated that he was looking for something that would "blow his socks off" and singled

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out *THE WHITE TIGER* by **Aravind Adiga**. The writer presents a riveting tale of the realistic anti-hero Balram Halwai, who although born in the most humble surrounding, harbours a marlowesque ambition to rise above his predetermined fate to be born and die in “the darkness” and achieves it through his ruthless planning of the murder of his master Ashok.

### **An Epistolary Novel**

Through this epistolary novel written in a series of seven letters over seven nights, addressed to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, the writer paints a cynical, supercilious and unromanticized picture of India where education system is defunct, elections are rigged, poverty is rampant, almost ubiquitous and the poor have to face appalling regression at the hands of the elites as the writer divides the nation in two distinct zones –

“India is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. But [the Ganges] river brings darkness to India - the black river”. (14, *The White Tiger*)

The western world took the novel to be a mirror of India. However the Indian audience decried it due to the bleak depiction of Indian society. Amardeep Singh dismissed it as fundamentally fake and freelance editor Anjali Kapoor declared-

“Adiga is the same [as Naipaul] focusing on everything that is bad and corrupt” (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 18 2008)

### **Two Contrasting Visions of India – Mirror of India versus Bleak Description of India**

Existence of these two contrasting versions is primarily due to the fact that India as a concept has always intrigued the west. Some consider it to be the library of ancient knowledge as depicted in Robin Sharma’s *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, while others consider it as floundering in poverty, hunger, naked bodies and hungry bellies. Some believe it to be the storehouse of intellectual knowledge while others can only view Adiga’s “glistening lines of sewage”. But among these one thing is pretty certain- India will always continue to be an intricate puzzle for the west because it is probably none of these and even more possibly both of

them. This in fact is a matter which needs its own deep and detailed exposition. However, the question here is how realistic is Adiga's representation of India.

### ***"I am Tomorrow"***

In the very initial stage of the story Balram Halwai declares - "I am tomorrow" (4). Here he represents not just himself but Adiga's "colossal underclass". He is the rickshaw puller, coolie, beggar, worker, and each one in India who has a small belly as the writer propounds that it is a country with only two castes –

"Men with big bellies and men with small bellies". (64, *The White Tiger*)

But here we are listening to the voice of an exception that belongs to none of these, but experiences both. However, as we go further our omniscient narrator ceases to remain the impartial executioner of Indian society, as meant to be, but becomes the mouthpiece of the author. Because none who was born like Balram, would ever be able to understand such unenviable difficulties as he does. The clarity with which he views his incapacities denies him the right to be the one facing them.

### **A Glaring Error of Distinct Zones of Darkness and Light**

A glaring error in Adiga's novel is that he has divided India into two distinct zones- Darkness and Light. As the protagonist initially informs the Premier -

"I am in light now, but I was born and raised in darkness". (14, *The White Tiger*)

Adiga has tried to draw a distinct line between darkness and light. When Balram is in Laxmangarh he is residing in darkness, but in Bangalore and Delhi he comes to Light. Everything is supposed to be perfect just like 'mini-America', with its big hotels, cloud reaching buildings, call centers, malls, high tech areas indeed "A small bit of America in India" (204). But Adiga's own description of the city diminishes the thin line between the two. As he consciously begins to try to find his self identity and the justifications for his future heinous action, he stumbles upon a slum in Delhi and finds himself facing a line of men defecating, trying to construct a wall between darkness and light. He also witnesses thousands of people living on the

side of the roads in the city with their thin bodies and filthy faces, becoming a particular problem for the drivers.

### **Co-existence of Darkness and Light**

Thus we can witness the co-existence of ‘Darkness’ and ‘Light’ in Delhi, living harmoniously and moving forward step by step, hand in hand for the progress of the propagators of ‘India Shining’. The division between the two classes is definitely not regional as reproduced but economic and may possibly be social. Adiga’s protagonist is the living example in his story of the fact that you can be in light and still be enduring the same conditions as darkness. So, India probably the most diverse nation in the world just cannot be divided on the basis of economic disparity and Adiga fails immaturely in his endeavour to divide India between the haves and have-nots on regional basis.

