

The Secret History Of Blood

Anoop Kumar turned his life away from a miasma of violence towards mentoring students

ANOOP KUMAR joined engineering college the year Mayawati came to power in Uttar Pradesh. On his first day the physics lecturer told students who had been admitted under the SC/ST quota that 'they better work hard because he was going to mark their papers, not Mayawati'.

At the time, Kumar had an inchoate idea of what it meant to be a dalit. These are some things he knew: his father, a first generation learner from the dhobi community in Lakhimpur Kheri, was smart and proficient in Hindi, Sanskrit and Urdu, but had to resign from his position as a Block Development Officer in the 1970s. Villagers would not even give him water to drink and his superiors were astonished to meet this defiant, outspoken dalit.

When Kumar went to high school in Lucknow as a teenager, he knew he should pretend he was a Rajput but it took a while to understand he needed a fake gotra too.

By the time Kumar got to college in Kanpur, he knew that his hitherto excellent academic record was not going to stop lecturers from saying that they did not expect much from him. In his second year, he helped organise a welcome party for dalit freshers a whole 7 km away from college because they did not want to be accused of invoking caste in college. By the third year Kumar had bluffed his way into a reputation for violence in his tense, volatile campus. He had made sure he was seen often enough in the company of visibly 'rougher elements' to deter any impetuous 'ragging'. In third year, a close friend was hospitalised with a gut torn and eyes wounded by angry uppercaste students. Everyone blamed Kumar for creating an atmosphere in which dalits thought they could assert themselves.

A few weeks later, Kumar was witness to a professor picking on a dalit student. Years of suppressed rage exploded. He found himself beating the professor, yelling like an insane prophet predicting Armageddon.

The college — afraid of a caste atrocities lawsuit — told Kumar he could continue studying there despite his 'misdemeanors'. But Kumar told his father, "If you make me stay, I will kill someone or be killed." His grief-stricken father and three brothers, who had put aside a great deal of their income to educate him, took him home.

A decade later, 32-year-old Kumar is considering a PhD. Nerdy and sardonic, Kumar has a gift for telling a gripping story. He does not hate those who tortured him and says that the socialisation process is what is to blame. He has been running *Insight Young Voices* (insightyv.com), a magazine for dalit students, for the last five years, making tiny inroads into 50 universities across the country. He played a key role in creating the National Dalit Students' Forum.

Beaten down by his engineering college experience he had joined a small Arts college back home and did extremely well. He passed the preliminary examinations for the civil services and headed to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) for his master's degree. "I was amazed to be in a place where dalits organised openly. It was almost 'Hi, I am dalit. How are you?'" Kumar roars with laughter. He was determined not to get involved in anything but the first person he met was a dalit activist. 'Saala, he ruined my life,' he chuckles.

He hovered on the edges of JNU's political circles for a while, shivering and crying as he read Ambedkar and Phule for days on end. But becoming friends with a young dalit student, who had been systematically exploited by her upper-caste lover and his friends, drew him in. Ideology was well and good, Kumar thought, but dalit students had more urgent needs. He turned his room into a library, organised English and computer classes.



Raising hopes Anoop Kumar at his Delhi office
Photo: SHAILENDRA PANDEY

"I WAS AMAZED TO BE IN A PLACE

Aspirations to the civil services were discarded, Kumar's siblings grew angry. "A young dalit man is an investment for the community. He must work hard and marry a dalit girl," Kumar smiles to soften the truth about his community's discomfort with his activist life and his fellow activist (non-dalit) girlfriend. But he has a clear vision.

"Higher education is full of landmines for dalits. They work hard to get there but have their confidence destroyed. When they graduate, they never want to be known as dalit again." So every young student is on his own, struggling as if his experiences are unique and isolated. Kumar and his friends assure students that they can claim pride in being dalit and that they have a duty to plan for others' future.

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This is a complex task, Kumar says, since community pride conventionally boils down to the tracing of ancestry. "We have no kings or warriors. Our history is one of exploitation. What role models do we give our young people? We demand dalit lecturers not to fill quotas. We want young dalits to have someone on campus who raises their expectations of themselves."

A decade ago, when the blood had rushed to his head Kumar had yelled at the campus that he would go to Mayawati. It was a child's claim of a pretend sibling. Today, he is amused by questions about the BSP. "Mayawati has a political future but the BSP has already fulfilled its political function. We are in a post-BSP world. When the media needles me into trying to comment on corruption or statue-building, they don't understand that voting for Mayawati is my act of political assertion. I vote for her because I can.'

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