

UK: Ambedkar, Pankhurst and political awakening

Sunday 12 March 2023, by [ISMAL Sacha](#) (Date first published: 5 February 2023).

Playwright Sonali Bhattacharyya may be known to some readers as a member of Momentum's national coordinating group (elected as part of the [Forward Momentum grouping](#)). Judging by her *Two Billion Beats*, which has just finished a second run at the Orange Tree Theatre in SW London, her generally wider fame as a writer is well-deserved.

(Last year Bhattacharyya's *Chasing Hares*, about factory workers' lives and organising in West Bengal, was on while I was involved in discussions about setting up the [India Labour Solidarity campaign](#). Somehow I didn't go in the end, and hope it will return soon.)

Two Billion Beats' two on-stage characters are both teenage Indian-background girls. Most of the play takes place at a bus stop outside their school (in Leicester), yet it brings in a wide sweep of left-wing politics and history.

The mechanism is that Asha (Shala Nyx) is about to sit her History A-Level; she's been discovering radical political thinkers and organisers that give new perspective on historical struggles including India's for national liberation and the UK's for women's suffrage. In particular British socialist feminist [Sylvia Pankhurst](#) and Indian anti-caste organiser [Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar](#), both referred to and quoted throughout.

These choices raise *Two Billion Beats* into a serious political category. Although neither Ambedkar's campaigning for workers' rights nor Pankhurst's anti-colonialism are mentioned as such, the connection suggested between India's Dalits and poor working-class women in Britain is good.

Asha is getting her head round the important idea of radical history hidden within familiar historical narratives; what it means for her ideas and view of the world; and what she can do about it, in day-to-day life and perhaps more politically.

At the start she avoids talking to the play's other character, her young sister Bettina (Tanvi Virmani), about any of it; we learn what she's thinking from dramatically lit switches to an inner monologue (lighting by Alex Fernandes, in his spare time an activist with the Labour Campaign for Free Movement...) As things progress she does start trying to discuss politics with Bettina.

For the most part Bhattacharyya weaves through the "big politics" without smothering her funny and touching portrayal of the sisters.

Asha's initial problem is that her criticisms of more respectable leaders in the movements she's reading about have upset her mum and her history teacher, posing challenges for getting to university. Quickly, however, bigger larger of injustice unfold in relatively small events affecting Bettina. What do Asha's developing ideas imply for dealing with the situation?

The issue of bigotry and disadvantage faced by Muslims specifically pushes more and more to the

fore - in the events around Bettina and (Asha discovers) in events in the life of their mother twenty years earlier, at the start of the “war on terror”. (The girls are evidently at least third generation, and for once their parent is not a strict or socially conservative first generation migrant.) The Hindu-background sisters face racism, but a Muslim and I think more working-class boy they become entangled with is vulnerable on a different level. (By the way, Bettina is not an Indian name: are they supposed to be mixed heritage?)

Two Billion Beats first appeared in early 2022; since then [events in Leicester specifically](#) have made those themes even more topical.

I thought there was some blurring implied, in the telling of the back story involving her mother, between the kind of left-wing awakening Asha is experiencing and “radicalisation” in some generic sense, including towards right-wing Islamic politics. It’s not clear. Such blurring certainly occurs sometimes in parts of the left, but I may have read in something that wasn’t there, or that Bhattacharyya didn’t intend.

The second half, as Asha’s politicisation unfolds, is a bit less sparky, more preachy, more contrived than the first. But the play is great.

Who will you read about, what ideas will you think about and discuss, what will you do in your two billion beats?

Sacha Ismail

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