### **Another Glaring Error: Only Elites versus Poor**

Another glaring error in Adiga’s visualization of India’s masses is that he confines the boundaries of his work up to the elites and the poor, completely ignoring India’s burgeoning middle class which does’nt find an iota of mention in it. Although it is the artistic liberty of a writer, whether he wishes to deal with other aspects of society or not, but if Adiga takes his novel to be a vivid representation of India then the bridge between ‘Darkness and ‘Light’ which is filled with the middle class just cannot be avoided, which he has done most comfortably. How can a work which does’nt mentions a major part of a country’s population be taken to be its realistic representation?

### **Little Space to Grow**

Even his characters seem to be left with little space to grow. All the elites have been presented as callous, corrupt and ensconced deeply in an illusionary self esteem. They seem to be devoid of any kind of feeling towards the poor. As is proved when the mongoose (Mukesh), brother of Ashok decides to read the letter of Balram’s grandmother in front of him and justifies his action by saying-“He won’t mind [me reading his letter], he [Balram] has no sense of privacy.”(189, *The White Tiger*)

It explicitly refers to the complete desensitization of the rich. The working class on the other hand is filled with vulgar, crude and rustic individuals who degrade their masters in conversations with each other and cheat them, as Balram siphons of the gas of the car and takes it to corrupt mechanics hand-in-glove with him and uses the car as taxi only to gain money and satisfy his sexual fantasies. Immorality has been portrayed at both top and bottom without a single positive character. Although mostly this is the very case, but there are always more than a few exceptions which cannot be veiled.

### **Possible Primary Motive**

A primary motive of Adiga while writing his masterpiece seems to be to bring forth the unbridled corruption and confront the society of servitude existing in our country. And he seems to have succeeded remarkably through the exquisite and almost unique employment of animal imagery. Balram views the whole nation as a kind of zoo, in which everyone has his own boundaries and limitations. Eventually it were these boundaries which kept our nation civilized, but with the dawn of independence these boundaries were pulled down, as according to him in 1947 when the Britishers left “only a moron would think that we became free then”. Our nation did not become independent but became a jungle - -

“See this country, in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation was like a zoo. ... And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on fifteenth of August 1947, the day the Britishers left- the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law”. (63, *The White Tiger*)

And now the whole nation was not being ruled by leaders but the ferocious embodiments of corruption who preyed on lesser meek animals. The Stork collected taxes (without any legal powers) from the fishermen and boaters. The wild Boar ruled (without any kingship) over agricultural lands, the buffalo owns (without buying) the rickshaws and the Raven charges (without right) the goatherds. Balram was himself nicknamed the white tiger by an inspecting officer, who was impressed by his knowledge. And his master Ashok was tagged

by him as the Lamb only because he returned from America a humble and sensitive human. It must be acknowledged that Adiga remains true to the jungle law in his work as ultimately the tiger (Balram) devours the lamb (Ashok). Indeed through the mouthpiece of Balram he eloquently puts forth his philosophy- “Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That’s my whole philosophy in a sentence”. (237, *The White Tiger*)

But this philosophy is rarely practiced in reality in this nation where animals are worshipped god-like. As we see how the dogs cuddle and puddle are leading a luxurious life while the simple villagers are being ruthlessly exploited. Similarly our protagonist considers it a badge of honour to have” got more attention than the water buffalo” (72) after returning home in a driver’s uniform.

### **Indian Education System – Another Jungle**

Indeed, Adiga has through the employment of animal imagery piercingly exposed the corrupt roots of India. He even makes use of it in order to expose the frailties of the Indian education system, which Adiga found to be defunct and again to him, it resembled a jungle, another jungle, probably a smaller analogy to the nation. Our education system in the ‘Darkness’ is made up of schools where a teacher’s primary focus is not to teach, but earn money through dishonest means. Balram’s teacher, a paan chew and throw man spits in the classroom, drinks, dozes off and sells the uniforms and food meant for the students in the market but then - “The teacher had a legitimate excuse to steal the money- he said he had’nt been paid his salary in six months”. (33, *The White Tiger*)

Indeed the whole system seems to have been corrupted in a manner so as to make sure that the poor stay in darkness. No doubt Balram received better education in the tea shop than in school.

