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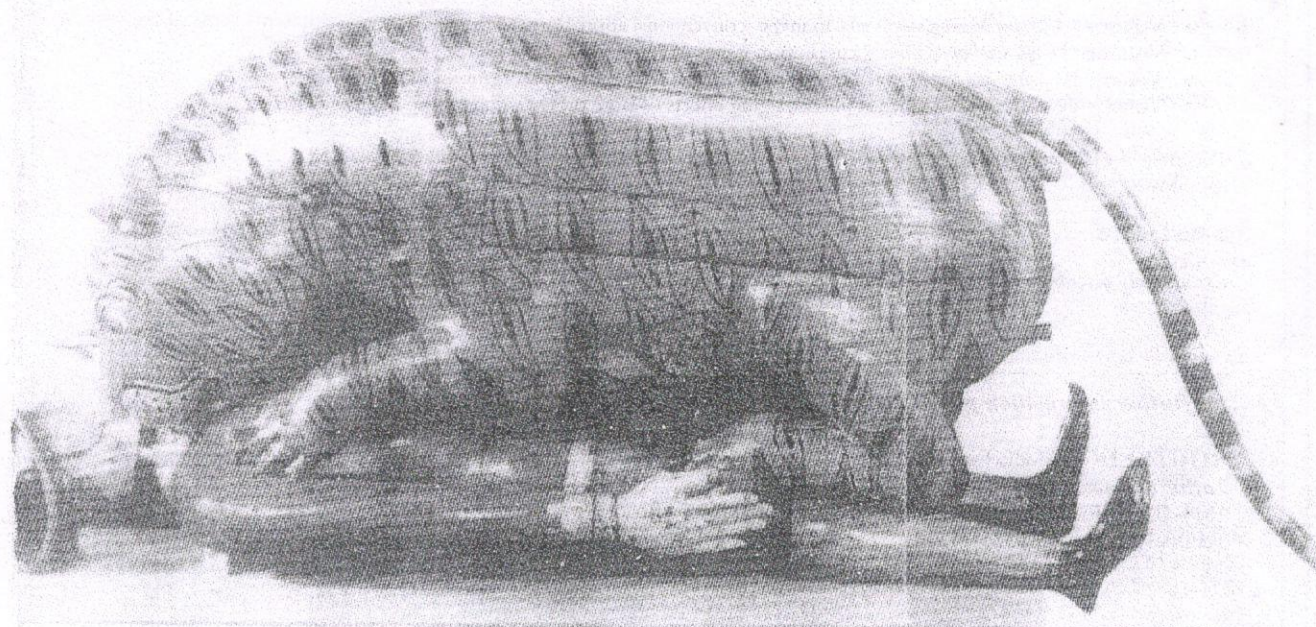
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Sikhs and Sikh History

J.S. Grewal

A HISTORY OF THE SIKHS VOL. I & VOL. II

By Khushwant Singh

Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1999, pp. xiv+420 & xii+526, Rs. 295 each

THE SIKHS

By Patwant Singh

HarperCollins, New Delhi, 1999, pp. xxiv+312, price not given.

At times it appears that perhaps the Khalsa have run the course of history prescribed for them and their Gurus in their inscrutable wisdom have given them leaders who will fulfil their death-wish'. This seemingly pessimistic but nonetheless rhetorical sentence concludes the *History of the Sikhs* by Khushwant Singh. The quality of Sikh leadership had begun to be vulgarized after Independence. Bhindranwale, Badal, Balwant Singh, Amrinder Singh and Gurcharan Singh Tohra represented in various forms the 'degradation in the quality of leadership'.

The Congress leadership fared no better. The terms of reference given to the commission for the Punjabi-speaking state created serious problems. Indira Gandhi's award of 1970 too was unfair to the Punjab. Anxious to prove that he was 'a more devout Sikh than the Akalis', Giani Zail Singh promoted Sikh fundamentalism. Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi and Darbara Singh, as much as Giani Zail Singh tried to use Bhindranwale as 'a pawn in the game of party politics'. Mrs. Gandhi did not take the *Dharam Yudh Morcha* seriously, and continued to play political games with the akalis. Advised by Arun Nehru, Arun Singh, K.P. Singh Deo and Sanjay Gandhi she decided to use the army. Her young gang of counsellors directed the operations which engendered feelings of alienation among the Sikhs and induced hundreds of young Sikh men and women to turn into terrorists. Mrs. Gandhi's assassination was followed by a sordid tale of administrative and political complicity in a massacre of innocents unparalleled in the history of India after Independence. Rajiv Gandhi almost condoned the violence and several of the culprits were actually rewarded. Rajiv Gandhi also gave the first blow to the Longowal-Gandhi accord which failed primarily because he failed to fulfil his part. Thus, neither the Akali leadership nor the Congress party has played any commendable role in the Sikh affairs after Independence. Contemporary Sikh history for Khushwant Singh becomes a sad and tragic tale, like a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.

Patwant Singh concludes his book in a different mood. The achievements and adversities of Sikh history have produced 'a compelling optimism' which has helped the Sikhs to emerge stronger after each trial. 'This quality has served the Sikhs admirably over the centuries, as it will in the centuries to come'. Patwant Singh looks upon the reorganization of provinces on linguistic lines as a folly pregnant with 'damaging effect on India's social fabric'. Indira Gandhi compounded the damage in the case of the Punjabi-speaking state because she did not want to let down the Hindu supporters of the Congress. The way in which the state was created threw up the issues of Punjabi-speaking areas left out of the Punjab, its capital city, and the river waters. The Akali demand for a truly federal system was misrepresented as separatist. Mrs. Gandhi never forgave the Akalis for their resistance to the Emergency. She chose Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to wean the Sikhs away from the moderate Akalis. He was built up to communalize Punjab's politics. Once this goal was achieved, 'the final gory scene was enacted in a carefully conceived political move which required the Indian army to unleash its firepower against the Golden Temple'. After her assassination, innocent Sikh men, women and children were killed in the capital. A four-day orgy of reprisal was encouraged by ministers and members of parliament, with the connivance of the police. The movement for Khalistan grew out of a steadily increasing sense of outrage. The bold initiative of Rajiv Gandhi was sabotaged by his advisors and the Punjab Accord was derailed. This failure fed the burgeoning militancy. Ignoring its real motivation and the genuine grievances of the Sikhs, and projecting the entire struggle as terrorist-inspired, New Delhi resorted to and justified state repression. A part of the disinformation strategy was to project Pakistan as the villain for the problems created by New Delhi. Almost all Sikhs now agree that the Indian state will have to adopt more mannerly policies in its dealings with them. 'They do not seek special dispensations, but reject discrimination due to their being a religious

minority'. Thus, contemporary Sikh history for Patwant Singh is a tragic tale, but a tale that carries a grave import for the future.

Both Khushwant Singh and Patwant Singh appear to have been deeply moved by the events of the past two decades. However, much of Khushwant Singh's *History* was written before the creation of the Punjabi-speaking state in 1966. In the 1960s, the story of the Sikhs from the time of Guru Nanak to the fall of the Kingdom of Lahore in 1849 was 'the story of the rise, fulfilment, and collapse of Punjabi nationalism'. Guru Nanak and his successors promoted the spirit of rapprochement between Hindus and Muslims of the Punjab, speaking the language of the people. Though Guru Nanak did not have a very large following, a considerable number of people belonging to other communities paid homage to the ideal of 'there is no Hindu; there is no Musalman'. And this ideal 'gave birth to Punjabi consciousness and Punjabi nationalism'. It is difficult to think of any empirical evidence from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in support of this hypothesis.

In fact Khushwant Singh himself tells us that Guru Nanak founded a new religion and by the beginning of the seventeenth century the Sikhs 'had become conscious of the fact that they were now neither Hindus nor Muslims but formed a third community of their own'. The call to arms during the seventeenth century was hardly conducive to rapprochement with either the Mughal State or its Hindu and Muslim supporters. Khushwant Singh's regret that Banda Bahadur's bid for power was a setback to the movement 'to infuse the sentiment of Punjabi nationalism in the masses' is misplaced. He does not cite any evidence in support of this supposed movement. Ranjit Singh nurtured 'the consciousness of regional nationalism' with his respect for other faiths and his court reflecting the secular pattern of his state. His prime minister was a Dogra, his foreign minister was a Muslim, and his finance minister was a Brahmin. Muslim artillery generals and influential Muslims mingled with Sikh Sardars and Hindus. Ranjit Singh's attitudes won the loyalty of his subjects. The resurgent nationalism became a powerful weapon of 'Punjabi imperialism'. Here for the first time Khushwant Singh talks of a politico-administrative framework in which Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims could operate in the interest of the state as well as their own. But even here he ignores the late eighteenth-century Sikh chiefs who too had employed Hindus and Muslims in their service. We know that 'Punjabi' sentiment and consciousness had begun to appear in the late eighteenth century to gain greater momentum in the early nineteenth century. In other words, consciousness of Punjabi identity was largely a product of the period of Sikh rule. Khushwant Singh projects this situation backwards, unconsciously placing the cart before the horse.

Khushwant Singh tells us that the nationalist movement began to peter out after Ranjit Singh's death and finally collapsed in a clash of arms with the British in 1848-49. However, the Var of Shah Muhammad, written after the first Anglo-Sikh war, gives trenchant expression to Punjabi patriotism. A Muslim artillery General is known to have fought in the last battle of the second Anglo-Sikh War in 1848-49. Khushwant Singh chose to use the term 'Punjabi nationalism' without trying to explain what he means by it, and without making any attempt to grapple with the rise of the consciousness of Punjabi regional identity. In his summing up of Sikh history in the present edition he does not talk of 'Punjabi nationalism' and looks upon the forty years of Ranjit Singh's rule as 'the golden age of Sikh political achievement'.

The period of colonial rule was seen by Khushwant Singh as 'the Sikh struggle for survival as a separate community'. Within the first two centuries of their history the Sikhs had evolved 'a faith, outlook, and way of life which gave them a semblance of nationhood'. Their resistance to British expansionism and Muslim domination was inspired by the ideal of national survival which remained operative after Independence. The British started recruiting the Sikhs to the British Indian army, cautiously before 1857 and as a matter of deliberate policy afterwards, which promoted separate Sikh identity. The activities of Christian missions, proselytization by the Arya Samaj, and introduction of the rational thought of the West obliged the Sikhs to redefine their faith and to bring about social reform. When the Arya Samajists claimed that Sikhism was a branch of Hinduism, the Sikhs insisted that they were a distinct and separate community. Sikh politics till the first World War was marked generally by cooperation with the British. After the War, three important parties arose among the Sikhs: the Marxists, the Nationalists and the Akalis. All of them were opposed to the British. The Akalis turned out to be the most important. Like the Chief Khalsa Diwan they too fought for reservations and weightage in constitutional politics, and, unlike the Chief Khalsa Diwan, they fought also for the control of Gurudwaras, which alienated them from both Hindus and Muslims. Whether the Sikhs were a separate people or a branch of the Hindu social system remained an issue of debate even after the Sikh Gurdwaras Act. The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee became a sort of parliament of the Sikhs, and the Shiromani Akali Dal became its army. The control of the SGPC, a government within the government, became the focal point of Sikh politics. The award given by Ramsay MacDonald was a bitter blow to the Sikhs. It gave the Muslims a permanent communal majority in the Punjab. After the Pakistan resolution of 1940, the alternatives before the Sikhs were to align with the Congress for resisting the formation of Pakistan or to strive

for a state of their own. Disappointed with the Congress, the Akali leaders toyed with the idea of a Sikh state but finally settled for the partition of their province to escape Muslim domination. After Independence, they worked for a Punjabi-speaking state to escape Hindu domination. Khushwant Singh's hypothesis of Sikh identity as the basis of Sikh politics under colonial rule is more tenable than his hypothesis of 'Punjabi nationalism' before 1849.

The scope of Khushwant Singh's *History* is much wider than the exposition of 'Punjabi nationalism' and 'Sikh identity'. But most of the time he relates facts, and even views, coming from his sources. Their accuracy or inaccuracy is in a sense accidental. For example, when he says that Banda Bahadur abolished the *zamindari* system he repeats Ganda Singh, not bothering to know that Ganda Singh had cited no evidence in support of his statement. A good example of Khushwant Singh's indifference to factual accuracy is his explanation and definition of 'Punjab'. He talks of the *Sapta Sindhu*, the land of seven seas, of the Aryans and the *Hafta Hindua* of the Persians. 'After the seventh river, the Saraswati, dried up, people began to exclude the Indus from the count (since it marked only the western boundary of the province) and renamed it after the remaining five rivers as Pentapotamia or the *panj-ab*, the land of the five waters'. All this is little more than a conjecture based on common sense. Khushwant Singh goes on to add that Madra Desha, 'the land of the *madras*', was named after Madri, the mother of the Pandavas. Here, even common sense is not at work. Both Madra and Madri, the name of the country and the princess, were derived from the name of the people called the *madras*.

One of the two major purposes of Patwant Singh in writing *The Sikhs* was to correct the wrong impression deliberately created by the mandarins of modern India that the Sikhs were responsible for creating the most dangerous crisis faced by the Republic of India in the first fifty years of its existence. This is amply reflected in Patwant Singh's treatment of contemporary Sikh history. His second purpose was to tell 'the stirring story of a people and a faith' to which he belongs. He tells us at the outset that Sikhism stands for an egalitarian social order and the Brahmins of India, who have upheld the inegalitarian caste system for centuries to perpetuate their own domination, do not relish the Sikh faith and feel uneasy about those who cherish it. 'Any faith that believes in equality among human beings and sees God in each of them, is an intrusion—an assault—on those who constitute the caste hierarchy'. But this hypothesis remains a mere statement, unsupported by empirical evidence.

Patwant Singh is far more emphatic than Khushwant Singh in underscoring the originality and uniqueness of the Sikh faith. It emerged 'not as a synthesis of established

religions but as an alternative to them'. He also gives greater importance to the martyrdom of Guru Arjan, the event which 'turned a peaceful movement of reconciliation and reform into the most militant ever witnessed in India'. Patwant Singh's emphasis on Sikh identity also is greater. 'Attitudes to caste, idols, rituals, orthodoxy, priesthood, fanaticism and bigotry had already set the Sikhs apart from Hindus and Muslims, but the time had now come to develop even more assertive Sikh characteristics and to establish a visible and separate Sikh identity. The creation of the Khalsa reflected Guru Gobind Singh's conviction that Sikhism was a *tisra panth*, a third religion, distinct from Hinduism and Islam'.

Differences of degree with Khushwant Singh do not mean that Patwant Singh gives a new or an accurate account of the early Sikh tradition. The only new thing that he says about Guru Hargobind, for example, is that he made the Gurudwara 'not only inseparable from Sikh religion, but the enduring symbol of Sikh faith'. A close study of the Vars of Bhai Gurdas would show that the term *dharamsal* remained in use for the Sikh sacred space and the term 'gurudwara' was used literally for the door or place of the living Guru. Patwant Singh appears to assign to the period of Guru Hargobind a development which began to take place in the eighteenth century. Not knowing the relative positions of a *subadar* and a *faujdar*, Patwant Singh places the former under the command of the latter. He quotes 'a modern historian' to the effect that the Khalifa of Baghdad refused to see the envoy of Aurangzeb. The 'modern historian' is lucky to remain unnamed because the last Khalifa of Baghdad had been killed four centuries earlier. These are small points but they do reflect indifference to factual accuracy. Patwant Singh does not know that recensions of the Granth Sahib containing the *bani* of Guru Tegh Bahadur at right places were prepared before the end of the seventeenth century. One respectable view is that Guru Gobind Singh himself got such a recension prepared at Damdama in Anandpur Sahib. In fact, Patwant Singh has not bothered to consult the work of Sikh scholars written in Punjabi.

Like Khushwant Singh, Patwant Singh relies mainly on Ganda Singh for his account of Banda Bahadur and repeats the abolition of the *zamindari* system by Banda. Despite the freshness of the title 'Retribution and Consolidation', the chapter on the political struggle of the Khalsa during the eighteenth century contains no new fact and no new insight. Like Khushwant Singh, Patwant Singh assumes differences rather than similarities between the late eighteenth-century Sikh rule and the rule of Ranjit Singh. He accepts the received wisdom that twelve Sikh *misl*s emerged in the Punjab 'as fairly well-defined entities'. When we look at the so-called *misl*s rather closely, we discover individual rulers exercising political power without reference

to anyone else. The *misl*s did play a crucial role in the rise of the Sikhs into political power during the 1750s and the 1760s. But their role ended with the occupation of territories by individuals. That they continued to operate so as to form a republican system called *misdari* is a mere assumption. It is not founded on empirical evidence.

Like Khushwant Singh, Patwant Singh talks of the empire of the Sikhs from 1801 to 1839, from the supposed coronation of Ranjit Singh as Maharaja to his death. Before 1799, he is seen as a *misl* chief. Ranjit Singh's conquests at the cost of the Sikh chiefs are seen as unification of the *misl*s and his conquests at the cost of non-Sikh chiefs are seen as 'conquests'. Khushwant Singh quotes Lawrence's fictional work to give Ranjit Singh's own estimate of his achievement. Patwant Singh quotes him to show that Ranjit Singh had formed a realistic assessment of his own power and that of the British. Patwant Singh adds that Lawrence had 'served in Ranjit Singh's army'. Patwant Singh quotes a Sikh scholar of 'impressive-credentials' to the effect that Ranjit Singh undermined the basis of a republican Sikh polity by assuming 'the un-Sikh title of Maharaja'. But the days of the *gurmata* were virtually over much before Ranjit Singh succeeded his father. Misconception of Ranjit Singh's position as a ruler springs from the misconception of Sikh polity during the late eighteenth century.

In the chapter on 'grievous betrayals' (1839-1849) Patwant Singh repeats the familiar idea that British victories in the two Sikh wars were not won by valour on the battlefield but by persuading their adversary's key men to betray their side. Treason was rewarded. However, the ultimate blame for what happened to the Sikh state rested neither with the Dogras, nor with the Brahmins who subverted it from within, nor with the British who triumphed with the help of traitors. The Sikhs themselves were responsible for failing to protect 'the magnificent legacy of an exceptional man'. The 'exceptional man' himself contributed his share to the tragedy by ignoring 'the republican temper of the Khalsa and leaving its fate to monarchical whims'. The notion of 'the republican Khalsa' in the context of state formation under Sikh rule is misleading. Ratan Singh Bhangu, writing in the 1840s, knew better: he talked of 'kingship for every saddle' (*hannay hannay miri*) as prophesied by Guru Gobind Singh himself.

In the chapter on colonial rule Patwant Singh is anxious to explain why the Sikhs did not revolt in 1857-58. An important result of missionary activities in the Punjab was 'the determined move by Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims to rediscover and re-emphasize the essentials of their own faiths'. The Singh Sabha movement was a cultural counter-offensive against missionary arrogance. The re-emergence of the Tat-Khalsa, who highlighted the vital importance of the Guru, the Granth and the Gurudwara, revitalized the

Khushwant Singh and Patwant Singh are not professional historians but they are reputable writers. A reader attracted by their literary reputation will not be disappointed with their books : they are eminently readable.

Sikhs. The Arya Samaj's virulent expression of religious militancy against the Sikhs widened the Sikh-Hindu divide. The SGPC and the Shiromani Akali Dal were the Sikh response to the trend of forming political parties as an extension of religious concerns. When the Muslims asked for Pakistan in view of the Hindu resurgence the Sikhs did not opt for Sikhistan. The stand of the Sikhs at the time of Partition resulted from their inviolable emotional involvement with their motherland, India. They did not know that in India after Independence they would face 'communal intolerance'.

It is true that facts are made to speak by the historian. However, Khushwant Singh and Patwant Singh are not content with speaking through their facts. They try to enliven them with their asides, reflections and generalizations which spring from their political outlook, goodwill for the Sikh community, and humanistic values. Their overt 'interpretation' becomes more important than their factual narrative.

Khushwant Singh and Patwant Singh are not professional historians but they are reputable writers. A reader attracted by their literary reputation will not be disappointed with their books : they are eminently readable. Their narrative skills are engaging. They cover the entire range of Sikh history—which can be one more attraction for the general reader. But they do not take into account much of the scholarly research of the past few decades—not even Patwant Singh who has written *The Sikhs* very recently.

