



## Book Review on Chandan Pandey's 'Legal Fiction: A Novel' by Abu Siddik

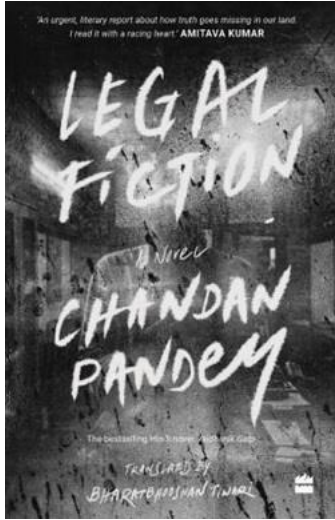
### A literary report on rising violence in India

*Legal Fiction: A Novel*, originally published in Hindi as *Vaidhanik Galp* by Chandan Pandey in 2020, is an English translation by Bharatbhooshan Tiwari, a noted writer and translator in Hindi and English. It was published in 2021. Chandan Pandey writes in Hindi and has won the Bharatiya Jnanpith's Navlekhan Award, the Shailesh Matiani Katha

Puraskar, and is a recipient of the Krishna Baldev Vaid Fellowship.

The blurb of the novel has detailed the story thus:

A late-night phone call from his ex-girlfriend Anasuya forces writer Arjun Kumar to leave his wife and home in Delhi and travel to the mofussil town of Noma on the Up-Bihar border. The reason—Anasuya's husband Rafique Neel, a college professor and theatre director, has mysteriously disappeared. Soon after he arrives, Arjun realizes that things are not as they seem: the police are refusing to register a missing-persons case, and the locals are determined to turn it into a case of 'love jihad'. And when Arjun begins to gig deeper, what he finds endangers him, and everyone around him.



Inspired by true events from today's India, *Legal Fiction: A Novel* is a brilliant existential thriller and a chilling parable of our times.

Amitava Kumar, author of *The Lovers* considers Pandey's novel as 'an urgent, literary report about how truth goes in our land'. Annie Zaidi takes it as a 'compelling' and 'devastating' story. Meena Kandasamy treats it as an 'absorbing snapshot of our time', a 'minefield of hate politics, the intricate, almost invisible fault lines in relationships, and the power of art in imagining a better society'. Author of *Diwali in Muzaffarnagar* Tanuj Solanki stresses that Pandey's novel is a 'cold, dark, tale', and is written 'in the form of a thriller, a sharp look at a 'terrifying Indian-ism and the currents against it'.

## It is a tale of lynching

No authors, however, have said that *Legal Fiction: A Novel* is a literary investigation of one of India's 'horrendous' crimes, mob lynching. Although the story has not reported any mob lynching incident, the fear of being kidnapped, arrested, beaten, or even lynched has gripped every Muslim citizen. It is not the story of love-jihad, of Rafique's missing, or his alleged love affair with one of his students Janaki who is also missing. It is a tale of lynching.

Why is Niyaz, a college-going boy who runs Suhag Studio, attacked by the mob of the Mangal Morcha? Niyaz told us, 'There were two other boys with me in that group, both my classmates in BSc final year. But all they wanted was a Muslim' (p. 149). Rafique is kidnapped because he is a 'brilliant artist and a talented author', who is going to stage a play *Bachane Wala Hai Bhagwan!*, The One Who Saves Is God! The play is based on the mob attacks on Niyaz who is saved from being lynched by an assistant sub-inspector Amandeep Singh and who is suspended for his noble job. But he was officially suspended 'on the charge that he had been misappropriating funds for eight years' (p. 146).

Niyaz recalled the day of the attack, 'I remembered the look on Amit's face as he hit me. There was a look of calm, rather than fury. Amandeep Sahib was sent by Allah to save me. Nobody would have found my corpse had he not been there' (p. 151). From Niyaz we also come to know about the attack on Anuradha. 'Before Amit could hit me a second time, Anuradha came between us and shielded me, the way a roof protects a house'...Anuradha's life is hanging by a thread at a hospital in Mumbai' (p.152).

Rafique and his theatre group 'thought that if they publicized the instances when people saved the lives of others, people would then stop playing with others' lives, or if needed, would

even save them' (p.151). The veteran and respected journalist Ravish Kumar in his book, *The Free Voice* (2019) opined, 'It isn't easy to speak out against Power. Before you speak, you will have to choose between jail and amputation. Or a lynching' (p. 47). Rafique and his students are trying to stage a street play on mob lynching. It is indeed a revolutionary act. It needs immense courage and sacrifice. The political authority of the town of Noma does not allow them to perform the play. That is why the teacher Rafique and his students, Janaki, Jagdish, Kushalpal are one by one reported 'missing'. They are being kidnapped so the play on the day of Dol Mela cannot be staged. The love-jihad story is fabricated to throttle a free, sane and rational voice, a voice that can defy the power.