### **The Centric Role of Lizard**

Of all the animals, Balram was particularly afraid of the lizard. He ran away from school after seeing one. The lizard here represents path, which a person living in ‘Darkness’ has to take

so as to travel to 'Light'. Like the millions who are simply existing and not living in "Perpetual servitude", Balram was afraid to walk on the path. His father took him back to school and killed the lizard so as to pave the way for him to reach "Light". Because he felt -"My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine – at least one- should live like a man". (30, *The White Tiger*).

However, family compulsions disallowed him to carry on his education. But years later, the lizard came back and confronted him again. His master Ashok was carrying a bag full of seven hundred thousand rupees to bribe a minister. Life once again offered him a chance to walk on the path and this time Balram overcame his cowardice and took the chance. He murdered his master to enter and be part of "light" becoming his [Ashok] namesake.

### **Elections as Another Feature of Darkness**

Apart from the education system Adiga also viewed the elections in the 'Darkness' with bigoted eyes as a disease inflicted upon the nation. Indeed, it were the elections that actually gave Balram his birth date, because his employer had sold off his vote to the great socialist and he was supposed to turn eighteen immaturity, to be able practice adult franchise. His father had seen through twelve elections, voted all twelve times but not himself. Elections in the 'Darkness' have been portrayed as a kind of nostalgia, a fervour where everyone was discussing them, but they only resembled" eunuchs discussing Kamasutra". (98), which is proved to be true, when a mad but brave rickshaw-puller decided to cast his vote and was ruthlessly murdered by Vijay and his companions. The elections were a time to celebrate not the democracy but its elimination from the nation as we witness biryani (a traditional Indian food, rice cooked with meat or vegetables) being distributed in front of a temple and free booze in abundance for all. Actually a primary difference between 'Light' and 'Darkness' is that in 'Light', people are free, cast their own vote and in 'Darkness' people are again free to cast their own vote, but not by themselves as Balram declares:

"I am India's most faithful voter and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth". (102, *The White Tiger*)

But Adiga's views regarding the fake elections are not just hypocritical but also myopic. With regard to his generalizations about elections, he ceases to be an impartial presenter of India's woes, instead he becomes a biased observer. India might be facing a lot of problems and probably more adversely than Adiga's picturization, but its democracy has always stood firm only because elections in India have always been largely free and fair, most of the time, whether they be in light or in grey or darkness.

### **Depiction of Social Life – Ridicule of Indian Marriage**

Even the social life of India has not escaped Adiga's sting. He has explicitly and truthfully portrayed how caste and religion can be immensely important factors in shaping the life of an individual in the 'Darkness'. When Balram was asked about his caste before being employed as a driver, he instantly knew it would bias the decision of his masters. He quickly responded by saying that he was a halwai by caste and was capable of making sweets and got the job. Similarly, he grasped the opportunity to go Delhi as the driver of Honda city by unearthing the fact that the other driver was a Muslim and not a Hindu.

However, the most critical aspect that has been ridiculed about the social life of India is the institution of marriage. Marriage, which is supposed to be a celebration, a union has transformed into a social stigma. When Balram's cousin Reena got engaged, his family arranged for a big wedding by their standards and also gave a huge dowry. For all these expenses, they had taken a loan from the Stork and due to the inability to pay it back, the Stork now owned them as his slaves. Balram also had to leave school and labour for him. So, we see how an able and talented student was deprived of his education and a whole family became a bunch of slaves just because of a marriage.

### **Living in the Light But Taking Decisions in the Darkness**

However, a more severe division existing in India is not based on religious or social structure, but on economic lines. Men with small bellies are born to get 'eaten up' by those possessing big bellies. A rich man can easily get his own way by twisting the rules with his financial muscle power. The Stork has nothing to fear about his illegal mining activity, because he has the capacity to bribe the politicians living in light and taking decisions of darkness. In a

similar way when Balram had money power in Bangalore, he had an easy access to police, who in collaboration with him caught all the drivers of a company who used to take call center workers to their homes at night and he was able to set himself as an entrepreneur. Indian political system, judiciary, police, administrative officers, political leaders all have different standards for the elite and different ones for the economically deprived.