All the three volumes are well produced. Each volume has notes, maps, illustrations, a bibliography and an index. Khushwant Singh's two volumes have fourteen appendices too. The scholarly format of the works is a homage that Khushwant Singh and Patwant Singh pay to the credibility of professionalism. It is not surprising that all the maps are not accurate, or that nearly all of them are decorative rather than illustrative. Khushwant Singh's bibliography is dated and inflated. Even Patwant Singh's 'further reading' does not imply that his work takes it all into account. There is no discrimination between good, bad or indifferent sources or secondary works. Literary art is no substitute for sustained scholarship. But the general reader is not aware of the difference, and has the right to prefer style over substance. ■

J.S. Grewal is a Professor at Panjab University, Chandigarh.

Fact And Fiction

Indivar Kamtekar

INVENTING BOUNDARIES: GENDER, POLITICS AND THE PARTITION OF INDIA

Edited by Mushirul Hasan

OUP, Delhi, 2000, pp. 393, Rs. 595.00

The year 1947 was exciting in India, but how exciting are the writings about India's partition? The contents of this book provide you a means to judge for yourself. In addition to an introduction, there are nineteen items in the volume, including seven essays and extracts from the 1940s, nine later articles of history or literary criticism, a couple of pieces of fiction, and one interview.

As an edited volume on the partition of India, this is an addition to a crowded field. C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright inaugurated a trend with *The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives, 1935-1947*, published in London in 1970. A seminar at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library led to A.K. Gupta (ed), *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47* published by Manohar in 1987. D.A. Low and H. Brasted's volume on 'Northern India and Independence' was published by Sage in 1998. Mushirul Hasan, the editor of the book under review, has already edited an earlier volume on the same subject: *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (OUP, Delhi, 1993). The declared aim of his new collection is to supplement his earlier one. *The Partition in Retrospect*, edited by Amrik Singh, has also appeared this year (Mushirul Hasan's introduction to this volume, which had appeared earlier in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, is published there as well). Among the better-known collections of fiction translated into English are Saros Cowasjee and K.S. Duggal (eds), *Orphans of the Storm: Stories on the Partition of India* (UBSPD, Delhi, 1995) and Alok Bhalla (ed), *Stories About the Partition of India* (3 Vols, HarperCollins, Delhi, 1994).

One test of a volume on the partition is how far it goes beyond what one might call the 'Agony-Trauma-Pain-Plight' (ATPP) syndrome. Times were tough during and after partition, but many of the refugees picked themselves up off the ground and got their act together again. We all know that they often prospered. Writers of various kinds seem to have continued weeping and wailing for much longer, and very determinedly too. Are writers very sensitive, or is it that, compared to the common man, the intellectual is uncommonly morose? Whatever be the case, the time has come for less tears and more analysis. In Punjabi English, this means saying good bye to 'hai'.

On this criterion, many of the essays in this volume score well. The book is divided into three sections of about 130 pages each, titled 'The Polemic', 'The Reckoning' and

'The Repining'. The first section consists of writings from the 1940s. Among the tracts for those times is B.R. Ambedkar's *Thoughts on Pakistan* (1941), which forcefully argues in favour of the creation of Pakistan, with all of the great man's formidable clarity. Even Ambedkar can become confusing though, as when he writes of Hinduism and Islam: "Notwithstanding the efforts made to bring the creeds together by reformers like Akbar and Kabir, the ethical realities behind each have still remained, to use a mathematical phrase, surds which nothing can alter or make integers capable of having a common denominator" (pp. 48-49). Figure out the ramifications of that one! Sajjad Zaheer's *A Case for Congress-League Unity* (1944), while praising the handling of the nationalities question in the USSR, puts forward the contemporary Communist view 'that the demand for Muslim self-determination or Pakistan is a just, progressive and national demand, and is the positive expression of the very freedom and democracy for which Congressmen have striven and undergone so much suffering all these years' (p. 113). No wonder Congressmen were infuriated by Communists! Radha Kamal Mukerjee's *An Economist Looks at Pakistan* (1944), after listing the percentages of Hindus and Muslims in the various districts of Punjab and Bengal, deems that: 'It is inconceivable that where the religious groups are so numerically strong and balanced and where economic and social relations of the two communities so interwoven and intermingled in the villages, religion can be any practical basis of political separation' (p. 106).

The next section moves to articles of a historical nature. Mushirul Hasan's article on the Aligarh Muslim University, displaying convincingly detailed knowledge, documents that the students of the university worked with enthusiasm and energy for the creation of Pakistan. This has been said often before, but never with better footnotes. Yohanan Friedmann's article on the attitude of the ulama towards Pakistan reveals their suspicions of Jinnah, who came across as too westernized to appeal to the truly orthodox. V.N. Datta's article on 'Punjabi Refugees and the Urban Development of Greater Delhi' describes meticulously, with case histories, statistics, and admiration, how this community revived itself, and transformed the city.

The word 'gender' in the subtitle of this book is justified by the inclusion of two essays, the first by Urvashi Butalia and the second by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, on women's experiences of the partition. In this research, a hitherto submerged and silenced human experience emerges and finds a voice. Tales of abduction and rape in 1947 are no surprise to anyone in northern India, but this analysis goes far beyond recounting such horrors. The analysis stresses the remarkable fact that the Indian and Pakistani states forcibly "recovered" women who often had no desire to cross the border and return to their original families. After their initial abduction,

many of the women had settled down as well as they could into their new environment. They rightly feared that they might be unwelcome if they returned home. In the states' calculations, however, the women's wishes were not allowed to play any part in their own future. If the women had earlier been treated as the property of men, they were now treated as the property of the Indian and Pakistani states. Their return was made into a matter of national pride. This meant, in effect, a second abduction: this time an official, governmental one. Drawn in large measure from interviews, this is a fascinating story, vividly told. After these articles were originally published, the authors have written full books on the subject, which constitute the most exciting recent work on the partition.

The last section of the book, 'The Repining', consists mainly of literature and literary criticism. Items by Saadat Hasan Manto are, quite rightly, mandatory in collections on partition. This riveting Urdu writer, genius and drunkard, dared to write about the partition with a savage cynicism and a trenchant black humour. In this volume a dozen pages from him are included. One snippet: 'Look yaar, you sold me petrol at black-market prices and not a single shop could be set on fire'.

Manto has been quoted much but imitated little. His writing is marked, most of all, by his contempt for the careful display of correct emotion. In a nuanced and witty essay on the "progressive" Hindi literature of this period, based mainly on his scrutiny of the monthly literary journal *Hans*, Alok Rai finds stories staggering under the weight of political correctness. The stories are crippled by their burden: Rai finds in them laudable motives, rather than artistic distinction. In a memorable phrase, Rai calls them 'a failed ventriloquial exercise'. The stories are drenched with poverty, starvation and death, but unable to transcend the fact that they are written by middle-class writers to assuage middle-class guilt.

As their friends know and students suspect, academics are competitive and often dislike each other. The roots of many hatreds lie buried in bad reviews. The last essay in this book is Jason Francisco's appropriately titled 'In the Heat of Fratricide'. Francisco praises Mushirul Hasan and denigrates Alok Bhalla, the editor of a well-known three-volume collection of partition stories. Decide for yourself whether this is a mere skirmish, or whether it is mortal combat. The last sentence on the last page of Francisco's review article (and hence the last sentence on the last page of this entire book) reads as follows: 'It is not that Bhalla is irresponsible in taking editorial licence with Manto's original, but in attacking Hasan's licence he shows a Janus-face'. Also note that the presence of the "J" in the sentence makes the allegation more decorous than it would otherwise have been.

Considering the volume as a whole, some omissions are striking. The Polemic-Reckoning-Repining format leaves out the Pakistani national viewpoint, in which the

costs of the partition were worth the result. The viewpoint of Pakistan may be deplored, but it should not be ignored. On the technical academic front, two notable monographs in the 1980s and 1990s were Ayesha Jalal's *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, The Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1985) and Joya Chatterji's *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge, 1994). Ayesha Jalal argued, controversially, that for Jinnah the Pakistan demand was a bargaining counter for a share of power in a united India, and that the creation of the separate state of Pakistan was an unintended outcome of a strategy that misfired. Joya Chatterji's study of Bengal highlighted the Hindu bhadralok's fear of Muslim domination and consequent support for partition, presenting the partition as a 'considered Hindu choice, rather than as a purely Muslim one. There must be reasons for the omission of these two authors, but it is unfortunate for the reader that neither this collection, nor the previous partition volume published by the OUP, has any excerpt from their writings. Matters are further confused by the statements that 'What Hasan and others call into question is how much Jinnah actually wanted partition' (p. 379); or that 'Hasan and his corps' argue that 'control over a strong central government...ultimately proved more important to the Congress than Indian unity' (p. 380).

There are a few typographical errors. If Choudhry Khaliquzzaman had indeed written *Pathway to Pakistan* in 1916, as indicated on page 151, his prescience would have been alarming; as it happens, the book was published only in 1961. The figure of 35 million for the number of Christians in British India (p. 79) has a moral: look at decimals carefully, especially when conversions may be involved. The claim on page 101 that in Panjab 'the Sikhs increased from 131,000 only in 1911 to as many as 3,107,000 in 1931' suggests a stupendous reproductive power (and single-mindedness!) which compels respect.

A general issue arises from this volume, as from the many other volumes on partition. There is sometimes a tendency to run fact and fiction together seamlessly, interweaving them as if, because they deal with the same reality, the pictures that emerge from them must be similar. The presence of fiction pervades many academic pieces in many collections. There is a problem here. Great art should not be mistaken for accurate social science. A student of the Bengal famine, for example, would be well advised to place more reliance on the work of A.K. Sen than on Satyajit Ray's *Asani Sanket*: to see the suffering of low-caste agricultural labourers, rather than that of a Brahmin priest, as typical. A historian who tries to ride piggy-back on a poet or novelist or film maker, is liable to find himself travelling the wrong direction. The riots in Punjab led to some good short stories: but these provide no substitute for academic analysis.

There is another reason for this. Progressive writers have commandeered the commanding heights of partition fiction, but in the times they write about, the plains of northern India were commanded by murderous mobs. The former groups are not too good at explaining the actions of the latter. Nor do great writers necessarily try to do so. As Bhasham Sahni says in the interview published here:

If you want to know my own opinions about what happened and why, I still may not be able to tell you. All I can say is that as a humanist and a writer I cherish certain values and modes of behaviour. I deplore the killing that took place.

Or as Krishna Sobti told the interviewer, Alok Bhalla, in 1997:

Writers on both sides—soon realized that after so much of hatred, violence and killings, human values had got to be affirmed and restored...it was necessary to salvage something that remained untouched by violence.

In other words, the literature we read is redemptive in intention. It valorizes courage, compassion, and love; while old newspapers report plunder, murder and hate. The stories we read uphold values: the reality of the times damaged them. The output of the creative artist consequently differs from writings based on the archives. We need to differentiate the historical approach to the partition from the literary approach. History and literature may supplement each other at times; but they can also be used to interrogate each other.

To the historian it may seem that fiction (though often of the ATPP type), has sometimes scaled peaks of excellence, while the factual study of partition is still—with the exception of feminist writing—meandering somewhere in the foothills. Mushirul Hasan writes sternly: 'Today the historiography of partition is hampered, by mental laziness and pious rehashing even more than by political ideology' (p. 18). How true! Those of us who have been moved by the tribulations of the Muslim family in Agra depicted in M.S. Sathyu's fine film *Garam Hawa*, may irritably feel that to particular academic essays on the partition, the title—in English translation—of Sathyu's film, may fittingly apply. To avoid this, the commandment to historians of partition must for the time being be (to recall the admonition of one fictional character to another): 'More matter with less art'.

This volume is, then, essentially a useful assemblage of diverse writings, all of which (excluding the prologue, but including the introduction) have been previously published elsewhere. Its merit is to bring together, in a convenient and attractive format, materials dispersed in various libraries. For that reason, it should be purchased by anyone really interested in the partition of India. ■

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Mysore Under Haider and Tipu

Meena Bhargava

CONFRONTING COLONIALISM: RESISTANCE AND MODERNIZATION UNDER HAIDER ALI AND TIPU SULTAN

Edited by Irfan Habib

Tulika, 1999, pp. xviii + 206, Rs. 220.00

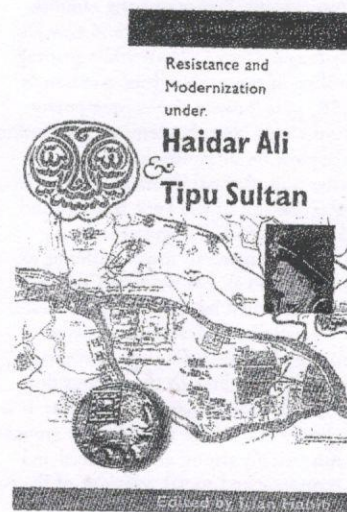
A day in the history of India, May 4, 1799, at Srirangapatnam had aroused different sentiments in different sets of people. The British had celebrated it as the day of the vanquished when one of their most determined opponents, Tipu Sultan, was defeated. But it was a day of grief for those who had fought and supported the fighters against colonialism. This volume is in commemoration of that day, to celebrate the memory of the martyrs who fought and opposed colonialism. It was the bi-centenary of the event on May 4, 1999. Yet, except for the Government of Karnataka, which celebrated the memory of its local heroes, the nation maintained an eerie silence. The silence could still have been accepted had it been graceful. The hostile demonstrations against the celebrations organized by the state of Karnataka were shocking.

To remind the "unawakened nation" of its two formidable, indomitable sons—Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan—and to reiterate their invaluable contributions to the national spirit in the eighteenth century, the Indian History Congress decided to felicitate the event. This volume is part of this decision. The papers contained in the book have been selected from the proceedings of the Indian History Congress and several other journals. The focus is on Mysore under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan.

The Introduction by Irfan Habib is exhaustive and deeply informative. Habib wrote this Introduction (as he himself says) to provide information and basic knowledge about the regimes of Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan. But its achievements are far above its defined objective. It should remove the misconceptions and bias that many hold against Tipu Sultan and which may have inspired them to demonstrate against the celebrations in memory of Tipu in Karnataka. It is evident from various accounts that Haider Ali, apart from being a staunch and a committed militarist who had registered a few victories against the East India Company, was also known for his justice, wisdom and moderation. On the basis of rich empirical data, Habib has set aside the misconceived notions about Tipu being an iconoclast or anti-Hindu. Tipu, like Haider Ali, had continued the services of the Hindus in his government. There were several Maharashtrian and Kannadiga (that all were Hindus is evident from the names) clerks in the treasury and 'Hindawi' clerks in the other

departments (p. xxvi). In fact, one of his prominent ministers till the end was Puraniya and the Brahmins continued to be in control of Tipu's revenue department. If we collate the evidences provided by Lt. Col. Mark Wilks, a major critic of Tipu, it becomes adequately clear that Tipu found no logical contradiction in the efficacy of both Muslim and Hindu prayers. And he faced no dilemma or difficulty in securing the support of the Brahmins and *Shastris* for his *sarkar-i-khudadad* (divinely conferred government).

Sectionary harmony was not all that Tipu achieved. His contributions to the eighteenth century were varied. He left his father behind in his anxiety to introduce modern technology outside the area of weaponry. He understood that technology was the secret of European success in India. And, as Habib has conjectured, Tipu probably wished to act like the European Companies by establishing an overseas settlement of his own. Despite the odds against him, which were overwhelming, Tipu remained formidable and unimpaired in spirit and resisted the East India Company till the end. He was never uncertain about his objective: no surrender but a fight to death. As Tipu died fighting, an English observer present on the occasion wrote that the "victors" ransacked the houses and property of the people of Srirangapatnam. Yet, the people lined the streets through which the funeral procession of Tipu passed—"many of



whom prostrated themselves before the body and expressed their grief by loud lamentations" (p. xii). That was how the people of Mysore felt 200 years ago. It needs no comment or elucidation. It speaks volumes for Tipu, the Sultan of Mysore.

Apart from the Introduction, the book has seven thematic sections. In the section on 'The Two Rulers', Barun De and Irshad Husain Baqai focus on the ideological and social background of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan and the implications of Haidar Ali's death. Barun De's brief paper is an outcome of the paper 'Some Observations about the Social Origins and Naming of Tipu Sultan' that he had presented at the Indian History Congress at Delhi in 1992. He focuses on the "plebian" social origins of and *dervish* streak in Tipu and the juxtaposition of two parts in his lineage—part sufi servitor, part petty military adventurer. Tipu resisted British diplomacy and military threats. In fact, the British regarded his power as the "real indigenous challenge to their alien colonialism (p. 9). He achieved his plans pragmatically—using French alliance, Jacobian ideology as well as the neo-madari principles of a *shabeed* without any scruples of artificial consistency or ideological purity" (p. 3). Baqai in his chapter on 'The Death of Haidar Ali' makes two significant comments which should set aside doubts about the patriotism of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. Quoting a British intelligence officer, Baqai observes that the army (Mysore) had the "highest opinion of Tipu's humanity and abilities to command them and ... that they would succeed while he remained at the head" (p. 15). Haidar Ali, on the other hand, Baqai submits, was "a bulwark of strength against the British. Indian princes at that time notoriously devoid of patriotism could count on him as an ally ... to form an alliance against the British (pp. 17-18).

The essays of Jadunath Sarkar, Mohibul Hasan and D.S. Achuta Rau examine the episodes of resistance in the careers of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. Jadunath Sarkar's essay is a translation of a French narrative preserved among the Portuguese records in Goa, on the campaign and fall of Arcot. The account is a description of each day of the battle from May 28-November 4, 1780. Although Sarkar makes no conclusions on the basis of the narrative, a close reading of the chapter reflects the unyielding, adamant and indomitable spirit of Haidar Ali, his immense confidence in his military strength and his success in proving wrong the invulnerability of the East India Company. Mohibul Hasan's article, also largely descriptive, discusses Haidar Ali's bitter experiences and hostility towards the East India Company between 1769 and 1776. He also discusses Haidar Ali's attempts at consolidating an alliance with the French. Hasan comments on the disappointments of Haidar Ali caused by the constantly inconsistent French attitude. The chapter by D.S. Achuta Rau is extremely valuable. It sets aside the misconceptions

about Haidar Ali created by the writings of Colonel Marks Wilks. Wilks' account is based on English sources and some oral information. He had no knowledge of the local contemporary languages. Biased by the English records, Wilks had glorified the British military strength and power and depicted Haidar Ali as a defeatist who had repented the folly of being hostile to the British. Countering Wilks' imperialist interpretation, Rau quotes from *Haidar Nama*, a contemporary account in Kannada, to depict the "indefatigable will and enterprise of Haidar Ali, his urge to never despair or compromise or harbour any idea of surrendering his cause" (p. 51).

The essays by I.H. Baqai, B. Sheikh Ali, I.H. Qureshi, A.P. Ibrahim Kunju, N. Kasturi and C.S. Srinivasachari focus on the diplomatic relations of Haidar Ali and Tipu with the East India Company, the French and even Constantinople, Travancore and the Carnatic. They comment on the military prowess of the two Sultans, their perennial competing rivalry and struggle with the English Company and their attempt to build and consolidate an alliance against the Company. B. Sheikh Ali observes that while the English adopted "an extremely flexible policy of either neutrality or intervention ... Tipu was quite firm and adopted a determined and consistent policy of opposition to the British" (p. 68). I.H. Baqai quotes from a letter of Brigadier-General Macleod to reveal the English sentiments for Tipu and that they were exceedingly impressed by his "warlike" qualities (p. 55). In fact, I.H. Qureshi suggests that such was the formidable power of the two Nawabs that they were seen as the "greatest obstacle in the achievement of their [English] ambition" (p. 70). This explains the celebration of Haidar Ali's death by the English Company. To illustrate, Qureshi quotes Sir Eyre Coote, who talked of the "many beneficial effects which may be expected to arise to our general interests in India by the important news of Haidar Ali's death—it opens to us the fairest prospect of securing to the mother country the permanent and undisturbed possession of these eastern dominions" (p. 70). The observations of these historians are indeed valuable in removing any doubts about the national fervour of the two Nawabs. They enjoyed the unstinted support and loyalty of the people of Mysore who, it may be observed, comprised a large section of non-Muslims. These evidences should also remove any dilemma about the "religious tenor" of the Mysore state in the eighteenth century.

