



Praful Bidwai Memorial Award

CITATION

The Praful Bidwai Memorial Award -- instituted in the memory of a courageous journalist, author, passionate social activist and engaged public intellectual, who was committed to radical social transformation and justice for all -- seeks to recognise the efforts of individuals and institutions that strive for similar ends.

It is in that spirit that we are delighted to recognise the work of the Maharashtra-based Andhashradha Nirmulan Samiti (MANS, Maharashtra Blind Faith Eradication Committee), by bestowing upon it the Praful Bidwai Memorial Award, 2017.



Set up in 1989 by Narendra Dhabolkar, a medical doctor who was a rationalist and committed public intellectual, MANS has over the years involved itself in multiple social interventions, from battling superstition and caste to educating and engaging with young students. The organisation's prime focus has been to challenge blind faith and superstition while disseminating ideas of rationalism and secularism. Dr Dhabolkar was shot dead for his vision and activism in August 2013, and within the next two years two other highly respected rationalists, Govind Pansare and M.M. Kalburgi, met with the same fate. The fact that their killers were almost certainly members of extreme Hindu outfits testifies to the deep relevance of campaigns of this kind in contemporary India.

Large numbers of ordinary Indians, seeking to solve the problems of everyday life including health reversals and financial troubles, have come to repose blind faith on forces that exploit their gullibility and fear of "evil spirits" to acquire enormous wealth and power for themselves. MANS has taken on these so-called astrologers, peddlers of black magic and 'babas' dispensing spiritual advice. It has opposed practices such as chanting mantras for effecting cures, or undertaking animal and human sacrifice to ward off ill-luck. This has inevitably meant confronting groups from the far right wing in Maharashtra, which have used religion and faith-based practices to build large spheres of influence in the state. These entities have now come to regard MANS as a threat.

Through this award we wish to honour the memory of Dr Dabholkar and recognise the immense courage and resoluteness that MANS and its dedicated team of activists have demonstrated in indefatigably visiting innumerable villages and towns, often using public transport, to connect with people on these issues. They have given lectures, written articles, participated in television debates, brought out their own publications and pamphlets, as well as generated educational materials for public distribution.

Through this award, we wish to applaud MANS's activism of two and half decades which have had some major social impacts. In 2013, thanks to its persistent campaigning, it was able to persuade the state government to pass the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifices and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices, and Black Magic Act, 2013. For years it has also been struggling against caste panchayats dispensing arbitrary and inhumane punishments ('Jaatpanchayatmuthmatiabhiyan'), by holding public meetings and staging its own distinct form of theatre. While MANS has been successful in getting some caste groups in the state to put an end to such panchayats, it is now demanding a law to delegitimise caste panchayats as an institution.

Through this award, we wish to celebrate the efforts of organisations working to promote rationalism in similarly difficult circumstances, even as the challenging struggle continues to bring the killers of Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M. M. Kalburgi to justice.

Through this award we wish to recognise the invaluable contributions that MANS has made in upholding and promoting the foundational values of modern India, including a commitment to equality, justice, secularism and a scientific temper.

Praful Bidwai Memorial Committee

June 23, 2017