### **Indians Caged in Coop**

According to Adiga this deplorable situation does not exist either due to social, religious or economic differences, but due to the mental slavery that is inflicted upon the Indians in Darkness. The writer employs the “rooster coop” analogy to his vision of enslaved Indian masses. He compares them with roosters in old Delhi, behind Jama Masjid where they are stuffed tightly in wire-mesh cages and,

“The roosters smell blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they’re next. Yet, they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop”. (173, *The White Tiger*)

The same situation exists with human beings in this country. They are enslaved in their own minds and consider it their birth right to live and die for their masters in “Perpetual servitude”. When Balram’s mistress Pinky madam ran over a child, his masters wanted him to take the blame and lead the rest of his life behind bars. But Balram did not rebel, he consented with their demand and his grandmother Kusum would have been particularly proud that her grandson had foregone his life for his masters. This mindset is because they are all in the rooster coop and Balram had yet not broken out of it. So, millions have been trapped in the same manner, not physically but mentally and the Indian masses have been trained by a meager number of individuals, who might be as well-equipped and talented to exist in perpetual “So strong that you can put the key of emancipation in a man’s hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse”. (176, *The White Tiger*)

### **Detest This Lesson from Adiga**

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But Balram accepted the key and murdered his master. He took away the money which opened the doors of liberation from perpetual servitude for him. However, the rest are not so courageous; chauffeurs do not carry off the bag containing millions in their back seat, no one loots the train carrying diamonds worth millions from Surat, as Adiga probably expects them to do in order to escape the society of servitude and overcome the mental barrier.

But just imagine what the consequences would be if everyone learnt the lesson which Adiga is teaching. Will our society exist if everyone thought as Balram did, servants murdering their masters, looting, killing and so on. Would we survive as a nation then, at all? The key, the way that Adiga is showing does not open the doors to emancipation, but only leads to destruction. The way out of 'Darkness' that he is suggesting might be, romantically appealing, but is definitely not practically sustainable.

Indeed after a complete analysis of Adiga's novel, it can be confidently affirmed that he has taken a view too narrow and painted a picture too dark. Andrew Holgate has rightly commented that hardly anything in this book that escapes scathing comment. Whatever in this nation is considered as divine he views as savage, whatever is taken to be devotional, he considers sacrilege. In his work, filled with sarcasm, deception, and exploitations he seems to be a writer who not only experiences, but is bent upon seeing only that which is detestable in India. The reason behind it can be unearthed by viewing the comment of Sir Simon Jenkins, former chairman of Booker prize jury:

"Indian writers in English face a peculiar problem - they write about India but their readership is mostly in other countries. Because of this paradox they create an image of India that is exotic and doesn't show the real India. I worry about this." (Sunday Times of India, Oct 19, 2008)

### **Exotic vs. Real**

*The White Tiger* is suffering from the same dilemma, where the exotic picture has replaced the real picture. And this is the reason, it has disturbed so many of the Indian intellectuals, some of whom like the author and playwright Manjula Padmanabhan described it as

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‘a tedious, unfunny slog’ and folk expert Ritu Sethi felt that the book ‘took us back three decades’. Aravind Adiga himself confessed that, he came to know what Balram would have felt while going to a city like Delhi by experiencing the same feeling when he went to cities like New York and Sydney. This fact clearly puts his mouthpiece Balram Halwai as an ‘outsider’. Because while going to Delhi the feelings, the emotions that Balram Halwai is dealing with are not the ones which a person would have felt while moving from one part of the country to another, (and yet we have observed the feelings of a rural Indian when he visits Delhi would be much like an outsider’s awe, amazement and fear at times), but they seem to be the ones which a person would have felt while going to Australia or America. This fact itself lays the foundation of partial observance by a detached Indian. However, Adiga has justified his criticism in an interview to Stuart Jeffries by saying-