The chapters that define the inter-communal relations of Mysore are, again, invaluable. The information provided in these essays leave no doubt about Tipu's liberal and tolerant attitude towards his non-Muslim subjects. Setting aside the arguments of Wilks, who had presented Tipu as "an unmitigated Muslim fanatic like Aurangzeb or even worse", A. Subbaraya Chetty observes that Tipu "from the very beginning of his rule

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was as sympathetic and faithful to the Hindus as to the Muslims" (p. 111). He lists several charities and endowments that Tipu had made to the Hindus and Hindu institutions from 1782 onwards. B.A. Saletore has reinforced the observations of Chetty with greater rigour. His arguments are interesting. He presents Tipu as a defender of the Hindu *dharma*, who took recourse to "Brahman prayers" not only "in times of danger" as suggested by V.A. Smith but also in "times of peace". Saletore reiterates that it was a "matter of conviction and precedent" for Tipu (p. 115). For the sake of those who have misunderstood Tipu, it would be valuable to quote an excerpt from Saletore's chapter. Explaining Tipu's gifts to the temples and his patronage to the Hindu religious centres, Saletore observes "whether in peace or in war, he [Tipu] was prepared to place his country above his own self even in matters of prayers. People have indeed reason to be grateful to him for the prompt measures he took to resuscitate the cause of Hindu *dharma* in the great seat of Shankaracharya, when it was eclipsed by political calamity" (p. 12). The liberal attitude of the two Sultans did not encompass the Hindus alone. George Moraes has cited sufficient evidences in his article to reflect that the Christians enjoyed "all the time-honoured privileges" under the two Nawabs (p. 132). The open-minded, liberal behaviour of the two Nawabs did not deter them from the commitment to their personal faith. K. Sajan Lal adequately demonstrates it by the translation of an unpublished Persian letter written by Tipu to a Muslim saint.

This book is valuable for its significant revelations on Tipu's personality. It can be deduced unhesitatingly that Tipu possessed broad and multiple interests and that his commitments to the Mysore state were varied. Four articles describe the trends in the modernization of Mysore by Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. M.P. Sridharan observes that in an urge to develop the economy and society of Mysore, Tipu had sent embassies to France to acquire knowledge on a variety of sciences and their development. Iftikhar Khan and Sheikh Ali, on the other hand, describe Tipu's contribution and enterprise in the spheres of trade and agriculture. The observations of

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Francis Buchanan on the two Nawabs have been thoughtfully included in the book. It adds to the value of the book in the sense that it shows how the English viewed the two Sultans. Francis Buchanan, at the behest of Governor-General Marquis Wellesley, had extensively toured the dominion of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan in 1800-01. He was instructed to collect information on all aspects of these territories including the state of agriculture, arts and commerce, religion, manners and customs, the history, natural and civil, and antiquities. The commentary of Francis Buchanan is interesting. He portrays Haidar Ali as an agrarian administrator and Tipu Sultan as a modernizer.

That Buchanan was not far from the truth is evident from the account of the scholars who have assessed the contributions of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan towards the construction and consolidation of the Mysore navy and building its military strength. Raj Kumar, in his very short note, suggests that the "Mysore navy would have been the most powerful fleet in Asia and would have compared with the best fleet in existence anywhere" had it not been for the sudden demise of Tipu Sultan in 1799 (p. 172). Reinforcing the observations of Raj Kumar, Mahmud Husain writes, "of the indigenous rulers, Tipu Sultan was one of the few who recognized the importance of naval power" to counter the British aggressions (p. 174). Mahmud Husain also gives details of the encampment charts of *lashkar-i-khudadad* (Tipu's army) to comment on Tipu's military wisdom. Reiterating Tipu's military strategic knowledge, Som Prakash Verma provides exhaustive details of the forts of Tipu. His information is based on the evidence of the two British artists—Thomas Daniell and William Daniell.

The book focuses on the political history of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. Most of the chapters are in the form of a narrative, concentrating either on the treaties signed by the two Nawabs or translation of Persian and French documents or a chronological description of events. Rarely do the chapters offer any conclusion. However, as one reads, the meaning can be grasped and facts interpreted. Such observations should not undermine the value of the book. The book has been compiled with a purpose—to revive the memory of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan, remove doubts about them and understand their national role. The book more than fulfils its objective and hence must be read. ■

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Celebrating Calcutta

Partho Datta

TEN WALKS IN CALCUTTA

By Prosenjit Das Gupta
HarperCollins, Delhi, 2000, pp. 182, Rs. 95.00

ABDUL'S TAXI TO KALIGHAT: A CELEBRATION OF CALCUTTA

By Joe Roberts
HarperCollins, Delhi, 1999, pp. 303, Rs. 250.00

DRAMATIC MOMENTS: PHOTOGRAPHS AND MEMORIES OF CALCUTTA THEATRE FROM THE SIXTIES TO THE NINETIES

By Nemai Ghosh
Seagull, Calcutta, 2000, pp. 191, Rs. 900.00

Sometime in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a precocious adolescent stood on a balcony in Sunder Street, Calcutta, watching the morning sun rise into the sky. Suddenly his soul lifted from his body and in a moment of sublime ecstasy it merged with nature around him. Recorded for posterity in a brilliant poem *Nirjharer Swapnabhanga* (Fountain's Awakening, published c. 1882), this decisive moment for the young Rabindranath Tagore was possibly also the founding moment of modern Bengali literature. While every Bengali who knows his Tagore, can associate Sunder Street with the Bard, this interesting titbit of literary history has unfortunately remained hidden for others. Many Indians on a quick tour abroad are more than likely to shed a few pounds/dollars to do a literary tour of the great metropolitan cities of the West. Yet few of us care to celebrate our own literary landmarks. It is therefore good to see that this story has found an appropriate niche in Prosenjit Das Gupta's carefully researched guide to Calcutta.

Not that Sunder Street has not previously figured in guidebooks before. One can find it mentioned in practically all books on Calcutta from the nineteenth century onwards and there are detailed notes to be found in the celebrated tour guides of the city produced by such famous Europeans like H.E.A. Cotton, Katherine Blychenden and others. As the heart of the *sabehpara*, next to the Indian Museum, it figured prominently in English narratives about Calcutta. The word *sudder* is of course a corruption of the Arabic word *sadr*, and the street got its name from the location till 1862 of the *Sadr Adalat* or Chief Court of Appeal for the District Judges of the Bengal Civil Service. This information has been recorded once again by Joe Roberts who spent some time in Calcutta soaking in its varied life. He lived for several months right on Sunder Street in the famous Fairlawn Hotel, the chief destination of white tourists on a budget. Although Roberts' book is a careful and sympathetic account of life in the

city, and he takes special pains never to get an Indian word wrong, the significance of Sunder Street for local Bengalis completely passed him by.

Indian guidebooks on the city, especially those written in Bengali, have existed since the 30s onwards, yet few were really inspired. Most of them were in fact rehashes (with a few pages on Indian Calcutta thrown in to give it a native flavour) of the older guides written by the English for visiting and fellow resident Europeans. It is a tribute to the staying power of say Cotton and Blychenden that they still remain intermittently in print and are used by all those who love Calcutta. Indian writing on the city really came of age with John Barry's (he was of Armenian descent) *Calcutta Illustrated* brought out sometime during the Second World War. Barry was probably trying to give local competition to Rushbrook Williams' famous guide to India published by John Murray and which had become an essential knapsack companion to every European and American soldier then garrisoned in the city. The story goes that for the first edition Barry had to submit to censorship and was unable to include any maps due to wartime restrictions. In the second edition which was brought out in the 1950s the maps were restored. This edition also carried an appreciative foreword by Amal Home, the famous editor of the *Calcutta Municipal Gazette*. The accent though like the other guide books in English was still on British Calcutta.

After a long gap it was only in the 1970s that two fine books published from Calcutta set new standards of scholarship for the city. Pradip Sinha's *Calcutta in Urban History* (this was a historical monograph) and Radharaman Mitra's idiosyncratic guidebook *Kalikata Darpan* (written in Bengali and serialized to great controversy and acclaim in the famous Bengali little magazine *Ekshan*) for the first time really restored the balance by giving Indian Calcutta pride of place. Anybody who has for instance walked up Cornwallis Street

with Radharaman Mitra's book would know the joy and pleasure of experiencing the city with an expert guide at hand. Incidentally, Mitra was a well-known trade-unionist and had actively participated in the great industrial strikes which shook Calcutta in the 1920s and 30s. His painstaking research set to rest many myths about the city's buildings. In one case (possibly following the example of the venerable Sir Syed Ahmed Khan who while writing *Asar us Sanadid*, let himself down from the Qutub Minar in a basket to read the inscriptions on the outside walls of the topmost floors) the wiry Mitra scaled the rickety roof of a temple to check an inscribed date, so as to firmly put in place the smug scholarship of his arch rival the famous professor of Bengali, Sukumar Sen! The 80s really belong to P. Thankappan Nair whose numerous publications on the city have decisively changed the way one has imagined Calcutta's past. His monumental *History of Calcutta's Streets* will surely be unrivalled for a long time to come. Mr. Nair is now alas! no longer a permanent resident of the city, though his magnificent book collection is available in the newly refurbished Town Hall.

To come back to Prosenjit Dasgupta's excellent attempt which has all the virtues that a good guide book should have including the very necessary one of being eminently affordable. Clearly inspired by Barton and Malone's pioneering *Old Delhi: 10 Easy Walks* (Das Gupta follows the same format) this slim paperback should easily fit into the large pocket of a *kurta* (or as Bengalis call it—*panjabi*). The only problem will really be Calcutta's humid weather and it is unlikely that anyone other than the very brave will be able to do the wonderful walk along the riverside suggested by Das Gupta which lasts four hours! Das Gupta's book like Radharaman Mitra's will certainly revive interest in Indian (now North) Calcutta. I am sure that he will expand and add more to the information in the subsequent editions.

For instance, the history of Nakhoda Masjid, Calcutta's most famous and possibly largest mosque needs to be filled out in more detail. Few know that the word *nakhoda* is a traditional term for the captain or owner of a ship who also had some share in the cargo. The historians Kenneth McPherson and Dipesh Chakrabarty have told us that the mosque was built by the powerful Zakaria family, famous *nakhoda* merchants who had made Calcutta their home since the late eighteenth century following the decline of Surat. They had virtual monopoly of the leather trade and also exported spices, indigo, tobacco and rice. As Gujarati Muslims from the Kutchi Memon community with connections to a flourishing overseas trade, the Zakarias (who had settled in the Chitpur area) were important patrons. It was they who had persuaded Abul Kalam Azad's father, a scholar of repute, to settle in Calcutta and also provided funds for some of the earliest journalistic endeavours of the young Azad. It

was this family which built the Zakaria Mosque in the late nineteenth century (the present building is from the 40s) that has since been popularly known as the Nakhoda Masjid. As a prominent Calcutta family their contribution to the city is no less than the more celebrated Debs, Shils and Mullicks.

Joe Roberts' book is an easy and pleasant read. Like thousands of white liberal Europeans his is a brave and conscientious attempt to come to terms with a culture so different from the one back home. Roberts' is never condescending and he takes real pains to understand the inhabitants of this bewildering city. From the numerous rickshaw pullers and taxi drivers to the elegant flats of global Bengalis, for a newcomer like Roberts, who obviously did not intend to stay for very long, this sojourn into multi-layered Calcutta society seems fairly adventurous. The style is one of straight reportage and luckily there is little pontification. All the characters come alive and there is no attempt at being unnecessarily dramatic. The only problem is that Indian readers may find his observations fairly commonplace and sometimes frankly quite banal. But then this book was probably written as a kind of primer for other Calcutta-bound Europeans in mind. The larger question is why the tourism industry in the West valorizes this city especially its poor. To answer that question the reviewer would like to direct readers to John Hutnyk's elegant post-modern critique *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty of Representation* (Zed Books, London, 1996) which unfortunately has not received the kind of attention that it should get in our country.

Nemai Ghosh's photographs bring alive the heyday of Calcutta theatre. Ghosh is of course famous for his diligent record of maestro Satyajit Ray's working life. But clearly he has been indulging in a secret passion for theatre on the side. There are marvellous photographs in this book of greats which include Sombhu Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Utpal Dutt and Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay. The photographs which are all in black and white celebrate the legendary productions of *Putulkhela*, *Raktakarabi*, *Antigone*, *Galileo*, *Jiban* and many others. The indefatigable Samik Bandyopadhyay has contributed a detailed and very informative text which is interspersed throughout with interesting quotes from actors, directors and producers. Richly produced on beautiful paper this excellent book will deservedly become an indispensable reference for all who love the theatre. For an older generation of avid theatre lovers it will surely invoke nostalgia as they turn the pages and relive the experience of great productions. *Dramatic Moments* proves once again how powerful has been the influence of Calcutta on the modern Indian arts. ■

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Two Time-lapsed Views

A.G. Krishna Menon

BEATO'S DELHI 1857, 1997
By Jim Masselos & Narayani Gupta
Ravi Dayal Publisher, Delhi, 2000, pp.116
Rs.1000.00

Felice A. Beato was a peripatetic photographer, who visited India in time to record 'the last of embers of the Mutiny' of 1857. He was in Crimea in 1856 and moved to India around 1858. Two years later he proceeded to China where he recorded more British military adventures and then settled for a number of years in Japan. He seems to have stopped active photography around 1877 and died in Burma around 1908 where he had settled and set up a studio and a wood carving export operation in 1889. The story of his life would have made fascinating reading, but this book on only his Delhi photographs, is sufficiently compelling to hold our attention.

This is in part because Jim Masselos, a historian specializing in Indian history and culture, used these photographs, now in a private collection in Sydney, to retrace Beato's footsteps and photograph the same scenes as far as possible after almost 140 years. He presents the two time-lapsed views portmanteau fashions, and thereby tells a story. Another reason is that though this is primarily a book of photographs, words have contributed immeasurably to appreciating their significance. Both Masselos and Narayani Gupta, an acknowledged authority on Delhi's history and monuments, have provided useful and interesting information on Beato, his photographs and Delhi of that time. This has added depth to the visual narrative.

Beato's photographs are associated with the 'Mutiny'; they do not show scenes of battle, only where the battles took place, perhaps just a few months earlier. Masselos' essay on Beato explains that he features in most histories of nineteenth century photography as one of its pioneers, not for technical innovations but for his adventurous subject matter—mainly British military campaigns.

Many photographs in this collection are of quite undistinguished landscape, like a disused quarry on the Ridge, where we are told a British picket had been stationed during the siege. There are some archaeologically valuable photographs of monuments as well, like the Qutb Minar, Safdarjung's Tomb and Jantar Mantra, but they are exceptions in a collection primarily

intended to tell the story of the 'Mutiny', a visual guide to the sites associated with specific battles. A site of battle has often little by way of visual interest, particularly to the contemporary viewer. In the last 140 years, the city has also changed considerably, and what was once the Water Bastion and Breach is today a stretch of the Ring Road in front of the Inter State Bus Terminal. Therefore, even Masselos photographs may show nothing of great visual appeal. But Narayani Gupta has annotated the photographs with facts and anecdotes, and this provides the context within which to view the photographs.

Old photographs have a voyeuristic appeal akin to seeing the youthful photographs of one's parents. They resurrect and mingle public and private memories. As Masselos puts it, "(Old photographs) provide a sense of the change in environment as much as they record the different mentalities, the mind sets, between one period and another, and over the span of time. Beato's Delhi is not the Delhi of the present-day but is part of that Delhi and helps us in understanding what Delhi has become." Old photographs, of even disused quarries, tell a tale: they provide a window to the past, through which one can read several meanings. Masselos explores these meanings with great felicity by examining "the multiple conceptual spaces which (Beato's photographs) inhabits through its physical existence as a photograph, a two-dimensional object, not a three-dimensional space".

He begins by pointing out that meaning was invariably ascribed to Beato's photographs by authors who used them to illustrate their narratives of the 'Mutiny'. Even the reader re-creates the text and refashions meaning. Thus whatever meaning Beato may have intended is subsumed and amalgamated to suit different contexts.

Interrogating Beato's reputation as a military photographer, he points out that the Delhi photographs were all taken after the British had re-established control over the city. They were therefore, not reports from the battle front showing, "charging horses, marching soldiers, waving standards, gunshot

Beato was not the first or even the earliest photographers to work in India. In fact, in her essay, Narayani Gupta refers to the existence of photographs taken within the walled city during the heat of the battle by an Indian nobleman or his retainer. But it is Beato's images that feature in almost every illustrated history or other visual account of the events of 1857.

smoke and flying Union Jacks" in the manner of the popular genre of battle prints. They were photographs of a present mediated by a knowledge of what happened in the past, and thus on the way to myth-making.

This was inevitable considering Beato's intended audience was British and patriotic. There was collective relief after the 'Mutiny' was suppressed, and control re-established. The public would have sought confirmatory evidence, and the images Beato recorded were carefully selected to extol the triumph and satisfy this demand. Even a photograph of Humayun's tomb is de-glamorized into Mutiny memorabilia as the place where the Emperor was captured.

Masselos draws our attention to the aesthetic debates and transition in artistic forms of that period. He identifies two agendas used in the 1850s to assess a photograph: the ideas of picturesqueness and of naturalism. Beato's photographs Masselos suggests "expressed the ambiguity involved in the juxtaposition of realism as record, and picturesqueness as pleasing composition". He attributes the lack of people in the photographs to the fact that the city was depopulated after the British regained control, and Indians were not allowed to return to their homes until much later. Hence, it was not by design that the crowds usually associated with Indian urban scenes, were absent in his photographs.

Beato was not the first or even the earliest photographers to work in India. In fact, in her essay, Narayani Gupta refers to the existence of photographs taken within the walled city during the heat of the battle by an Indian nobleman or his retainer. But it is Beato's images that feature in almost every illustrated history or other visual account of the events of 1857. Perhaps their ubiquity can be accounted for by the fact that as a professional photographer he made multiple prints for sale, which were widely disseminated.

Some of the photographs are exceptionally fascinating. For example, one remarkable sequence of photographs is a panoramic view of Shajahanabad taken from the minaret of Jama Masjid. It is both spectacular and an invaluable record of the city as it was in 1858. Masselos tells us that when all the prints of this panorama were joined, it was 1.8 meters long! It clearly shows the area between the Masjid and the Red Fort before it was cleared by the British army for security reasons. This demolition changed forever the original relationship between the Fort and the city. No wonder that many contemporary conservation architects are unable to appreciate the significance of the original proximity of the city fabric and the Fort wall, and so make inappropriate suggestions like establishing a garden in this open area. There was never a garden here, and to create one today would compromise the authenticity of the historic Fort.

Other changes discernable by comparing

Some of the photographs are exceptionally fascinating. For example, one remarkable sequence of photographs is a panoramic view of Shajahanabad taken from the minaret of Jama Masjid. It is both spectacular and an invaluable record of the city as it was in 1858.

Beato and Masselos' photographs are less regrettable. A river side view of the Red Fort photographed by Beato shows what is now an open area between the Khwabgah and the Diwan-e-Khas joined by a wall with two storeys of rooms behind, which was later demolished when conservation work was undertaken at Curzon's initiative.

Masselos refers to the differences in context between Beato's and his photographs of the same location—the difference in equipment, the nature of the city and even the air: Beato's photographs, he says, have a clarity and precision that the present-day photograph cannot achieve. Though Masselos does not mention it, Beato was most probably using the 'wet collodion process' that had been developed in 1851 by Frederick Scott Archer, to capture images on glass negatives (the tell-tale fuzzy edges and corners are evident in several photographs). Many believe that the commercially available films today cannot match the quality of images produced by the old glass negatives of Beato's days.

But there are other problems with Masselos' photographs. For one, his wide-angle shots do not capture the same area of a scene as Beato's, and therefore, do not show a substantial amount of foreground and horizon that one sees in Beato's photographs (page 22/23). For another, Masselos often gets the lighting on his subjects wrong. Beato was obviously a consummate professional and was always sensitive to the angle of sunlight on the object he was photographing, whereas Masselos is not (page 58 and 66). And finally, I noticed that Beato's photographs have greater depth of field; perhaps this was on account of the large format negatives Beato would have used, but Masselos could easily have attempted the same results with his more sophisticated modern equipment.

This is an absorbing book, and I enjoyed reading it. But I must also point out that some of the pleasure was diluted because the design of the book is unsatisfactory. After all, this is primarily a visual book, so it is sad to notice the unfortunate insensitivity to the aesthetics of book design in its production.