## **Noma—'a garbage town'**

*Legal Fiction: A Novel* exposes a holy alliance among the unholy, powerful men of the town of Noma. The daroga Shalabh Shrinet, the petty police officers one of whom 'shoved the lathi against Anasuya's stomach' during her visit for registering an FIR for her husband's missing, the single authority of the town Surendra Pratap Malviya-ji, adorably known to Noma residents as Dadda, the pride of the town who retired as a gazette officer, a chemical products scientists, and now running BL(D)U—Baba Lakarnath (Deemed) University which spread over forty acres and looked like the headquarters of some large corporation, his son Amit Malviya who is the chief attacker of Niyaz, Amit's hired goons who take shelter under the political party Mangal Morcha, Pramod Gupta who ran Navbharat Medical Store and was the local correspondent for the *Dainik Jagrit*, and whose signboards announced his interest in medicine, journalism and human rights, —all with the help of money, muscle and political power has turned Noma into 'a jungle' which did not have 'any respect for the rule of law' (p.136). The town is sterile as a

barren land. The denizens did believe in 'the web of lies that had been spun around his life [Rafique]. His diary, his notes, his script—all of them were telling the truth, but what was available to everyone was the newspapers, the police, the Morcha, and their homicidal ambitions' (p.153). These educated, sophisticated, powerful wealthy people were 'in love with themselves. They had several achievements to boast of, but all of them looked restless' (p.69). They mocked Rafique, 'Such a big author is in our city and nobody knows about it?' (52) The city's literary circle is trash. No writers of the town have the guts to appreciate the lover of Mayakovsky or Muktibodh's poetry or Premchand's stories.

These big names of the town were ever vigilant of their town's reputation. They accused the narrator that his Facebook post had tarnished the town's image and that he had come to Noma to meet his ex-girlfriend Anasuya. Against this charge Arjun Kumar burst:

I haven't come here to *find* Rafique. He is not a lost tune or a memory that needs to be found. He is a living, breathing person, his wife is pregnant, and—now listen to this carefully—not a single person, not one person from this garbage town must have come forward to help her. That's why she thought of me' (p.77).

## Attacks on artists

According to the 2021 Freedom to Write report published by a non-governmental organization Pen America which works to protect freedom of expression across the world, 277 writers and academics were detained or in prison in 36 countries last year. Of them, eight are from India – comedian Munawar Faruqui and Bhima Koregaon accused persons Varavara Rao, Sudha Bharadwaj, Vernon Gonsalves, Hany Babu, Gautam Navlakha, Arun Ferreira and Anand Teltumbde. Aman Abhishek , a noted columnist, claims since assuming power in

2014, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been systematically destroying the secular, democratic foundations of India and transforming the country into a strictly Hindu nation. BJP's Hindu supremacist ideology portrays Muslims as the nefarious 'other'. Moreover, Hindu supremacy is about the hegemony of upper-caste Hindus. Lower castes, which constitute the majority of the Indian population, are, on one hand, told to be proud Hindus, and on the other hand, oppressed violently because the caste system deems them inferior. It is in this context that anti-caste, Dalit scholars such as Teltumbde, as well as Muslim and other dissident academics, are accused of being 'anti-national' and prosecuted with fabricated charges.

Rafique is kidnapped apparently for his love jihad activities. But behind his 'missing', his role as an artist to stage a play that has the power to disturb the authority of the town is crucial. If Rafique has been a 'genteel' teacher, whose activities will be limited to reading only 'prescribed' books, taking notes from them, and disseminating those notes among his students, he will not be a threat to the town's image. Even if he is ready to stage the play, *Chandragupta*, as suggested by Dadda, will be praised for his art. But Rafique is a creative artist. He writes scripts for public performances to call attention to incidents of mob lynching.

## **Commentary on contemporary India**

Pandey's fiction needs to be read in the context of the rising attacks on intellectuals, poets, writers, and activists across the country. It also needs to be read against the backdrop of rising incidents of mob lynching. It needs to be read against the background of hate crimes against the Muslims and Dalits of contemporary India. Trading cows, eating beef, wearing a skull cap or burqa or niqab, falling in love with a girl or boy of another community, and the likes are merely excuses for the

Hindutva mobs to beat or lynch them. There is absolutely no space for a Muslim artist like Rafique. His survival demands his denial of any creative pursuits.

I am a bit uncomfortable with the flow of Tiwari's prose. The cover of the book is not catchy. But the story is superb. It deserves a wide readership.

Title: Legal Fiction: A Novel

Author: Chandan Pandey

Available: [Amazon](#)

## **Abu Siddik**

---

He writes critical essays, poems and short stories. His writing is mainly based on the issues that directly affect the vulnerable and the disadvantaged people of India—Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, the marginalised and the invisible. He has 12 books to his credit. His recent publication includes *Identity and Belonging: Mapping the Margins* (Authorspress, New Delhi), *Banger Musolman: Samaj Pironer Dahan Britanto* (Gangchil, Kolkata).

---

## [Get Your Book Reviewed](#)

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here](#).

## [Authors & Books](#)

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.