“At a time when India is going through great changes and with China is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. It is not an attack on the country but, it is about the great process of self- examination. That’s what writers like Flaubert, Balzac, Dickens did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and as a result, England and France are better societies. That’s what I am trying to do.” (The Guardian, 15 Oct. 2008)

If Adiga’s motive, behind the severe criticism of his parent country was to lash out at its evils and reform the society, then it is not only his right but also his duty. None can deny the claims of servitude and injustices put forth by him. India is definitely inflicted by the problems he has brought to the world’s notice. Indian education system has a weak base in the rural region. The levels and quality of education being imparted deteriorates as we move from cities to villages. In our social life we stand divided on the basis of caste and religion. No doubt an institution as sacred as marriage has been maligned in India by the convention of dowry. Corruption has weakened the roots of the nation and exists at all levels. Economic disparity has reached alarming levels and continues to do so. And this economic disparity results in social inequality also. The economically poor, that is Adiga’s ‘colossal underclass’ has to face partiality and is mistreated. All these problems are definitely confronting India, but the criticism of *The*

*White Tiger* is due to the most excoriating manner through which he has reproduced them, which stings the Indian national pride.

### **Provocative?**

However Adiga has justified the severity of work in his book in one of his interviews by declaring that -

“Provocation is one of the legitimate goals of literature”. (The Indian Express, Oct 18 2008)

But the term ‘Provocation’ can itself have multiple meanings as well as multiple effects. Adiga claims to provoke in his work the society of servitude and its sustainers, but does he do so in order to please the western readers or to cleanse the Indian society and thus transforming it into a purer place to live in, thus providing a way out of the destitution and deprivation to the whole nation? This answer can only be provided by Adiga, but he definitely does not show a way out to move forward towards a better society and a better nation. Instead he paints a very dark and bleak picture of the nation, where the economically poor have only one option to break the cage of mental slavery and that is through criminal activities amounting to murder, which is the most disturbing aspect of the novel. Hopefully, he does not intend to provoke the Indian masses to such reactionary tactics.

Similarly the term ‘Legitimate’ can also have its own parameters according to individual inferences. Adiga claims to have legitimately exposed the omnipresent exploitation of the poor. But he does not seem to understand the humans undergoing the suffering. It seems to him a universal law, that the poor are always crude, helpless, suffering and appalled. But he fails to understand that they might be deprived, but not necessarily desperate. However, Adiga’s emphasis that in this desperation it is legitimate enough for them to murder their masters, may be questioned and rejected. But it is unimaginable that something which is termed legitimate by him can provoke someone to an act like murder, which doesn’t qualify as a legitimate action in any country or region whether it be in light or darkness.

Adiga has all the right and under it has projected the problems existing in India in the most piercing and stinging manner. But the fallacy in his work is the fact that he has increased the problems, disparities, insecurities, suppression manifold so that the problems do not just get represented in his work but India comes to be represented by the problems. There is a huge gap, between, pointing to servitude existing in society and portraying a society of servitude. The latter points to servitude as the dominant factor in society. Can America or Australia be considered as a racist country just because of the existence of racism in those nations? Similarly should India be represented as a society of servitude just because of the presence of servitude in the nation? Almost everything that Adiga has written stands true but the manner in which he has represented it in his book is both fallacious and misleading. He seems to view a wound as the whole body, a wrong convention as the whole society and a problem as a whole nation. Adiga's novel is a unique work as far as observing the problems afflicting India is considered, but to view it as a realistic representation of India will be an error of judgment. India is a nation too diverse to be represented realistically in a single book and all that Adiga does is represent the problems existing in India in "The White Tiger". But then one may also raise the question whether an author has the need to represent the whole nation in his book!

Curiously, however, behind Adiga's savage representation of India lies the unpalatable truth of the suffering Indian masses, entailed by the corrupt, lopsided Indian administrative and social system, firmly tilted in favor of the elite. His description may not be truly realistic, but his courageous endeavour to expose the plight of the poor who remain obliquely hidden in Indian democratic system is highly commendable. His work is of paramount importance to realize the invisible boundaries laid upon the progress of the poor and working towards liberating them to the new horizon of equality, education and prosperity.

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