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An Exemplar

Harsh Sethi

BIHAR IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

By Vijay Nambisan

Viking, 2000, pp. 286, Rs. 395.00

Between the late Arvind N. Das *The Republic of Bihar* (Penguin, 1992) and Vijay Nambisan's current offering hangs a tale. And the fact that both books come from the same stable only underscores the point that whatever possibility the metropolitan intelligentsia once saw in the state had vanished by the new millennium. Arvind Das, his undoubted successes in the rarified environs of Delhi notwithstanding, remained to the end a quintessential native of Bihar. His many writings, despite sociologist Shiv Visvanathan finding them depressing, 'the style of work mimicking the subject', were historically embedded and invariably marked by an optimism. The travails of the present were placed in a long historical *duree*, the attempt being to understand how a region of Buddha and Mahavir, the seat of the first pan-Indian empire under the Mauryas, of centres of learning like Nalanda and Rajgriha, and the techno-administrative excellence of a Sher Shah Suri, came to a sorry pass.

Nambisan's on the other hand is an exemplar of the outsiders fascination and exasperation with Bihar. However witty, and episodically insightful, his tone never quite overcomes a contemptuous dismissal of the state and its people though, as he so often reminds us, his is a personalised narrative, drawing primarily on his experiences of his 16 months stay in the sleepy town of Mokammah, 90 kilometres from Patna. Nambisan was playing house-husband to his doctor/author wife, Kavery, working with a Mission hospital. Since he was not there, unlike most outsiders in Bihar, on a 'mission'—research, development, politics—he had ample opportunity to observe his

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Everything that the liberal intelligentsia finds repugnant in Indian public affairs—from corruption, venality and massacres—has its echo in Bihar. Nothing, but nothing seems to work in the state, including the salesgirls in the fancy departmental stores in Patna.

Bihar and Biharis in their everydayness, life as the commoners live it in the raw.

Vijay Nambisan's Bihar is dominated by his responses to Laloo Prasad Yadav. In itself, this is not surprising for, at least in the last decade or so, Laloo has provided the axis around which Bihari politics has evolved. And politics is, other than brigandage, the fastest growing industry in the state. How a poor, backwardclass boy, otherwise destined for a *chaprasi's* job, became the chief minister of the country's second most populous state, and has managed to hang on to the top is a story worth a fable. Nambisan provides us with delightful one-liners, but unfortunately little real understanding of Laloo's durability. Unless, of course, one believes that politics is only about how to remain in power—'by keeping the electorate ignorant, by bullying it if it persists in educating itself, and by stretching financial populism to its limits.'

Everything that the liberal intelligentsia finds repugnant in Indian public affairs—from corruption, venality and massacres—has its echo in Bihar. Nothing, but nothing seems to work in the state, including the salesgirls in the fancy departmental stores in Patna. And yet, this is the same state that Appelby described as the best-administered state in the early 1950s. It is not just phenomenally well-endowed in natural resources (though the situation will change dramatically once the southern districts are hived away to make Jharkhand), it has over the years provided amongst the best in our civil services—from B.D. Pande, P.S. Appu and K.S. Singh in the early years to a K.B. Saxena closer to our times. It is also a canard that Biharis are lazy and indolent. Much of the success of the Green Revolution in Punjab can be traced to Bihari migrant labour.

To trace it all to Laloo and the political culture he represents would be a mistake. All observers of Bihar point to its deeply ingrained feudal culture—not the 'high culture' of princely India, but the ferocity with which status differences based on caste are sought to be maintained. No wonder, even die-hard Naxal ideologues see their fight as essentially one of *ijjat*. By all accounts, Laloo, more than any of his 'illustrious' predecessors has been able to impart a sense of self-worth and dignity to at least his chosen constituency of the backwards. If such are the contours of the 'historical struggle', then retributory justice, of showing the Bhumihars

and the Thakurs their place, is merit enough. Who cares for development, performance, accountability?

In a variety of contexts—buying vegetables in the local bazaar, conversations with domestics, train travel in Bihar, evaluating Bihar Education Project schools—Nambisan captures the contradictory impulses generated in experiencing Bihar. I have little problem with his descriptions (in many ways they echo my own reactions in various forays into the state). The uneasiness stems from his periodic assertions that if Bihar is to be rescued from its present morass, its political leadership should be in the hands of people like Nitish Kumar or Sushil Kumar Modi.

More engaging is his description of the Mission Hospital, the role of the Sisters, his uneasiness in realizing that non-native converts (Malyalis) are preferred to the locals (Biharis). As is his understanding of the role of Christian missionaries and their work. At a time when the mildest criticism of the Indian Church is likely to be labelled as politically incorrect, Nambisan's straight talk comes as a great relief. Very different from the tripe the VHP and its cohort present, these descriptions help us understand why the likes of a Dara Singh attract support.

Nambisan has tried to portray, not 'the Bihar out there', the dystopia, but the Bihar in all of us. His vignettes are sharp, the language witty. His weakness lies in confirming our prejudices about Bihar and Biharis (in particular, its political class).

What, however, brings the best out of Nambisan are his comments on his tribe of journalists—both the stuffy editorial writers and the hit-and-run news reporters. Particularly memorable are his asides on the Patna edition of *The Times of India*, a paper which most excites his invectives. No surprise. A 'national daily' which re-names its 'Resident Editor' as 'Editor-Patna Market' makes no effort to hide its contempt for its readers. As such it deserves no less from us.

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Harsh Sethi is with *Seminar*.

Contestation and Demystification of Ideas

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan

TRANSLATING NATIONS

Edited by Prem Poddar

Aarhus University Press, Denmark, pp.269, price not mentioned.

The 'nation' has developed into a major academic area of discussion, no longer the simple geo-political space we unthinkingly inhabit, but a constructed entity whose conceptual and actual histories, ideologies, and politics are sought to be understood in the light of contemporary theoretical concerns. *Translating Nations* exemplifies this academic trend well if somewhat too faithfully. The 'nation'—of one kind or another, kingdom, tribe, federation—has always been available as an idea and institution with which to affiliate oneself, as well as the source and scene of conflict, both of internal and external. But such naturalized forms of belonging (and exclusion), and the territorial imperatives of security and expansion underpinning nationhood, both of which had unquestioned legitimacy earlier, now emerge as particularistic and problematic—even as the modern form of the nation-state has become virtually universal.

The context for this new interest is the crisis of nation, understood simultaneously in terms of both the 'regression' to pre-nation-state ethnicities and tribalisms, as well as the 'progression' to post-nation-state globalization manifested in different parts of the world today. The conceptual apparatus for theorizing the nation is, as I have indicated, constructivism, impressively brought to bear on the issue by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* (1983), the virtual bible of this branch of studies in the metropolitan academy. It has also fed into post-structuralist, post-modern, diaspora and postcolonial studies—sometimes inflected with left critiques of nationalism, as in Anderson's own work, and sometimes by feminist critiques, as in the work of Nira Yuval-Davis and others. Homi Bhabha's intervention in the form of the edited collection of essays *Nation and Narration* (1991) has been hugely influential, as has Bhabha's work in general, in locating the question within the frame of diaspora, dislocation and displaced peoples and their cultures; while Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986) figures prominently in postcolonial inquiries. Major contemporary works of fiction, particularly from the sub-continent, like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Amitava Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*, have also emerged from and fed into these

recent theories of nation.

The value of constructivist arguments lies in their contestation and demystification of ideas and institutions which have long appeared as natural and immutable and therefore got sanctified as unquestionable right, such as gender and caste hierarchies, racial differences, biological (most recently genetic) determinism, and the 'nation'. Drawing on history, ideology, and the operations of desire and power in order to explain the existence and force of these ideas and institutions, and to account for the destabilizing aspects of change, resistance and the inversion of hierarchies, constructivism has now had a long and influential reign in the human and social sciences. Increasingly however its appeal has begun to wear thin, mainly as a result of overuse. There is also a certain political glibness in invoking it as *automatically* radical. The same problems apply to other positions—usually linked to constructivist ones—like discourse analysis, and those celebrating postmodern heterogeneity, hybridity, and the like. I must confess that some of the articles in this collection are predictable and tedious in these ways.

This is not to pronounce an end to or exhaustion of such inquiries, only to ask for theoretical advances and more rigorous genealogical investigations. For instance, the irony—if not the outright contradiction—of drawing upon historical evidence to combat, not other truth claims, but the very idea of (a) 'truth'—a post-structuralist postulate—is now a matter that asks to be explored with some seriousness. How may we claim that 'gender/nation/race is constructed in specific ways towards specific ends' is a *fact and a truth* when we are operating from the post-structuralist premise of scepticism about facts and truths? How, indeed, does scepticism ground a premise?

Mahesh Daga's '*Jati*: Translating India' in this volume is an impressive example of work that meets such demands. Daga investigates the pre-history of the 1920s concept of Indian nationalism that Gyan Pandey and, following him, other historians like Partha Chatterjee and Sudipto Kaviraj, have made central to our understanding of present-day communalism. Contesting Pandey's claim that the discourse of communalism was unknown before the

1920s, that the early Indian nationalists 'had sought to emphasize the fact that India was more than only, or primarily, Hindu', Daga shows, convincingly and elegantly, that in the late nineteenth-century Hindi-language public discourse nation was almost exclusively defined in terms of a Hindu '*jati*.' But Daga's demonstration is not simply an empirical exercise, though he does read the archives substantially; he follows instead the linguistic theory that words and concepts are closely connected, that the concept of *jati-as-nation* in this period is therefore to be read beyond semantics as a window into the beliefs and praxis of nationalism itself. Daga's point is that our contemporary Hindi terms *rashtra* (nation) and *janata* (the people) were simply not part of the available discourse of nationalism at this period. The idea of the nation was denoted instead by the generic term *jati* (a usage existing alongside its older conventional sense of caste-group), and the people by the (historically and politically inappropriate) term *prajah*, or subjects. Daga tracks the usage of *jati-as-nation* within broader historical and conceptual contexts: the promotion of the Hindi language; the identification of Hindus with 'Indians', as such; the equation of Hindus with the Aryans; the statistical 'artefact' of majoritarian Hinduism; the exclusion of lower castes from the Hindu/Aryan fold; and the ambivalent place of Muslims in *jatiya* discourse. Daga's insights into this last aspect are provocative and valuable, and allow us to understand something of the doublespeak of the ruling BJP's Muslim policy as well. Hindi/Hindu ideologues, Daga argues, had a mixed attitude towards Muslims, an attitude whose formula was '*cultural exclusion and political inclusion*.' While Muslims could not be included within a *jatiya cultural* identity constructed around a Hindu language, religion and history—which in fact required the Muslim to serve as its 'other'—the inclusion of the Muslim population was needed for making common *political* cause against British rule. It is through such moves, Daga holds, that the nationalists evolved the *rashtra* discourse of nationhood in the 1920s, and concomitantly that of communalism, a term which then began to designate the claims of a particular *jati* over that of *rashtra*.

Few of the other articles in this collection have the same kind of density that Daga's does, though several are nearly as long. There is no significant coherence among them as a collection, a failure made more perceptible by a perfunctory introduction which makes no attempt to show their connections and/or dialogues among themselves. Thus Graham MacPhee's essay sits incongruously next to Meena Alexander's. Alexander's 'An Intimate Violence: Crossing Borders, Making Poems' is, characteristically, an autobiographical and reflective piece about her own personal travels and crossings across several continents, juxtaposed with poems and prose pieces about the horrors of a world of wars, riots and other

forms of ethnic and racial violence. The juxtaposition of personal with collective histories of migrancy and exile can sometimes lead to an aggrandizement of the writer's own tragic persona, both as a being too sensitive to others' pain—suffering and sharing with 'a woman in Sarajevo shot to death', 'Turks burnt alive in the new Germany', 'hundreds hacked to death' in Ayodhya—and as a representative of all of them, herself 'outcaste'. Graham MacPhee's 'Europe and Violence: Some Contemporary Reflections on Benjamin's "Theories of German Fascism"', is written in the very different genre of philosophical speculation. Locating the origins of the modern nation-state within the space of a European modernity informed by Enlightenment conceptions of rights, freedom and violence, he asks how we might be required to reformulate our understanding in the conditions of a new world order that is now definitively transnational. Kant's essay, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay', which celebrates the establishment of the nation-state as the condition of cosmopolitan coexistence, even as it acknowledges the violence of its origins, provides MacPhee with a point of departure for examining Walter Benjamin's work. Benjamin, MacPhee suggests, is an overlooked precursor for thinking of the nation in relation to technological modernity and its violence. In the review essay, 'Theories of German Fascism,' Benjamin explored the implications of the

First World War as the first modern *global* war, whose technology (the example he offered was gas warfare) 'tore apart the ordering of European modernity in terms of the discrete borders of the nation-state.' Thus the war must be understood as announcing the 'emergence of a new structuring of the phenomenal world in modernity.' MacPhee's fine analysis offers Benjamin's work as an important resource for thinking about the nation in our times. His essay is one of the major contributions this volume makes to the subject.

A point of novelty and hence interest about the book is that it is published in Denmark, a location that could have generated more discussion than the one essay it provokes, Prem Poddar and Cheralyn Mealor's 'Danish Imperial Fantasies: Peter Hoeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*' (two, if one includes the somewhat cursory comparative exercise of Hans Hauge's 'South African and Danish Literary History'). Poddar and Mealor set out to read this popular detective novel/thriller as a typically *postcolonial* text, stressing Hoeg's critique of Denmark's colonial relations with Greenland, and his exploration of questions of hybrid identity, as themes central to the novel's meaning. However both these postcolonial interests are compromised, the critics feel: the first by Hoeg's displacement of colonialism onto a more generalized critique of capitalism and technological hubris, the second by his old-fashioned perception of hybridity as a 'degeneracy' rather than as the

ambivalent, potentially subversive identity that postcolonial critics (read: Bhabha) celebrate. What is evident in such a critical procedure is a tendency to cast postcolonial theory into a formulaic and prescriptive set of tenets, against which texts are then measured (as if, too, being 'postcolonial' is a literary medal). It is a reification into which this intellectual field is all too quickly settling.

The remaining essays in the volume cover other national locations: Neluka Silva writes about political strife in Sri Lanka as represented in the work of three English-language writers; Lars Jensen about Canada and Australia as 'postcolonial' sites; David Johnson about South Africa and the claims of the Griqua people to recognition in the new nation-state; and Caroline Bergvall about a many-sited 'plurilingual' writing, 'writing that takes place across and between languages', as exemplified in the work of three contemporary artists, Joan Retalack, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. This variety is a good thing in that 'the nation' is discussed from many different contexts, as it ought to be. But as I said more could have been done to consolidate the assets of this volume. ■

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Snapshot of British Writing

Lola Chatterjee

NEW WRITING

Edited by Tibor Fischer and Lawrence Norfolk Vintage
The British Council, London 1999, pp. xiv+ 575, £7.99

Anthologies are notoriously difficult to review. In this case one is confronted with a fat paperback volume containing 64 items, varying considerably in content and quality. There are 23 short stories, 8 novels in progress, 26 poems, one extract from a biography and 3 'texts.' According to the editors, 'The brief for *New Writing* is to provide a "snapshot" of what has been happening in British literature over a one-year period.' The large unattractive male face smeared with grease-paint to suggest 'persons of colour' perhaps, and sporting a 'bindi', which is the cover illustration, is off-putting, though perhaps is intended to convey the idea of the 'cultural entrepôt' which the introduction promises its readers.

As short stories predominate in the collection, it is best to begin by commenting on some of them. Violence, especially that

involving sexual mutilation, acute sexual frustration, pathetic attempts at creating self-esteem, and escaping from stifling confinement, drug abuse—all stare out of these pages. One is horrified and saddened at this panorama of desolation and social decay. Most of the verse substantiates this impression. One hopes such 'contemporary' themes do not reflect society as a whole.

The story that opens the collection is a long one. 'The Stalker' by Patricia Duncker is stylishly written and divided into sections like a musical score. Two themes alternate. The protagonist is an attractive 'young' middle-aged woman married to an Oxford don, who is an archaeologist. Sexually frustrated, inclined to lesbianism, bored, she feels she is being watched and enjoys the heightened sensation of pleasurable fear from a male gaze. She follows up the sensational accounts

of the rape, brutal mutilation and murders of a former lesbian lover Lindsay, and those of Lindsay's subsequent lovers—named Diana and Helena. The women are all public figures, beautiful, successful and acknowledged lesbians. Meanwhile, the husband, proud of his attractive wife, has made a successful 'dig', and his discovery of what he hopes is a temple of Zeus provides the Mediterranean background, symbolism and convenient ambience for violence, the exotic, sex, passion and death. With a morbid curiosity, a feeling of satisfied revenge at being abandoned by Lindsay, she waits in a welcoming expectant fear of a similar fate.

The protagonist, Sylvia Jarvis, of the story entitled 'The Procuress' by Paul Melville, again belongs very much to an upper-class sophisticated set. Sylvia Jarvis surrounds herself with beautiful objects, such as bowls of flowers appropriate to season and guests, and is an excellent hostess. When she loses her husband who dies of a sudden heart attack, she discovers her talents for counselling and matchmaking. She is a sympathetic listener and seems to understand immediately what the problem is. However the author tells us dryly, "Her intuition was never clouded by moral judgement." This talent develops into procurement of whatever sexual need she feels her 'clients' require. Her business flourishes and she becomes a very rich woman. An unfortunate false step leads to scandal, imprisonment, nemesis. The story

ends, as it began, on a seemingly casual note that cleverly effects closure. An easy confidential style and a gift for creating characters with a few strokes add to the effectiveness of this story.

From these well-heeled characters and elegant locales one moves to the underbelly of society: to the grubby housing estates, cheap cafes and super-markets to find the school dropouts, unsuccessful pop groups, shop girls looking for a little excitement and adventure to brighten their monotonous lives.

Very explicit sexual activity and dialogue to match seems another characteristic of contemporary writing. In 'The Score Board' by Lana Citron, five youngish men with unsatisfactory sexual partners and experiences, team up to go on a holiday to "Costa Flesh" on the continent. The aim: to lay as many women as possible and in as many different ways with points allocated for each. As it turns out, being short on self-confidence, not particularly attractive and either too drunk or too high with dope they are unable to perform adequately. As time and money run out they tot up their scores. Then contrary to their earlier bragging, they realize that all along they have been at the receiving end of the ridicule and contempt of the women whom they had hoped to dominate and conquer with their charms. On the flight home they vow not to tell their partners that the much-vaunted holiday ended not with a bang but a whimper. Hard on their egos, but no moral can be drawn from this degradation of human relationships. The air hostess, at whom they attempted a half-hearted pass, is seething behind her thick layer of make-up. "Scum," she thought, "fucking scum".

Another bleak commentary on underprivileged urban life is the story 'Oblivion Girls'. Kids from a run-down housing estate and mostly hassled one-parent homes seek thrills and applause by jumping down from the perilous edge of a half-built flyover on to a safe piece of ground far below with their blades' motors off. The place is called Oblivion Drop. The authorial voice of Jeff Noon describes the scene: "Maybe the council ran out of money, of love, of caring, of desire, of planning permission, of concrete . . ." the juxtaposition of the human 'love' and 'caring' with the soulless 'planning permission' and 'concrete' making judgement transparent.

But the central character of the story, 16 year old Topsy Sleepwalker, as she is nicknamed, who has continually failed the edge, has a brother falling into oblivion in another way just as frightening. He won't go out of his room, won't meet her, his mother. When she finally manages to confront him she sees he is far gone on drugs and AIDs. And she is losing weight too.

As Topsy approaches the flyover, she can see the bladegirls on the Oblivion Drop, some of them getting ready to chance the flight. Underneath the structure, two boys are playing shockball, a girl watching them. Her

brother and his new friends.

Topsy gets to the easy-lift point, flicks into elevator mode, rises up slowly, slowly, using her skills to compensate for the weight-loss. When she gets to the top, the other girls turn to look at her, some of them laughing. Because they know what's happening to her brother, and they know she will never make the leap anyway, you can only fail so many times.

Topsy ignores them. Calmly now, she sets the blade to empty. Naked flight. The motors fade to zero. And then, she just speeds, I mean, she just speeds (p. 139). The colloquial language, the dead-pan narration with just the merest hint of a give-away, make this one of the best short pieces in the volume.

'Leaving Algiers' by Claire Messud is an extract from a novel. It deals with the departure of the last batches of French colonists for France. They are the ones who had made Algeria their home and couldn't believe they would not be welcome to stay on peacefully once independence became a reality. But they had miscalculated. Bloodshed in the streets, forcible closing down of their businesses and shops, their homes looted, made departure no longer a question of choice but of life and death. This is one of the terrible recurrent themes of 20th century life: war and aggression, exile and homelessness.

The author speaks of her father, then only 17 years old, who, reluctant to believe the worst and caring for his dying grandmother, was among the last to leave. There is compassion, suspense, unexpected assistance from a wealthy neighbour when his last minute attempts to get places on one of the last steamers fails. The old lady dies, she is placed in her coffin . . . but the coffin is too big to fit into the cabin. I won't give away the conclusion of this very human, moving narrative.

Names in India are often helpful as markers. In this anthology there are a few which catch one's eye and one reads their pieces with a special interest. Two of the names are well-known—Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi; two more not so well-known (at least to this reviewer)—Naeem Murr and Hari Kunzru. All four legitimately find a place in a collection emanating from England. Rushdie's story, entitled 'The Firebird's Nest' embodies his characteristic novelistic formula of fact and fantasy, everyday-ness and myth, metaphor, fable. Reduced to the dimensions of a short story, it is extremely effective. Located in an erstwhile princely state in a typical Indian countryside with drought, superstition, ritual and a deep-seated confrontation between the sexes, the story relates the experiences of a naive American bride brought by the now plain Mr. Maharaj to his rundown palace. He is dominated by his elder sister who teaches dancing to a large group of young women. The atmosphere is riven with spite and fear as the brother and sister nurse a family hatred. Their father had suspected his young wife of infidelity and had

her burned to death. "The villagers said the old prince, consumed by rage, had been transformed into a giant bird, a bird composed entirely of flames, and that was the bird that consumed the princess, and returns, these days, to turn other women to ashes at their husbands' cruel commands". There is a series of dramatic events. The women dancers and villagers pray for rain as the brother and sister desperately decide to bury their feud. It rains. The rain washes everything clean. The wife, now pregnant, will return to her home in the States to have her child. "The new life growing within her will be both fire and rain." 'Four Blue Chairs' by Hanif Kureishi is a neat piece on the fragile relationship between a young man and woman reminiscent of Jhumpa Lahiri's stories. Stress and strain appear as the operation of transporting the four new chairs from the store to their first shared home ends on a quietly positive note.

There is lots more of interest in this collection, but before ending this review I feel a brief reference to other forms is in order. 'When the Writer Speaks' by the well-known Australian writer David Malouf is an essay based on an address given to a PEN conference in 1998. He makes a distinction between two kinds of writing born out of different attitudes or states of consciousness without suggesting that one is better than the other. There is the imaginative writer who regards his work as a process of discovery; there is the writer 'in the world' who deals with argument, judgment, moral and political issues. He concludes his address by paying tribute to the imaginative writer who is forced to take up an adversarial attitude during times of political repression. He gives Thomas Mann as an example of such a writer. This is certainly an aspect of contemporary writing that must not be forgotten.

The many and varied examples of verse do not give the impression of great talents about to burst upon the world. Interesting, eccentric they probably reflect a somewhat barren period poetically speaking. As for the 'texts' they foxed me completely. One needs to be able to slide into a post-postmodernist haze to understand such pieces as 'Lady Constance's Prisoner FE CAMPBELL, HOM Inc. Los Angeles, 1993' by Emma Kay. It begins in italics "220 objects in order of appearance, 162 pages" then

Padlocks, locks, chain, car, straw, key, cord, leather collar, car, clothes, leash, double whisky, food, riding crop, rope, safety pin, panties, cane, mirror, bottle of irish cream, bottle of white Lightning, car, bottle, pot of coffee, blanket, chains, and

so it goes on with much repetition to the bottom of the page. (We are spared the other 161 pages.) ■

Lola Chatterji has retired from the English Department, Miranda House, Delhi University. She now freelances in matters literary and domestic.

Living on Hyphens

Eunice D'Souza

NIGHT RIVER—POEMS

By Keki N. Daruwalla

Rupa and Co., New Delhi, 2000, pp. 112, Rs. 95.00

Keki Daruwalla has called his newest book of poems *Night River*. He could also have called it by the title of one of the poems in the book, 'Living on Hyphens'. Both concerns are present: the conscious search of a man to position himself "between dream and landscape", and the urge to drift on the darker tide of reverie, dream and even nightmare from which the luminous moment of the poem may emerge.

One could call the book existential, and not just because there is a poem called 'Meursault' in it. There is the search for meaning, certainly, but there is also a strong sense of a life being lived and evoked in many moods and textures: amused observer, detached observer, intellectual analysis and the refusal to intellectualize, contemporary concerns and historical reconstruction. Sometimes a book of poems has one predominant mood or concern. Daruwalla has, from his very first book tended to let the atoms fall here one day and there the next, as Virginia Woolf said about life itself.

Perhaps the set of poems that brings together many of these concerns most forcefully is the section called 'Stalking Mandelstam'. In his notes at the end of the section Daruwalla says that the poems were inspired by Nadezhda Mandelstam's book *Hope Against Hope* in which she talks about her husband's incarceration because of his poem on Stalin written in November 1933. A translation of the fatal poem on the man whose "words are iron measures of dead weight" is included in the set. In 'The Poem' Daruwalla writes:

*There are poems that take you to the knife,
and death poems that give you
a vulture's eye-view of what the vulture sees;
and poems that mark themselves out
for a particular locale:
grey wall behind you and guns in front.*

A few lines in "Through a Row of Doors" evoke a scene that could be called domestic if it were not for the poverty and unease which attend it:

*They haven't eaten—there's nothing in the
house;
Osip borrows an egg from a neighbour,
so they can serve Akhmatova.
But David Brodsky keeps sitting there...
...
Then the knock, explicit as glass cracking...*

If Mandelstam and Brodsky made their choices, (Brodsky to betray Mandelstam) Meursault chooses to live "upfront and with

no disguise./He might have lived it differently,/if he had felt. That's all there was—/he'd acted thus, not otherwise". The man on the Muscat, Dubai and Doha shuttle is aware of the tragedies of the contemporary world and waste of human history but keeps his distance:

*So when a whole city moves to another,
when a country walks out on itself;
you can bet your butt we wouldn't be around
The Night Sky Lands at Doha*

"An island sometimes/doesn't know where it is" (A Feel For Space) but "The good thing is/the island doesn't have time/to think of all this". It's luckier than humans because "Truths also oscillate" (Notes Again) and in 'Small Space' "I grope for this path of darkness/with a lighted match./It is so private/that I can't locate it within myself—whether it is inside the ribcage/or frozen behind the eyeball".

The moods in *Night River* range from lyrical in 'Contradictory You' to apocalyptic in 'On a Dying Millennium':

*For the last day of the millennium will cry
out
like the last bird of a species
moving into extinction.*

'Of Sages' and 'The Trouble With Reviewing Seth' are witty and amusing, while 'Egyptian Testament' explores a vein of the cynical wisdom we have all had to acquire about those in power. 'Exile and the Chinese Poets' explores with sympathetic understanding the melancholy and the loneliness of these poets but concludes "For they were always one with reed and river,/with mice and drongo and firefly./And those who are not exiled from their dreams,/are they really far from home?"

Night River then, confirms Keki Daruwalla as one of our finest poets, and not just in English. He is a prolific poet, but that in itself is no guarantee of success. What matters is the range of linguistic skills, the control of form, to match the range of experience and the insights this experience yields. ■

Eunice D'Souza was until her recent retirement Head of the English Department of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. She has published four books of poems, books for children, and has edited two anthologies *Nine Indian Women Poets* (1997) and a book of interviews, *Talking Poems*. She also co-edited with Adil Jussawalla a book of *Indian Prose in English Statements*.

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Blue stocking, Blue blood and the Blue pencil

Laila Tyabji

THE WAFFLE OF THE TOFFS: A SOCIOCULTURAL CRITIQUE OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

By M. Prabha

Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 2000, pp. 257 plus bibliography and index, Rs. 250.00.

Twenty-five years ago, my father¹, selecting candidates for the Indian Foreign Service, found himself in a quandary. He was the only one on the UPSC Board rooting for an outstandingly intelligent, erudite, and personable young man. The others on the panel were adamant that he be passed over. They argued that though eminently suitable, all his qualities were by virtue of his birth (his father was a Rajput aristocrat and former Foreign Secretary) and his superior education (Mayo, Switzerland, St Stephens and Cambridge). He therefore had an unfair advantage. My father found this Alice in Wonderland logic baffling—he reasoned that the Services would be losing an ideal recruit, and that candidates should be judged on merit rather than reverse discrimination. Nevertheless, the young man was rejected. (He went on to become the youngest Indian director of a renowned multinational corporation.)

I'm reminded of this reading M. Prabha's *The Waffle of the Toffs: A Sociocultural Critique of Indian Writing in English*. She too would love to disqualify all those who enter the cultural egg race with a silver spoon of education, birth and social connections already in their mouths. In fact her thesis is that success and recognition is only deserved by the underprivileged.

By M. Prabha's definition I am probably a toff—so what I write is, by that same definition, waffle. Waffle, by its very nature, should neither upset nor offend—since both the product and the producer have already been adjudged trivial. Bertie Wooster, however politically incorrect, can never offend; he's a goof we all love to love. Nevertheless, M. Prabha does seem seriously riled by both the toffs and what she, with a very sweeping blue pencil, condemns as waffle. There is bitterness in her jibes about the English-speaking Indian elite and their forays into print, music, dance, art, and culture. (Though the book purports to be a "critique of Indian writing in English" its scathing rhetoric attacks every aspect of the Indian cultural scene. M. Prabha's institutional victims encompass INTACH, the India Habitat Centre, the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, Teen Murti Museum, Bharat Bhavan, the IGNCA, and the National Museum, among others.)

Similarly, her individual targets go far beyond writers—including M.F. Husain, Sonal Mansingh, Pupul Jayakar, and, for no apparent reason except their similarly

alliterative names, "the three Malavikas"—(Singh, Sangvi, and Karlekar)! Her venom targets practically every Indian that has ever put pen to paper or brush to canvas, or has had even a smidgen of success, notable exceptions being R.K. Narayan, A.K. Ramanujan and Nirad Chaudhuri.

India's high-profile glitterati-literati and their attendant culture-vulture groups do present easy targets for satire, abuse and resentment. English-speaking itself is limited to a small circle that lends itself to cultural incest and nepotism, and the three metro centres of cultural power, Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta, do tend to exclude those from the regional backwaters. Those who write English are also their own readers and reviewers, and the English language media notoriously prefers to cover cultural events that are urban and English-speaking.

Everyone knows each other and praise is easier than objective criticism. Consequently, much back-scratching takes place. The book is scathing and funny about globe-trotting university lecturers who never take classes, and the IIC/international seminar/cocktail party circuit. One need not be a hammer-and-sickle wielding activist to agree that Shobha De would not be on the front pages of magazines and on the curriculum of English literature departments if she was not so socially high-profile, skilled at PR, and easy on the eye. Or that Pawan Verma's current media blitz owes as much to his official status as his prowess with the pen.

Nevertheless, to tar Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy, Nissim Ezekiel, and Girish Karnad with the same brush, or to make birth and education an automatic de-merit, is to weaken rather than reinforce the *Waffle of the Toffs* thesis. So does impugning those writers from less privileged backgrounds, like Arun Kolatkar, Jayanta Mahapatra, and Kiran Nagarkar, by suggesting that they have achieved recognition only through boot-licking and chicanery.

The book is dedicated to "the unknown Indian writer of humble origin languishing in the backwaters, ignored by the organs of the State and blanked out by the media". Sadly, just as all the privileged are not undeserving, not all boondocks writers necessarily merit the Booker. Somewhere along the line, M. Prabha is missing the point. The fundament of her book is that literature *should not be* about birth and opportunity. Willy-nilly, by making so much of social status, she has fallen into her own trap, rubbishing her own hypothesis.

Good literature is not about who and what you are or where you came from; it is an intangible something that makes a connect with the reader. Not all the hype in the world can sustain a lousy bit of writing beyond the first edition. Nor can high status. Meanwhile Kabir and Ghalib, despite the handicap of their birth and vernacular medium, will endure for another millennium. Nevertheless, a king *could* write a good novel, just as a beggar might write a lousy one. Poor Henry VIII would probably have gained more recognition as a lyric poet had his verses not been obscured by his fame as a monarch with multiple wives!

M. Prabha's own writing is like her thesis—it suffers from an illusion that quality comes from being obscure! She LOVES the kind of words that need a dictionary as a companion: Tribady, coprology, opuscles, afflatus, paradigmatic, defamiliarisation, ossified skaldry, prolix tartuffery, cline, contumelious, phatic, psittacine, viscerotones, clerisy, manipulable, examen, quotidean, terpsichorean, kennings, are just some of the words with which she lambasts the reader, as well as her subjects. A typical paragraph outlines her premise, while also illustrating her style and prejudices:

The upbringing of the contemporary Indian writer in English has affected his epistemology where his eclectic microcosm becomes the universal macrocosm. The nature of reality that he portrays is partial, anaemic and marginalised, frequently shaped by his jaunts abroad, and international vocations and assignments.

A favourite means of denigrating/putting down any of her targets is the use of words like "claims", "allegedly" or "purporting", used as if the facts were spurious, even when they are provably true! e.g. "Shashi Tharoor, who also claims to be a United Nations official and shuttles between Geneva and New York", Anita Desai who "allegedly, has been a Helen Cam Fellow at Girton" or Jayanta Mahapatra—"a physics teacher who purportedly taught this subject for 36 years in Orissa".

Woe betide someone who qualifies as a toff: even their physical appearance and voices are held against them! Here is M. Prabha on Shiv K. Kumar reading at the IIC:

An attitude of smug superciliousness which sounds offensive and objectionable... He intoned his verse in a croaky voice, with far too many distracting gestures, jerking his neck all the time.

His verse, according to Prabha, was

"Much of the libidinous, titillating stuff that has come to him from the West.... banal and bankrupt of poetic essence", with "even landscape and environment projected as extensions of his veneral self."

Strong stuff this, and by combining personal invective with literary criticism

M. Prabha reveals her own subjective prejudices. Similarly, her slur on Jayanta Mahapatra: "Mahapatra knew that a converted Christian like himself has no legacy to fall back on in an Indian context".

Illogically, while impugning this Oriya-born poet for using Hindu mythology or Hindi words, she also slangs Arvind Mehrotra for using images from English nursery rhymes and fairy tales while being brought up in Allahabad! Come on, M. Prabha, you don't have to be "reared by a Nanny from Albion" to have read Red Riding Hood and Mother Hubbard! Every suburban play-school in the Indian subcontinent echoes to the sounds of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and *Sleeping Beauty*.

Sometimes her stream-of-consciousness critique verges on the slanderous. For example she premises that Vikram Chandra "must have had a fat purse to sustain himself at Baltimore, and later at Houston for a decade. The sybarite origins of this writer are thus quite obvious." She then leaps to the quite unjustifiable conclusion that, "A person with a crore made available for education, would definitely have no problem with payola of a few thousand to India's saleable media for boom and coverage." If Vikram Chandra did not pay for the favourable reviews of *Red*

Earth and Pouring Rain, he might consider suing M. Prabha for libel!

One reads books to inform, enlighten and entertain oneself, not to vicariously rub shoulders with the rich and famous. Once the flurry of book releases and book reviews is over, whom the author is fades rapidly into insignificance. Wracking my brains, I couldn't even remember the social antecedents of more than a handful of writers; which seems to support my own theory that in the long run birth doesn't matter a damn!

After all, Lord Byron and Shelley, Count Tolstoy, Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Rochester, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Henry James, Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, the Lyttons, Stracheys and Sitwells, and many, many others, all left a legacy that remains memorable—in spite of their upper-class origins. Churchill wrote riveting, magical prose, despite rather than because he was a Duke's grandson and a Prime Minister. Her obsession seems to prevent M. Prabha from enjoying what she reads. How sad to read Vikram Seth's funny, perceptive *Beastly Tales* and see only a "word-game of fame hunting".

"One is lead to the hypothesis," says M. Prabha, "that the sociological milieu a writer comes from is almost inversely related to

his quality of writing. That is, the more affluent the writer, the less significant his writing." (Italics are the author's.) She has supported this hypothesis by tearing apart the established Indian literati, but has not been able to give a body of evidence to substantiate the flip side of her argument—i.e., a parallel stream of outstanding writing by socially disadvantaged Indians. Most of her examples are western literary figures. In the West the educational system does even out literary opportunity anyway.

Shorn of M. Prabha's acidic and prejudiced illogic, we all must agree that in India the abysmal level of public education does inhibit the development of much latent literary talent, while privileged institutions like St Stephens, Elphinstone and Doon School help nurture it. Similarly, the supremacy of English over India's multiplicity of regional languages prevents a wider awareness of many luminous texts. Something does need to be done about this. Sadly, *Waffle of the Toffs* is not the way to do it. ■

¹ Badr-ud-din Tyabji

Laila Tyabji is Chairperson of *Dastkar*, a society for crafts and craftspersons, in New Delhi.

Literature and Discourse

Mohan Ramanan

A FINE SILVER THREAD: ESSAYS ON AMERICAN WRITING AND CRITICISM

By James W. Tuttleton

Frank Bros., Noida, 1999, pp. 272, Rs. 149.90

James W. Tuttleton is Professor of English at New York University and has written on a wide range of topics on American Literature in some of the best known journals of our profession. He is, besides, the author of *The Novel of Manners in America*, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson* and *Vital Signs: Essays on American Literature and Criticism*. He has edited *The Works of Washington Irving: History, Tales and Sketches*. The present volume brings together revised and/or rewritten versions of some fifteen articles he contributed to various journals over the last thirty years. Professor Tuttleton is a serious academic with a conservative mindset. He believes in the old verities which the drunken helots of post-modernism reject—values like discrimination in criticism, good taste, judgements of the relative merits of literary works, and above all a sense of the special qualities of literature which he sees as a "separate and higher form of writing discernible through comparison and discrimination and definable through an exercise of refined good taste." He is opposed to current tendencies which collapse literature into discourse, and which see everything as political or ideologically loaded. Tuttleton

quotes James Baldwin approvingly: "All literature might be protest but all protest is not literature." One cannot, and should not, reduce literary works of worth to mere ideology. This is not to say that ideology is not important but that one ought to be alert to those moments when literature attains transcendence over the local, the specific, the passing fashion and over necessity.

Tuttleton's reflections on art and ideology, therefore, effect a separation between literature and ideology. These reflections are about the difference between the two and "about the ways in which ideology has not merely entered the work of some of our best writers but even grossly disfigured it." A secondary purpose of these essays is to focus on the way "one or other ideology has dominated literary criticism, of late, and transformed even our best works of art into objects of shame." I can empathize with this lament because my personal experience with Departments of English in India convinced me that there are English teachers who are no longer loyal to their subject. They wish to study tribal art or films or society and want to do it under the auspices of Departments of English. Now it is no one's case that films or

society should not be studied. Indeed fruitful comparisons between literary texts and cinematic texts have been made but what is now being done is part of a move to scrap English Departments or to make them serve some ideological or political purpose. The politically correct colleague today is hardly a democrat who believes in the cut and thrust of argument or in a critical consensus. She is more likely to be almost fascist and totalitarian. Tuttleton is right to oppose this tendency, and he speaks for many of us when he says: "To offend, even if through honest criticism, is not permitted. We live in an age of wounded sensibilities. Women are wounded, blacks are wounded, native Americans, homosexuals, immigrants, and the welfare class are wounded, among others." He might have added Dalits or subalterns for an Indian audience. He goes on to say: "In savouring minority wounds, the Benjaminian complaint (a reference to Walter Benjamin, the contemporary theory Guru), if I may paraphrase it, seems to have caught on like candied crackerjacks: there is no distinguished literary work that is not also a monument to barbarism, in that it was purchased through the pain of the dispossessed, the disfranchised, and the wounded." Tuttleton's impatience with shame-mongering, I can share, particularly if I am asked to stop reading my *Ramayana* or *Gita* on the grounds that these are shameful texts which preached Brahminical dominance. I am not against a critical appraisal of our past but there is surely a usable past we need not lose in order to pamper our enthusiasm for a nineteenth-century woman autobiographer from Bengal or for the obviously

exciting partisan writing of Mahasweta Devi. Tuttleton's stance confirms me in my suspicion that my politically correct friends are actually nascent fascists in the guise of egalitarians practising a critical laissez faire policy.

It is, of course, true that literature grows out of certain specific political and economic contexts; but it is surely also true that the best works speak across time and space. They speak to our common humanity. They are, as Tuttleton puts it "testaments to transcendence over the barbaric." Our task as literary critics should be to recover from the past that which is of value, to grasp what is genuinely valuable in the present, and to see the past, the present and the future as of imagination compact. I believe Tuttleton understands this but I find no evidence in this collection of essays that he recognizes that a Toni Morrison or a Scott-Momaday could also give us "testaments to transcendence over the barbaric." But of this later.

Tuttleton writes only about fiction and clearly his observations apply to all literature; also they admit of a significance beyond America. Tuttleton shows how in America, ideology has always taken precedence over the aesthetic. The Puritan ethic was inimical to writing which did not have religious utility, practical utility or political correctness (Tuttleton means this in his use of the expression, "political orthodoxy") particularly when it involved questions of national feeling and patriotism. The Puritans destroyed the possibility of an American theatre because of their prohibitions and it was not till the objective conditions of the literary landscape changed that American theatre came into being with Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. In fiction, which is Tuttleton's focus, Washington Irving was perhaps the first to break through these orthodoxies and to transcend the local. Irving had a varied style and while he, like many other nineteenth-century American authors, was strongly nationalistic, nevertheless did not allow this to obstruct art. His *The Sketch Book* has a rare unity provided as much by style as by the consistent theme of ruin, mutability and dilapidation, dust and decay evoked through various narrative strategies. While *The Sketch Book* undoubtedly engages with the nation, it raises to high art because Irving is able to mythologize and people the landscape in stories like 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' and 'Rip Van Winkle'. We have here the expression and fulfilment of what Tuttleton calls the "basic rhythms of desire". Like Irving, whom we read for his style, we read Poe for his aesthetic quality. Poe has generally been condemned by ideologically motivated critics for his voyeurism, drunkenness and dissipation—as though these overflowed into his art. *The Poe Log*, however, presents a picture of a sensitive, though volatile, artist struggling amidst indifferent personal circumstances to retain his balance. Surely if biography must play a role in critical opinion, people should see this side of Poe. The fact is

that Poe, alone in the nineteenth century, was the supreme artist of beauty which he pursued with a rare dedication and commitment. Tuttleton sardonically asserts: "Henceforth there ought to be a special circle in Dante's hell reserved for every high school English teacher who neglects to read *The Poe Log* and goes on presenting Poe's work as if the author were one of his own demented personae, leering in the visage of Vincent Price."

When Tuttleton turns to James Fennimore Cooper he focusses on an early American author who dramatized the struggle between the aesthetic and the political quite sharply. It is Tuttleton's contention that Poe was artistic in his Leatherstocking novels where he created a fascinating world of romance, frontier heroism, brave Indians and Gothic dread. In his social novels Poe could not quite keep out his bias for the landed gentry. This, presumably, is a pity, because Tuttleton's own bias in American fiction is for the social novel of manners and he is loathe to see Cooper failing there. But Dean Howells succeeded in his exploration of the *aristoi* from a perspective of the Jacksonian democrat. Howells' socialist views actually provided him with the necessary balance in satirizing the snobbery of the genteel set and in projecting the positive values represented by back-country girls like Kitty Ellison and Lydia Blood. They represent good American manners.

Tuttleton's concern with manners allows him to judge Henry James' subtle representation of Venice, not as ideologically motivated critics do. James responded to the sunshine of Venice, its 'imagined community', not to its brute reality which, of course, was its status as a failed republic in ruin. In spite of James' inexorable Yankeehood, he could produce an artistic and aestheticized version of Venice, purified of actuality. In a curious parallel Tuttleton points to the indigenous gentility of Henry Adams and his wife, who between them created a polite circle in Washington to counter the vulgarity of real American life. Both James and Adams aestheticize life and letters. Both were successful because they had a strong balancing capacity in their natures. Not so Edith Wharton who in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1901) could not successfully keep down her partisan need to be politically correct in matters concerning women, family and marriage. Art suffers because of ideology. Conversely ideologically strong writers like Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis produced good art, as did Fitzgerald. These writers did not allow their Tolstoyan or Leninist ideology to prevent them from tapping their inner conflicts to evoke an authentic picture of their times. Dos Passos' *Mid-Century* is a good example of a successful melange of history, fiction and biography. Tuttleton prefers works where ideas are subordinated to their dramatic uses. He clearly sees this happening in Conrad Aiken's psychological exploration of Mr. Articularis, and in Louis Auchincloss' genteel writings. He sees this particularly in the

treatment of women in Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway, all three of whom engaged with the woman question but dramatized their conflicts on the issue by countering the radical feminist view of the Mother as an emasculating power with the view of Mother as a power for the community. In their versions of the feminine mystique they produced genuine art.

Perhaps Tuttleton's best essays in this volume are the two polemical ones on American radicalism in the Twenties and his essay on tracking the American novel into the void. In both these essays Tuttleton speaks from the perspective of a cultural conservative. He attacks the radical tradition of Bourne and Brooks, their appropriation of Emerson and the nihilism of the 1950s which he sees as a legacy of that tradition. In his essay on the novel he shows how in a parallel to this radical tradition, Americans have promoted the romance and its concomitant generic expressions of grotesquerie, fantasy, utopian and dystopian narratives. Everywhere Tuttleton's indignation for the anti-human tendencies of the radicals is evident. He speaks up for America, for art, for tradition. "Too normal seems to be boring" say these nihilists. Tuttleton argues for continuity of tradition. "Cultural conservatism has been a constant fact of American life from the beginning and is reflected in our jurisprudence and law, in our politics and religion, in all the human sciences, in social and intellectual history, in our art and criticism. Cultural conservatism is the glue that holds our society together. It connects us to the past, preserves what has provided socially and personally valuable, and makes it possible for us to contemplate the future without terror." I am in general sympathy with this view but at the end of the day I wonder if Tuttleton's conservatism is not *waspish*, if it is not exclusive. Surely there is much in ethnic writing—American Chicano, Amerindian, Asian-American and African-American—which is "socially and personally valuable". Is it not strange that except for a single reference to James Baldwin, Tuttleton has nothing to say about even such an accomplished African-American woman writer like Toni Morrison? Is it conceivable that writers from the margins, as they are termed, have not been able to attain transcendence over their immediate conditions? Is it not simple prejudice to imagine that the multiculturalists do not speak to our common humanity? By all means discriminate between good art and bad art but you cannot exclude the enriching artistic expression of half the American writers who may not be white, male or Protestant. Tuttleton is too good a scholar to fall into such a position but for all the passion and concern of his essays he does seem to have excluded genuine art from his scheme of things. ■

Mohan Ramanan is Professor of English at the University of Hyderabad.

Plight of Short Story Writers

R. Raj Rao

ENGLISH AND THE INDIAN SHORT STORY

Edited by Mohan Ramanan and P. Sailaja

Orient Longman, 2000, pp. 155, Rs. 325.00

Academics these days are folks in a hurry. The rate at which more and more of us are lending our names to 'edited' volumes is alarming. All we have to do is conduct a seminar in our department (for which the lolly of course comes from the UGC), call for papers, and publish them as a book after writing a four or five-page introduction. Scholar-entrepreneurs such as Delhi's R.K. Dhawan have expanded this into a full-fledged industry. Dhawan has stopped displaying even basic courtesies, such as using the words 'edited by' on the covers of his nice-looking volumes. The editor's name appears on the cover as if he/she were the author. We are supposed to ignore the distinction between these two crucial words.

It is always difficult to convert seminar papers into a book. This is because the papers are generally on diverse topics; when brought together in book form, they may rob the book of a focus. Moreover, academia is by nature unadventurous. The papers presented at the seminar are frequently thus on dated subjects. Few participants are willing to take risks.

The present book comes out of a seminar held at the University of Hyderabad, a university that undoubtedly has one of the best English departments in the country. The seminar was held way back in 1994. When a book appears so long after the original event, it loses some of its relevance. This is reflected in a couple of Ramanan's and Sailaja's introductory remarks. For example, they say: "Practically every major newspaper has a short story section as standard fare... Magazines have always been in the forefront in promoting the short story—witness the example of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Reading this in the year 2000, one is overcome by feelings of *déjà vu*. We can only lament the death of the *Weekly* and condemn the editorial policies of major newspapers that have stopped accepting short stories. So much so, aspiring short-story writers today don't know where to go with their work—there are but a few publishing outlets.

Again, the editors say that while a "large section of India" was covered by the seminar, the metropolis was left out. But why was the metro left out of a 1994 seminar? Bombay has a large number of top short-story-writers such as Cyrus Mistry, Vilas Sarang, Dina Mehta, Nisha da Cunha and Randhir Khare. Why were no papers invited on the work of any of them?

Not that the editors don't anticipate the problems posed by academia's orthodoxy and by the interregnum that separates book and seminar. They do, and attempt to deal with it by asserting that "these are old questions but need to be asked again and answered as specifically as possible". But how often must the same questions be asked?

While the editors are right in suggesting that there is a link between literature and ideology, ideology mustn't be seen merely in terms of colonial rule. The three papers that best test their claim that "many of the papers in this volume explore the impact of ... ideology on the emergence of the Indian short story" are all by scholars with a feminist orientation. Tutun Mukherjee, discussing Mahasweta Devi's short stories in Gayatri Spivak's translation, says: "All the three short stories taken up here, sketch the gendered subject enmeshed in the lateral mappings and relationships which reveal the cartography of power and social control". Ranjana Harish argues in her paper "Male Culture, Female Strategies" that "in the absence of any well-defined theory of women's writing, women writers often invent strategies to cope with their creative urge for self-expression on the one hand, and their need for acceptance in a patriarchal set-up on the other". Rekha Pappu tackles the issue of reading practice. She writes: "My reading of a short story by Ambai suggests one such reading method without necessarily claiming that it is the only permissible kind of feminist reading." Julia Kristeva gives Pappu her framework.

The other papers that stand out are mostly by Hyderabad University professors. All of them are on the subject of translation. Sachidananda Mohanty, deeply rooted as he is in Oriya culture, discusses the relevance of socialist realism in the work of Fakir Mohan Senapati, an Oriya novelist. He offers a close-reading of just one of Senapati's stories, 'Dakamunshi' (The Postman). For his theoretical grid, he relies on Gauri Viswanathan and the ideas put forward in her book *Masks of Conquest*. What practical problems do translators of Indian stories face? M. Sridhar and Alladi Uma attempt to answer this question in a short presentation, in which they talk about the difficulties they encountered while translating Peddibhoda Subbaramaiah's Telugu short story 'Sati Savitri' into English. Sudhakar Marathe takes up an unusual topic: the 'country' (or tribal) short

story and how it is affected by the 'sanskritization' of language. He compares this to the disappearance of other ethnic arts.

Rope-making is now largely replaced by factory-made Cordage; coppersmithy and brass works are now made obsolete by plastic and aluminium-vessel factories; gathering of medicines and herbs, etc., are increasingly butted out of the way by the patent medicine industry; traditional costumes are disappearing, they are replaced by factory-made clothing of urban-western styles; ditto jewellery and decorations, and so on, specific to each community and sub-community and sub-region; traditional tools and processes are also disappearing. No voices seem to be raised against this human environmental degradation, no societies have been created for conservation of these features of the ethos.

I began this review by grumbling about how scared we, as academics, are to move away from the beaten track. In this context, I am inclined to ask why a maverick intellectual like Hoshang Merchant, who is also on the English faculty of Hyderabad University, is nowhere in the book. Hoshang should have been persuaded to participate in the seminar and write a paper. His paper would have been what parallel cinema is to mainstream cinema. Needless to say, it would have enriched the book greatly. ■

R. Raj Rao a poet is the author of *Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorized Biography*.

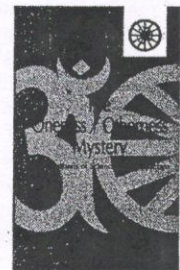
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Understanding Theory in Translation

Alladi Uma

TRANSLATION & UNDERSTANDING

By Sukanta Chaudhuri

Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 89, Rs. 250.00

Before I received this book for review, I met a Bengali couple who raved about Sukanta Chaudhuri's translation of the nonsense verse of a well-known Bengali children's writer, Sukumar Ray. We discussed how difficult such a task would be but they insisted that I had to read the translation to see how Sukanta Chaudhuri was able to achieve this. But before I had a chance to read it, I read this book on translation. Talking about the act of translation in general and also about this specific work, Sukanta Chaudhuri says, "...as a translation or rendering it must always be inadequate, never a total reflection or equivalent of the original" (p. 23). A simple enough statement. How many times had I not, as a translator, asked myself about the adequacy of a translation!

I must preface this review by stating that I am no translation theorist. I am simply a translator. So it was with some trepidation that I picked up the book, wondering how I would understand its theoretical nuances. But to my pleasant surprise I was impressed with its lucidity—how the theoretical positions were conveyed so comprehensively. I could hear Sukanta Chaudhuri speak to me—though a translation has taken place here from the oral ("a series of lectures at the University of Alberta") to the written published text!

The book is divided into four short chapters, 'Translation and Cultural Encounter', 'The Translator As Sceptic', 'Translation and Creation' and 'Translation and Multilingualism'. Each of these chapters is complete in itself, yet one leads on to the other. In each one, he does not merely rest on abstract theorizations, but uses concrete examples to arrive at his conclusions, for where is theory without the actual practice of translation? I am amazed at his range of examples from ancient Greek to the Bible to Marx to contemporary Indian writing in English, not to mention examples from his mother tongue, Bengali. Not to be missed are his analyses and responses to various translation theorists. It is really interesting to see how he uses such a vast canvas in such a tightly woven short book. It is perhaps because of his capacity to combine practice with theory that this book will appeal both to practitioners and theorists.

At a time when many publishing houses in India have taken up translating Indian language texts into English, the questions of

the hegemonic relationship between two languages and the way in which the dominant language is manipulated by the 'marginal' are paramount in the mind of translators. Sukanta Chaudhuri spells this out quite clearly:

The translation scenario between two languages or cultures "fixes" or crystallizes their hegemonic relationship...

Yet by articulating the hegemony, each translation from a marginal or subaltern language into a dominant one can counter the imbalance—often subtly, sometimes dramatically. It validates the subaltern culture quite literally in terms of the dominant one, but thereby draws out the dominant language beyond its entrenched confines (pp. 15-16).

However, in the very next chapter he says that, "[n]ot all translation scenarios are hegemonic" (p. 36). He comments on the "curious situation (p. 36) in India where translation between languages often occurs through English and little between them. While he concedes that such translations between Indian languages are "unevenly distributed, owing to social and historical circumstances that might be hegemonic in nature" (p. 36), we wonder why he is not more forceful about the hegemonic relationship between Indian languages. Look at the number of Bengali texts that have been translated into Telugu. Saratchandra is such a common household name that some Telugu readers do not even know he is not a Telugu!

Another question that constantly comes up is the connection between translation and creativity. He takes this up in his third chapter. Discussing the auto-translations of Tagore, Nabokov and Beckett, he remarks, "These various versions of auto-translations illustrate with unique clarity the process of extension, revision, critique and deconstruction invested in translation" (p. 47). He feels that the translator, especially the auto-translator shows the "fundamental version" of the "anxiety of influence" (p. 48) and "cannot proceed with his task unless he misreads, just like any other writer" (p. 48). No matter his deconstructive reading of translation (in fact, he uses the guest-host analogy and would prefer to call the target language, host language), what comes through forcefully is his emphasis on the creative output of the

translator, that the translator is like any other writer. This is especially important in that it controverts not just popular notions but those in certain quarters of the academia that translation is just a reductive activity.

Sukanta Chaudhuri brings out an interesting distinction between monolingualism and unilingualism—"monolingualism, the literal state of knowing or using only one language, and ...unilingualism, a mindset or ethos that operates only in terms of one language" (pp. 72-73). Discussing *The Bible* translation, he says that "each rendering of the Holy Writ has thus been a reconfirmation and a revolution" (p. 67). He sees how Marx and Marxist discourse have been read variously by people such as Lenin and Mao dze-Dong. But he calls such cultures "more or less single-noted, more or less prescriptive, and this restriction links up with a verbalization that is implicitly unilingual" (p. 72). He contrasts it with modern capitalism which has "no defined, textual ideology" (p. 72). I wonder how a translation which has been a "revolution" (*The Bible*) and the various renderings of Marx and Marxian ideology can be thought of as unilingual?

Sukanta Chaudhuri's text is indeed multilingual or at least bilingual—it speaks to the practitioner and to the theorist as well. Maybe a theorist will have something different to say. Maybe another practitioner will have something else to say or maybe I too will have something else to say at a different point. I use here Sukanta Chaudhuri's views on the translator and substitute the word 'reader' for 'translator': "...no two readers (or the same reader in two works) stand in quite the same relation to the source text..." (p. 55). ■

Alladi Uma teaches English at the University of Hyderabad and translates from Telugu to English.

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Two Good Authors, Two Disappointing Books

Mrinal Pande

DOOSRI KAHANI

By Alka Sarawagi

Radhakrishna Prakashan, Delhi, pp. 192, Rs. 150.00

NILU, NILIMA, NILOUFER

By Bhisham Sahni

Rajkamal Prakashan, Delhi, pp. 200, Rs. 175.00

D*oosri Kahani* is the second collection of Alka Sarawagi's short stories. She has already been catapulted to literary fame by her award-winning Hindi novel *Kalikatha via Bypass*, a rambling picaresque tale about the Marwari diaspora, and the rise and fall of the great city of Calcutta. The present collection is, therefore, bound to be read with raised expectations of a kind that are seldom fulfilled. A pity Sarawagi is a smart and polished handler of prose, and unafraid to experiment most of the stories in the collection seem to wander ultimately into wordy mazes and get lost. They start off with some exciting and unexpected ideas, but eventually most of them fail to humanize the contours of the ideas or to bridge the gulf between personal essay and fiction, between truth seen in a flash, and the architechronic needs of a short story. This has also been the tragedy with the fiction of some of the best poets of our previous generation: Muktibodh, Shrikant Verma and Raghuvir Sahai. Like theirs, Sarawagi's stories are part gothic, part kaleidoscopic journey into the lives and minds of lower middle-class men and women, residing for the most part in and around India's awesome metro cities, nursing stifled ambitions and a deep neurosis. They pull at you constantly like little black holes, but once you enter their world, you find that inside there are no profound visions. The stories offer only an even more dense version of a brittle angst-ridden verbosity.

The characters' preoccupations with self lead to imperfect weaving of the inside with the outside in stories such as 'Ye Rahguzar Na Hoti', 'Ek Ped Ki Maut', 'Ek Aur Namakharaam' and 'Ripon Streeter Parwin Akhtar'. All depict life lived on the fringes of Calcutta. All are haunted by the many contradictions of the old city, the sinister lassitude that pervades the city's intellectual circles, decadent old families going slowly broke and mad behind dusty and shuttered windows, the endlessly talkative eccentrics trapped inside their own hallucinatory dreams and men and women stuck in dysfunctional marriages. Often it is as if the vitality of

everyday life of the middle-class has been sapped to fuel the machinery of depression that weaves these tales. There is Jagannath Babu, the protagonist in 'Ek Ped Ki Maut', who turns into an avid birdwatcher-cum Guru. He performs the Dwadasha Shradha of a tree that housed hundreds of exotic birds in the courtyard of his office building, but was chopped down mysteriously, for no ostensible reason. He observes a virtual fast for twelve days and then discovers at the end of his fast and his tenure in the office, another tree, where the same mysterious birds come to meet him exclusively. In 'Ye Rahguzar Na Hoti', an irascible, old and eccentric grandfather has driven his sons away since his wife's death, and is by now reduced to cursing them all the time as he continues to haunt the ancestral house. Like the narrator of this tale, his granddaughter who comes visiting, the stories are choked by memories of old feuds and bitter recriminations. There are few shared memories of warmth and love and togetherness.

Ironically, the protagonists of the stories, as they meander through a maze of dysfunctional relationships, bewailing the loneliness of men and women in big impersonal cities, also treasure their own aloneness like a black pearl. They may be constantly complaining about being cut off and abandoned but still they (the men in particular) seem always to be loners by choice. They hate themselves for being inadequate, yet they demand that females receive and bear their poisonous love with its terminal guilt and hatred, like dutiful wives and daughters. It is their karma, like cleaning up after a destructive binge by abusive men. In 'Nirvan', the male protagonist tries hard to edge close to the world of women, yet ends up only stalking some young women, and discovering how they create interesting geometric patterns as they chat and roam aimlessly. He seems to be fascinated by the erotic dominance and submission (his older brother beats up his wife routinely) but, amazingly enough, he does not wish either to touch women or solicit their company. He



seems merely beset by a cold and somewhat idle curiosity to find out what women without men do and what they discuss, as they roam around lanes and bylanes. "Dear readers," the story says at this point, "you may be well aware of how a major grief in life is generated by the necessity to choose between loneliness and socializing. When you are alone, you wish for company, and when you have company, you catch yourself wishing for solitude."

Going through all the eighteen stories in the volume, one senses that a certain rage and introverted dismay runs through most of them. When pleasure comes, it comes less from the story's perfection as an artefact, than from our sense of a very sensitive, inquisitive mind at work as it traces life's ironies and little deceptions. Sarawagi understands well the mixture of bored contempt and fervent intimacy that marks most parent-child relationship in Indian middle-class families. She is also adept at uncovering the desperation of filial love, and the agonizing needs and distances that exist between generations within families. But the sharp irony and unapologetic intensity that mark the story-teller's own descriptions, are mostly missing in the words and gestures of her laconic characters. As they shape up, they all seem to lack a certain will to survive or even to strive determinedly to emerge out of their fears, their boredom. It is as though while the writer focuses her sharp gaze on them, they have already decided to give up on the world and retreat into vivid daydreams or nightmares of their own. The rich poetic language that describes their lives does not emerge from them, but the story-teller's mind. Are they truly bloodless apparitions, one wonders. Or is it the author who can't permit them to have their own will and determination? Is such near total lack of will, the characters' blindspot, or the author's? Almost all of them are victims, and they owe their ability to fascinate, to their victimization by forces more powerful than themselves. But

was there no life for them, before or after their victimization? Even the women who are relatively powerful beings in these stories, end up sabotaged, confused and tortured by a man's world, that both covets and despises them.

Is that all there is to human life, one wonders. And isn't it sadly ironic that the writer seeks to efface, by and large, the characters' individuality (often by rendering them literally nameless) while chronicling the systematic violation of their identity by society, workmates and circumstances?

Sarawagi's prose is agile and deft. She uses words brilliantly, economically and with a precision that her poetic idol Raghuvir Sahai would have approved of. She is also rightly, uncompromising about what is abusive and contemptible in human relationships. But there is more to life than self-destructive rages and voyeuristic wanderings as her novel *Kalikatha via Bypass* shows brilliantly. The characters she has created in these stories, remain largely destructive, even creepy, almost without exception. They are unattractive and self-regarding in their personal lives, unheroic in the public sphere, sunk in their own hurt and misery when others need their sympathy and in communicating with people generally. The easy bonhomie and interweaving of caste, class and gender, that made *Kalikatha* so special, is largely missing in these stories. This collection perhaps, is an instance of an immensely talented novelist whose gifts are less great when turning her hand to the short story form, edgy and indirect.

Veteran writer Bishm Sahni's novel *Nilu, Nilima, Niloufer* is, in contrast, a simple and unpretentious braiding of two tales of Hindu-Muslim love in the age of choleric communalism. Sahni's fiction has from the beginning, been haunted by the many ironies inherent in the partition of this subcontinent of ours. His earlier novel *Tamas* was a brilliant example of his sweeping, gently ironical vision of the trauma of a land's forced dismemberment. The present novel though neatly structured and readable, lacks the epic quality of the earlier work. It can be best described as a fictional working out of the crippling fears that have beset the sensitive Indian intellectuals in the last two decades. The novel deftly weaves the lives of Nilu or Niloufer, a young Muslim girl from a small village, who comes to the city as a college student and falls in love with Sudhir, a poor, but gifted Hindu painter. Then there is Nilu's friend Nilima, a Hindu girl from a well to do and liberal Punjabi family, who is in love with a Muslim boy Altaf. Nilima cannot decide if she loves Altaf well enough to risk marrying him.

Though both these stories are placed in our time, the ambience of the novel—the college life, the staff-room scenes in Simla, the friendly banter among artists and students—somehow feels terribly dated. The nuances of speech and giggly, gender-

segregated socializing actually take us back to the pre-partition days. Perhaps the author unconsciously digs into memories of the days when he himself was young and interacted with other young students, artists and professionals, as he creates a narrative based in the present times. But times have a habit of changing. Even in our smaller towns, campus life and the language of the young have changed in fundamental ways. The scenes in the novel, therefore, have an unreal sepia tinted feel to them, as though one was watching the lovers in some old video from the days gone by, with the men in flappy trousers and shirt sleeves and women dressed in diaphanous chiffons and ghararas. The only thing that is not dated and still rings true in the novel, is the tension between Hindus and Muslims, which has intensified and deepened through the last five decades, and mutated into disturbing forms.

Sudhir's romantically primal feelings for the beautiful Niloufer after they get married furtively in a court, cost him not only his emotional well being, but also the full membership of the teaching fraternity. The lovers go off to Simla in search of anonymity and in the way of Hindi film artist the hero lands a job almost instantly. For a while they are blissfully happy as he teaches, paints and she keeps house and waits for him. Niloufer becomes pregnant and to her delight, Nilima comes visiting. But then Niloufer's villainous brother Hamid too enters the scene. A sultry fundamentalist, he is smarting under the stigma of his sister's marriage to a Hindu. Under the guise of taking his sister to visit her parents, he forces her to abort her 'Hindu' foetus and then puts her practically under house arrest. He even plans for her to be remarried to a proper Muslim, a widower with children, as soon as she is better. Nilo's family pressured as it is, by an increasingly intolerant community and the fear of legal reprisals by the Hindu police, is stiff and angry and helpless. Niloufer is treated as a pariah by all except her mother. She hates what has happened, but is unable to defy the young hotheaded son. But eventually it is the mother, who sets the daughter free, so that the lovers may be reunited. Nilo returns to Simla and they go on in time to parent a child.

Parallel to this runs the tale of Nilima's doomed love for Altaf. She decides ultimately not to marry a Muslim because it seems too complicated. She okays her engagement, instead, to a Hindu official who her family thinks most suitable. After a traditional and spectacular marriage ceremony she lives to regret the decision. Her husband turns out to be cowardly, uncouth and mean and abuses her frequently. She tries to commit suicide by setting fire to her clothes, survives, leaves her husband temporarily to 'try and collect her thoughts'. Ultimately she decides to stand up to her husband by using her leverage with his boss's sympathetic wife, rather than ask for a divorce. Strange sadistic choice this. Anyway

the novel ends with a long letter from Nilima to Nilu. She talks in it to her closest friend about the entire traumatic journey from being a petrified, self-loathing doormat, to a militant feminist-wife. She ends the letter with a pathetic girlish appeal to keep in touch, "Who knows one day, I too may laugh and chirp again".

Nilu, Nilima, Niloufer remains an old-fashioned novel with largely pasteboard characters. Sahni is at his best when describing the subtle unconscious traumas of the Hindu-Muslim mind, through little words and gestures. He also gives graphic details about the cruelties and tortures that both communities subject individuals to, when they break the forced segregation, of how mixed marriages between the two communities frequently betray the calm surface of our rural society as also the urban lower middle-class. He is pitiless in evoking scenes that show how humaneness may be ruptured again and again by acts of unspeakable bestiality and violence in the name of male pride or family honour. But Sahni's creative sympathy is at its weakest when he is describing the life of well-heeled members of the upper crust. The most moving parts of the novel are those where the characters touch his sympathy: a simple and trusting Niloufer and her innocent and humane young lover, who lay their souls bare to each other. Sahni also records the tender love between hostile communities with infinite grace and sympathy. But then he goes on to show how human beings may be overwhelmingly driven towards hatred and retrograde behaviour against their own better judgement. The deep and abiding communal streak which still runs like a faultline across the nation comes out clearly enough in the novel. But it is, by and large, a forgettable exercise because despite the value of the theme, the work itself is lacking in startling images or phrases that made *Tamas* so unique. Ultimately *Nilu, Nilima, Niloufer* feels less like an evocation of individual experience, than an illustration of politically correct ideas about communalism. About how true love conquers all. The steadfast banality of Nilima's letters, the preference for summarizing rather than presenting live scenes, the decision to present the post-independence Hindu liberalism in the person of Nilima's westernized father with his cliched words and mannerisms, prevent Sahni's characters (particularly Nilima's family) from developing into memorable individuals. The novel reads like the work of a conscientious and diligent, but rather dull, social activist. One who has set out to present a fictionalized study of communalization of the Indian society and its effect on young lovers.

Pity, because Sahni's novels as we all know are capable of touching immense heights. ■

Mrinal Pande is a writer and a journalist.

Of Death and Other Matters

K.G. Verma

ANTIM ARANYA

By Nirmal Verma

Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, Patna, 1998, pp. 282, Rs. 225.00

Work... to text... is methodological field.

— Roland Barthes

It is a decade Nirmal Verma (hereafter NV) returns to novel in *Antim Aranya* (hereafter AA). A narrative of the last years of a highly placed government official, now retired, who lives with his family in a cottage situated in a famous hill station. Withdrawn and despairing he remains confined to himself. The narrator 'I', an unemployed young man who has recently been engaged works as a scribe. His job is to make notes of conversations held at different times with him apart keeping a vigil on the ailing man.

A preferred NV locale the hill resort comprises a few scattered cottages, an erstwhile colonial club-cum-library, an old temple, and a cemetery. Tall polars, pine and deodars surround the isolated habitats. At intervals shaken from slumber by the activities of attendants in out-houses. Mehra Sab's much younger, beautiful Christian second wife Diva who feels lonely has started a school on the heights for children. Their daughter Tiya from the first marriage, who is unmarried and is a doctor, lives away, sometimes visits them. Among those who frequent the household is one Annajee a German émigré, who chose to stay back after the Second World War. She has no one to call her own in the whole of India yet she loves the place, is in touch with her aged parents back home. Quite a bit of an eccentric but very affectionate. Niranjana hails from Jaipur, some time teacher of philosophy in the university, owns an orchard, spends his summer here during the season calls himself an absentee landlord. A quiet and brooding man, he is more of a recluse. Dr. Singh an army doctor runs a private clinic up in the bazaar attends on Mehra Sab as a personal physician. That's about all by way of an interactive community.

The novel is a long, dreary gaze at the painful fact of death. There is no drama in it. In the mind of Mehra Sab and others crop up memories and suppressions which are colored by the nightmarish quality of the narrative. During exchanges, questions of identity, meaning and suffering are viewed closely. There are pauses and long-range philosophizing, often conversation is snapped. Mostly bewilderment prevails. The mood is of dark despair, outside strong winds impinge on the serenity of the valley. Residential quarters are adjoined by haunted graveyard,

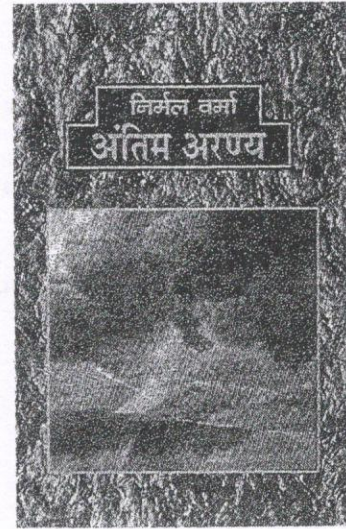
confounded by flickering fire-balls, grasshoppers and bats. A depressing quiet overpowers everything during dusk when the huts are dimly lit and the inmate Mehra Sab lives the painful thoughts of God's absence.

NV spent long years (1959-72) in Europe. It was there that he got his first shock when the then Soviet Union attacked Czechoslovakia. Disillusionment made him throw away his leftist gear. The crisis resulted in closeness towards the modern West. Thereafter in short stories and novels he increasingly came closer to the questions involving angst of the modern man. A feeling of thrown-in in an alien set permeates his entire fiction. AA is a culmination of the questions raised earlier.

AA is a gradual unfolding of the trope of 'death' with accompanying sense of 'solitude' coupled with 'remembrance'. Mehra Sab keeps a close watch on his own body—a sort of self-distancing in moments of pain. A frightening experience for those around him. He seeks deliverance from pain perhaps akin to ancient Indian negative conception of *Upvarga*. For the narrator the scene is one of unrelenting experience of isolation and tedium of routine check-ups. It grows worse after Diva's untimely death and consequent departure of Tiya. Dr. Singh reminds the narrator '*Tum yahan eise umra mein aya ho jab sabka sab beet chukka hai. Aur woh jo shesh bacha hai voh-voh kya hai?*' Niranjana too is in similar straits, '*Kabi to samajh mein nahin atta, kaun si zindagi asli hai. Yeh ya voh...ya dono mein koi nahin.*'

Though a formation on death, AA employs this metaphor to persist with the meaning of life, its enigmatic nature, its many turns and twists and its final ontological status—*Deh ke bhed* (Secrets of body) and soul's mysteries (*Pida*). Is the novel an account of masochistic self-indulgence of a guilt-ridden old man who will not give out the cause of his first wife's death? The entire experience is transformed in to a narrative within narrative—a sort of confessional in a church chamber.

Steeped as it is in the doxa of modern existential writings we cannot make of AA only an experience of a rarefied zone of consciousness for that will be delimiting its heterogeneity. Doing so will be denying its allegorical nature because all text remains



caught in their own unreadability.

Preoccupied as they are—Mehra Sab, Niranjana and Dr. Singh with Death, each one of them successively comes to terms with it in intimate expressions of guilt, failure and mystery. But the moot problem approached at different stages with possible "meanings" is "torn apart" by the aporias that constitute them. Occasional totalization in terms of symbols and metaphors such as *Virat Kaya Kalp* (massive metamorphosis) Leela (-lay), *Kal-chakra* (cycle of time), *Ghatana Krum* (turn of events), *Gyan* (knowledge), *Ishwar* (God), *Satya* (truth), *Dusara Kal Lok* (another region of time and space), *Mukti* (liberation) recreate the whole in terms of "illusion" but are strongly resisted by the realistic and the temporal hum-drum rhythm of life around, making transcendence unachievable.

To the curious narrator Niranjana is quite an enigma. In between languorous sittings on liqueurs both exchange notes, in moods of general *udasinta* (indifference) on *sanyas* (asceticism), and *andh viswas* (superstition) and question of search for the unnameable. As an astute observer of the many and intricate routes which consciousness takes NV takes recourse to all possible efforts to unravel the unfathomable. So much so that direct reference is made to a *sanyasi* who merely suggests 'to be in place'. It could be the natural fall-out of the ideological volte-face which NV underwent. He realized the inadequacy of linear approach to matters of profounder intent. Another aspect which attracts our attention is the metonymic revalorization of Indian miraculism as against western European existential angst. At times making it all look like a *pari-katha* (fairy-tale).

French critic Maurice Blanchot reflecting on the nature of (literary) work: it reveals a permanent struggle "between the measure of the work that becomes a possibility and the excess of the work that tends towards impossibility". There is no gainsaying the fact the AA attains it abundantly. This logical

impasse is the excess of double-bind impossibility. It remains so after the end—unfinished and infinite.

NV generally works in the excess of impossibility. Those who look for a certain “closure” will be sorely disappointed. There is implicit rejection of the “historical reason” in AA. From the time of Diva’s death to the dispersal of Mehra Sab’s ashes in the river Sapra everything takes place in subdued manner without any loudness or protestations. The tangible eludes us at every juncture. The vocabulary of the morbid abounds—“suspicious”, “apprehensions” stay stuck and the unstated reigns in restated “obsessions”. The whole of it reiterates that psychical burden “being human is to be perpetually in ferment” (NV).

An obvious choice in reading a work like AA is deconstructive hermeneutics that is to carefully shift the unnecessary baggage and arrive at some “plausibility” of meaning. This will be a diagnosis which involves interpretation of intentionality, as manipulated by objects in the form of symbols and metaphors. Take for example *akelapan* (loneliness). The metaphor entails a host of problems. It starts with Mehra Sab to the narrator’s final exit from the scene of activity enmeshed in “infinite meaninglessness”. Critical attitudes which work on the lines suggested above or phenomenologism eschewing subjectivity to the last trace or those encouraging “distance” and “unwillingness” to “interfere” in an active way have their limitations one way or the other. The “slippages” about the “truth” location and objectivity are such that vigorously pursued may turn out to be mere stances without a ground or foundation. AA points this towards emptiness. The significant move in the case of NV is to let the novel be a suspension between “ours and not ours”, a languishing form of “decision and indecision”. It is not arriving anywhere! *Bitata kuche bhi nahin hai. Sab kuche vaisa hi hai.* Even when we try to catch up with the intricate web of relationships, i.e. Tiya’s attitude towards her step-mother, Diva’s cheerful demeanour in Niranjan’s presence or Mehra Sab’s quasi-confessional revelations towards the end we have an unerring feeling that work is “unfinished”, “unending”—“*Deh ka antim sandesh sirf mrityu ke samne khulta hai*”.

Following “excess of impossibility” as stated above one arrives at a sense of elusiveness for such is the outcome of rigorous analysis. Its logical corollary will be what Walter Benjamin postulates that no (work) is intended for the reader.

Critical adventures on these lines especially in the case of AA may help penetrate further into what Paul de Man puts as the “dark and inaccessible domain of work”. We find in them that work in some versions, not only does not have an objective status whatsoever; it has no existence apart from that constituted by the “inward act of reading”.

It is fairly obvious that to capture AA in its

entirety with the help of this or that textual practice is fraught with pitfalls. In its final analysis a work is ever without a ‘shape’, ‘end’ or ‘effect’. AA in particular is characterized by haziness, opacity and lack of transparency towards the end. It is true that to travel critically along these doctrines of exegetical readings is to reasonably avoid all kinds of essentialist and pseudo-ideological traps. But the fact remains there is lack of historicity in them. Reducing everything, under the hypnotic spell of the prose of the deathliness to ‘linguistic’ complication “will be delimiting the expansiveness of its explosive unfolding—‘*unka dekhna ... Ankhen dekhte hui, Ne dekhi hui*’.

At this stage one is faced with a disjunction where history asserts its claims though there are no signs of active struggle, just a move from monadic totalities to infinite “other” understandings—trying to look at “remembrance” as a ‘political act’ in the case of Mehra Sab. This is the high moment in AA. In different shades, though in the same surroundings of spiritual aridity run down by emotive torpor, Tiya and the narrator though not old, ailing or indifferent, do not belong. Tiya did not stay with her parents and the narrator could not come back. Also it is they who alone in the entire range of AA enjoyed a few fragile flashes of togetherness during the water crisis in the town and after the end of Mehra Sab’s mortal travail. This is not to suggest that they self-consciously endeavoured for it. It is one of the many systems of which the text unfolds.

One last thing about NV’s avowal of Hindu mythological, religious and philosophical designations, which are spread over in his prose writings as well made Ashok Vajpeyi in his own way qualify as NV’s *Bharat Vyakulta* (Espousal of India). We have in Mehra Sab an Indian with traces of a pucca sab, with residues of a colonial. His state of mind—of knowing, feeling, becoming is that of a lonely man without moorings in the traditional past. His quest for deliverance is from pain is existential in nature. Nor is Niranjan a believer in the strict sense though Mehra Sab has made frenetic enquiries about God from a Jesuit Father when in service and Niranjan too feels the absence of God. Yet both acutely suffer their predicaments “within”. But NV does not leave things at that, he brings Indian legacy in Hindu tradition to checkmate his earlier West European slant. This makes quite a difference though this kind of empirical historicism where the present is left out altogether and the past presents a nostalgic image—a post-colonial celebration of the Orient—is considerably problematic. Nevertheless NA’s handling of things in AA is of far-reaching consequence for contemporary Indian writing in general and Hindi in particular. ■

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Dreams And Nightmares

Sukrita Paul Kumar

KITNE PAKISTAN (A Novel in Hindi)

By Kamleshwar

Rajpal and Sons, Delhi, 2000, pp. 363, Rs.250.00

There are histories against histories, partitions within partitions, and stories behind stories emerging in different hues as one focuses on the eye of this kaleidoscope that is *Kitne Pakistan* (How Many Pakistans). Chunks of history, real-life situations and mythological episodes cut corners, collide with each other and settle as patterns to be seen and felt by future generations. The shadows of the past become concrete images while the present may become fantasy. The seed of Kamleshwar’s Hindi novel *Kitne Pakistan* published in January 2000 actually germinated in a powerful short story written by him more than two decades earlier with the very same title. The writer has lived with the urgency of the experience of the Partition over a long period, before he finally found the much larger canvas of the form of the novel for expression. This gave him an opportunity to organize and articulate his vision into a form that allowed him to travel in time and geography without any constraints. The writer fully exploits the freedom not to have a conventionally structured narrative or a plot, nor a definite single protagonist. The back cover of the novel declares, “In this novel, history and time stand knocking at the door of humanity... with the hope that the blood-soaked tradition of partitions, happening one after the other, would at last get terminated.”

The writer’s exasperation with the innumerable “Pakistans” is reflected in the title of the novel itself. So many Pakistans! The author records his anguish and reaction to divisive forces operative not just in the Indian subcontinent, but the world over, both geographically, and as partition between man and woman, one religion and another, life and death, etc. The alien imperialistic forces injected the seed for division to suit their own needs and the tragic way with which the Partition and Pakistan happened centuries later, lend very unfortunate associations with these words. To the writer’s sensibility then, the word ‘Pakistan’ is nuanced heavily with tragedy, desperation and helplessness. He is in no way directing his rancour at the nation that is Pakistan, nor certainly at the people who are in Pakistan. Pakistan does not merely remain the name of a country; it becomes the symbol for division, a metaphor for violence, hatred, and even massacre and death. The

massacre and death. The writer's exasperation is further accentuated with his sensitive confrontation with the multitudes of partitions the world has gone through.

Kitne Pakistan serves as a pause for reflection at the end of the millennium for the reader to perceive with clarity the direction in which mankind has painfully moved decade after decade, century after century. The novel begins with a presentation of the rather placid life of a middle-class man and a woman travelling together each day to their respective places of work, sharing a sweet silence. They are content with inaction and even the monotony of their existence. Steeped in the memory of that quiet and personal life in the first chapter, the narrative makes a quick shift in its tone in the following chapter when the narrator records current history in the voice of a journalist or an artist. "He then read the dispatches in quick succession... it had happened again... just as in the year 1948, 1965 and 1972." The army movement in the Kargil area is perceived promptly as an extension of the same politics. Taking 1948 as the nodal point, the novel travels in time with the writer acting as the conscience for each age and for its political and cultural heroes.

The protagonists of the novel are Adeeb (the writer) and Time, face to face with each other throughout the narrative. Time steps in as All-Time existing in the simultaneity of its past as well as the present. The past gets summoned within the present. Documented history is perpetually questioned, the underlying posture of the narrator being that of a sceptic. The stylistic device used for this is interrogation in the court of the artist who examines the past dispassionately and explores the truth without the blinkers of the colonial historian. Adeeb is as much a critic of the present political scene as of the past. A sample of his journalistic critique of the present appears in the form of an open letter... "Dear Prime Minister and Defence Minister ji", signing off as "A writer and journalist participant of the sad times of this nation".

A little over three hundred and fifty pages, *Kitne Pakistan* oscillates from the tone of bland documentation to the imaginative narration of mythology and fantasy, interspersed with flashes of moving statements and interesting anecdotes from history. One by one, from the first Mughal emperor Babur to Lord Mountbatten, many historical personages are brought into the Court of Adeeb for the scrutiny of the truth of Partition history. From the Battle of Plassey (1757) to the Civil War of 1857, the formulation of the British strategies of rule

The writer has lived with the urgency of the experience of the Partition over a long period, before he finally found the much larger canvas of the form of the novel for expression.

emerge with the clear thrust on controlling the culture of the "natives". The narrative of the novel attempts to sift "reality" from the coloured representation of facts. The novel aggressively narrates the story of the "divide and rule" policy of the British and reveals how their historians destroyed evidence from *Baburnama*, manipulated facts in the *Faizabad Gazette*—thus sowing seeds for the communal strife which eventually blossomed at various points of the history of India—1948, 1965, 1972, etc., to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and later leading to Kargil as well as Pokhran and Chagai. It is as if the genealogy of Partitions gradually strips itself brutally in the court of Adeeb who scrutinizes the politics of the historians and attempts an unbiased representation of the past.

Commenting on his own creative process, the writer of the novel identifies with Adeeb. The following dialogue from the novel somewhat explains the chaos or say, the complexity of the narration:

"... but I want to tell this story along with its immensely beautiful and painful contexts... if this unique (*apratim*) story can become a creative work, it will live for time immemorial... I need time to write it!" said Adeeb.

"... don't be obstinate. This is not an age for aesthetic creation. Whatever you have to tell, narrate it quickly or your stories will die with suffocation."

"Alright then, dig a grave and bury my *qalam*. You can continue telling the story then!" Adeeb was disappointed and helpless. [translation mine]

This self-reflexive note within the novel is a comment on the form of this novel which begins to flow in whatever direction the streams of the narrator's consciousness may go. The reader faces the challenge of remaining an involved witness or a participant consistently, to be able to absorb the abundant historical data with all the arguments presented in the novel. However, since the central axis remains the theme of continual partitions and divisions, the collage connects up and the fictional narrative of the novel gets salvaged.

The novel carries within its vision some very incisive metaphysical contradictions regarding human existence. There is, for instance, the parallel story of Gilgamesh seeking to conquer death while the history of mankind projects the grotesque scenes of man killing man, of man becoming an instrument for cessation of human life through gory massacres. The Gilgamesh story appears at first in the beginning of the novel within the larger narrative, a couple of times in the middle, and later once again at the end of the novel. While there is Hiroshima and Nagasaki in recent history, there is hope of Gilgamesh reaching his dreamland and gripping death totally! The resolution to fight pain and death goes hand in hand with man's

concern for power which in turn, creates death itself. Humanity is absurdly caught in the double-bind of its own creation as well as destruction.

"It is because I am blind that I am able to see everything so clearly", says Kabir at the end of the novel. Another irony! Mere sight does not yield insights. That is reason enough for the stories of the past to get unveiled and the curtain be raised for the theatre of history to come alive for a review. The discerning eye may then witness truth directly in all its pristine colours. What emerges is yet another contradiction: while there is partition within partition through history, in point of fact, this narration of partitions becomes a pointer towards the essential connections amongst people and people. The pain of the partition is felt most acutely by those who have experienced connections and whose vision is holistic. The history of Partition does not remain localized in the novel precisely because the entire world is seen as one. The novel begins with the Aryans not originating in India, nor settled eventually only in India. What is there in the notion of one's own land then? In the light of this, the politics of the "sons of the soil" all over the world become suspect.

But then, as a counterpoise, the writer makes a direct intertextual lift from Rahi Masoom Raza's novel *Adha Gaon* and quotes the passages demonstrating the dictum "Identity is territory": "I am myself my village." References are made to Lebanon, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, as also to Tunisia, Algeria and Somalia, to show how partition does not necessarily happen between one religion and another—Pakistans are created within Pakistans! Crippled nations! Nations hollowed out by termites!

From Kurukshetra to Hiroshima, large masses of people have been killed; cultures destroyed, and barbarism has thrived in the guise of the forces of civilization. One of the evocative images that the reader of the novel will be left haunted with is that of the displaced Surjit Kaur, who continues to live corpse-like, after the 1947 Partition, with her unconscious son on her shoulders, asking in every period of strife, "Has the bomb dropped on my Multan?"

Kitne Pakistan includes within its ken another gruesome spectre of Partition which looms over gender relations and realizes itself as rape or male assault over women. "Suddenly they found a house... a house with a woman!... the officer ordered his men out and after that the woman went through the same experiences! And then his soldiers too did the same things to her which the soldiers and the officer of the defeated army had done with her before running away" [translation mine]. The enemy is not the other race or country, but the male. Woman emerges as man's victim and a mere object for sexual abuse. Ugly partitions between the two sexes happen over and over again! Alongside, ironically, stories of love pile up endlessly.

Kamleshwar is not merely being politically correct when he brings in a gender perspective into this novel which has partition as its central concern. His living portrayal of male lust and aggression arouses a deep empathy for the woman, enriching the novel by further adding to the meaning of partition.

The narrative moves from research to insights, and in its growth reminds one of Qurratulain Hyder's novel *Aag ka Dariya*. Interestingly, there is a cross-textual reference to Hyder's novel in *Kitne Pakistan*: "She could see Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag ka Dariya* flowing out there...!"

When Kamleshwar drops the names of many contemporary Hindi and Urdu writers in this novel, without really according them any role of significance, is Adeeb (the writer) attempting to build a collective writers' consciousness? He feels the need to show his association with like-minded writers of his times.

Off and on in the novel, the author picks up stories of his relationship with Vidya and Salma in his effort to complete what he calls the "incomplete stories of his personal life". His personal life runs parallel with the hearings in the court, where he sits as the conscience of the people from the past and the present, as also of phases of history when people's heads disappear, and thinking and understanding are at a standstill. The surreal pictures of mountains of eyes which do not see, and of souls which are enslaved, suggest yet different kinds of divisions, fragmentation and oppression...: Partitions between the body and the soul, the haves and the have-nots, life and death. 'Creation could be beautiful without partitions' is one of the messages running through the subtext of the novel.

The novel invokes a sense of absurdity as regards the evolution of human existence and

its claims of civilizational progress. Behind *Kitne Pakistan* stand poignant moments and experiences of Partition captured by such writers as Yash Pal, Manto, Krishan Chander, Bedi, Krishna Sobti, Ashfaq Ahmed, and many others. The body of Partition literature in Hindi and Urdu gains in stature with Kamleshwar's *Kitne Pakistan*, notwithstanding the monotone of journalese brought at times into this fictional enterprise. Given the fifty-odd years of the 1947 Partition, the writer of this novel gets into a position to telescope time and draw logical connections from history, to understand the irrational cracking of nations. Pakistan is not a mere territory. Pakistan is a metaphor for a dream, a nightmare; it is Hiroshima, it is division, it is the pain of separation... so many Pakistans! ■

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Latticed Memories

Sunita Jain

SMRITI KE JHAROKHE SE

By Bindu Agarwal

National Publishing House, Delhi, 1999, pp. 275, Rs. 250.00

It is not every day that one sees a biography of a literary personality written by his or her life partner. But when there is one it makes for fascinating reading because of its inevitable double focus on, and portrayal of, both the subject and the biographer spouse.

Bindu Agarwal's *Smriti Ke Jharoke Se*, a recollective biography of the well known poet Bharat Bhooshan Agarwal is not only immensely readable, it is a pathbreaker in Hindi. Critics have been quick to point out that Bindu Agarwal's book is the first of its kind. One is reminded here of Shivrani's book, *Premchand Ghar Me*. However, Shivrani's book is not a biography—it is an account of Premchand's day to day living after his marriage to Shivrani. Bindu Agarwal, on the other hand, does exhaustive archival work to delineate her husband from the time of his birth in 1919 to that fateful day in June 1975, when he suffered a sudden heart attack in Shimla while talking to his son, Anupam. The book ends with his cremation in Delhi on June 24.

Bindu Agarwal uses her husband's diaries, letters and also first-hand accounts by relatives and close friends to piece together the poet's early years. Chapter by short chapter she brings to life the young Bharat Bhooshan in his home town Mathura. She recounts how his miser father little realized the extent of anguish he caused his sensitive son by refusing to pay for his education. The father wanted the boy to be a mere shopkeeper. The determined boy, however,

was to forge a different destiny for himself. Spurned by the father the boy uses his various scholarships to complete his education. And while at college he took tuition to sustain himself. His poetry—his true friend, was his solace during this lonely stretch of time. Those who knew Bharat Bhooshan well can detect in his early love poems a longing, a yearning, which was not faceless. But soon it gets veiled in his own brand of humour—his parodies and lampoons bring him instant fame. The heartbreak, if there was one, is hidden in the great depths of his gentle soul.

The reader, in the meantime, follows the young poet as he moves to Calcutta for his first well-paid job. Lonely now, Bharat Bhooshan consents to marry Rukan, Nemi Chand Jain's sister-in-law. He changes her name to Bindu. The account of the marriage makes the book extremely atmospheric. A whole world is conjured up of a time when *barats* used to stay for seven days and marriages were endless ritualistic affairs. Here we meet yet another Bharat Bhooshan—one about whom we would have remained ignorant but for Bindu Agarwal's book. We meet now the bridegroom Bharat who has the courage to challenge a whole social set up by his insistence that the marriage be concluded on the same day with just one meal for the *barat*, no dowry or exchange of gifts and that the bride keep her face uncovered before all! After reading this sensational account—sensational because it was the feudal India of 1943, one wonders if such people who lived

Bindu Agarwal's *Smriti Ke Jharoke Se*, a recollective biography of the well known poet Bharat Bhooshan Agarwal is not only immensely readable, it is a pathbreaker in Hindi.

what they believed, are merely legends of the past!

In marrying Bindu, the poet, it seems, was trying to avenge his father's cruelty to him as a student! His 'mission' now was to educate his bride. With an unmatched single mindedness he encouraged Bindu to enrol for the 9th standard in Calcutta. Fascinated, the reader watches her finish high school, enter college for a BA, then get an MA and eventually a Ph.D.—the three confinements punctuating her progress!

The children grow alongside Bindu's books on the study table; the poet-husband goes on writing his plays and poems, moves from one city to another and is conned off money several times by a world cleverer than him. Towering literary figures like Mahadevi and Agyeya, step in and out of his life, till we reach the final destination—New Delhi. Bharat Bhooshan's appointment at the Sahitya Akademi in Delhi, their setting up home in Jangpura Extension and Bindu's selection to teach at the prestigious Lady Shri Ram College, all seem so right!

It was a year or two later that I met him for the first time. His novel, *Lauti Lebron Ki Bansuri* was just out. My first story 'Birha Janam Hamaro' was published in *Dharmayug*.

I told him I liked his novel. He said my story was read and discussed in Delhi. I was pleased and flattered. He loved the admiration of a younger woman. We were two strangers soon to part again. It was easy to confide in each other. He said during one

of our meetings at the Akademi, "You write a novel for me. I will tell you the story."

"Why don't you write it?" I asked, surprised.

He finished smoking and said finally, "It will hurt the ones who are mine."

Another time I told him how much I had liked one of his unpublished love poems. He gave me a whole bunch to read. They were tremendous. His erotic—*Shringar* poems! "Why don't you publish these?" I asked. "My literary friends will tear me up," he said and sighed. For someone who was unschooled in the ways of the then literary world, both these meetings were revelatory. I asked myself, can a writer really not write what he wishes to? And why must he hide what he writes to conform to his public image?

Yes, Bharat Bhooshan Agarwal was much more complex than the paired and consistent personality we meet in Bindu's biography. His restlessness, his anguish as a poet when the 'literary strategists' emerged to control the Hindi writing world, his bouts of depression and almost uncontrolled anger, lurk still in the memory of his various intimate friends. He was one of the first 'modern' writers in Hindi who subjugated his gift to his ideology and the first perhaps to awaken to the fact that while he made commitment, others made capital of their commitments. He was also perhaps the first major poet in Hindi to be denied his due—the posthumous Sahitya Akademi Award notwithstanding. Bharat Bhooshan Agarwal was too original, too honest, too upright, and too outspoken. He could not have pleased the new king-makers in literature who demanded servility and were prescriptive. The double assault of politics at work and politics in literature tore him up. His wife was not unaware of his pain. She includes parts of his letters and quotes him (pp. 248-249) to hint at what troubled him.

"The last time I saw Bharatji was soon after he retired from his job. I had returned after many years in the USA. He was getting ready to go to Shimla. "Free at last," he said. "Free to write. I will travel now and see India. I will write now. What have I written so far? Nothing! Now I will. Now I have the time!" I was not to see him again! Yet his exuberance, his innocence, his boyish joy in small things, his utterly humane nature, his tremendous surging love for the beautiful in life, his instant anger at injustice survive still in the mind and are recapitulated by his partner, his sensible wife. He would have been pleased with this book."

To put it with Mamta Kalia, *Smriti Ke Shoroke Se* should be read by those entering matrimony to know how two people can walk in unison, fulfilled in each other's achievements and yet retain their forceful separate identities. ■

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Questioning Established Values

Neeraj Malik

WIDOWS, WIVES, AND OTHER HEROINES: TWELVE STORIES

By Premchand (Translated from the Hindi by David Rubin)

Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, pp. 152, Rs. 325.00

The stories in this anthology, as the title suggests, revolve around women characters, and their familial and social roles and experiences. Presented thus, they offer a comprehensive view of Premchand's understanding about women and the Indian social milieu. Reading through the stories, one is once again struck by the fact of how advanced his ideas were about gender and patriarchy in relation to his times.

Premchand seems to have been influenced by the growing movement for women's emancipation in the country in the early decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to the social reform movements of the 19th century, which were led by men and were directed towards bettering the position of women within the family, this second phase of the movement was led by women and raised issues of gender equality, and educational, social and political rights. This period saw the emergence of several women's journals in different parts of the country, including in the Hindi-speaking areas of U.P., through which sustained and informed debates on important issues were carried out. Premchand's writings, too, reflect the urge to interrogate established values and truths by subjecting them to fresh scrutiny. In his vast oeuvre—over 300 short stories, fourteen novels and other writings—there is hardly any important gender issue (or for that matter, any social or political issue of the time) that he has not addressed.

The twelve stories presented here offer a variety of situations and relationships involving women. Most of these stories are taken from Premchand's later, more mature phase, in which the authorial analysis and moralizing of the early works gives way to a realistic portrayal of individual and social psychology, without, in any way, losing the author's basic orientation towards the necessity and desirability of social change.

Several stories in this collection deal with the plight of widows, specifically among the high-caste groups. (In fact, as in 'Divided Hearths', the last story in this collection, he often shows young widows in low-caste communities happily remarrying.) In 'Widow with Sons' and 'The Funeral Feast', it is the widows' own family and community, which

exploit them and appropriate their money, even forcing them to marry their young daughters to much older men. The stories focus on the selfish greed and wickedness of men masquerading as custodians of religious tradition and the laws of the community. Though unable to act independently in such situations, Premchand's female protagonists see through the contradiction between patriarchal values and their own lived experience. As Phulmati, in the first story, tells her sons: "I made this home, I saved its wealth...and now I'm an outsider in this house? It's the law of Manu and you want to go by it?...I planted the tree and I'm not allowed to stand in its shade. If that's the law then let it be burned." The story is clearly one of the best examples of Premchand's social realism. He lays bare the workings of patriarchy and its interconnections with religion, caste, social tradition and economy in a powerful narrative that stands out for its sensitive but non-sentimental delineation of character and situation.

Similarly, the story, 'Wife Into Husband' unsettles the notion of wifehood as Godavari gradually learns to follow her own instincts and begins to participate in the nationalist struggle even against the wishes of her loyalist husband. Interestingly, when he questions her right to spend his money, she simply tells him: "You're quite mistaken! I have absolutely the same right as you to spend it. Of course, if you people pass a divorce law and then you divorce me, well then I won't have that right any more." Here again one sees an assertion of women's economic rights within the family. The nationalist movement forms the backdrop of another story, 'Sacrifice', in which Rupmani takes her own decision to join the freedom struggle without waiting for her parents' consent. These stories, influenced by Gandhian ideas of *satyagraha* also go beyond him in questioning given familial structures.

Another issue being raised by feminists during this period was that of old men, usually widowers, marrying young women. Indeed the ease with which a man could remarry after the death of one wife was seen, by many women, as indicative of the low status of women in society. Premchand takes

up the issue in several of his stories but the best treatment of this is found in 'Second Marriage'. Written in the comic satirical mode, the story is a light-hearted look at incompatible marriages. Characteristically, Premchand shows a sensitive understanding of the young wife's need to seek emotional and sexual fulfillment outside marriage and sympathizes with her transgression. Here, again, Premchand breaks new ground by treating of themes that were considered taboo in literature in his time. The other stories which explore the theme of female desire are 'The Secret', 'Desire', 'The Prostitute', and 'The Actress'.

David Rubin's selection of stories is based on his observation that previous collections of translations from Premchand have drawn from a narrow range of his works. Only two of the stories included here have been translated and published in book form before. In this sense, this collection is a useful addition to existing English translations of Premchand's writings. One hopes that this will inspire more translations of the works of Premchand, who is clearly the most representative writer of North India in the twentieth century, for the benefit of non-Hindi readers.

Literary translation is a challenging task, more so translation of a writer of

Premchand's stature. In a sense, it is impossible to fully reproduce the range and richness of Premchand's language especially because of the ease with which he shifts registers from Hindustani to Sanskritized Hindi or Persianized Urdu to, even regional dialects to suit different situations and characters. There is also the added problem of how to deal with the innumerable images, idioms, proverbs, and sayings that he uses so effortlessly. A good translation would, however, try to approximate to the simplicity and naturalness of Premchand's style, the easy conversational tone of his story-telling, and his brilliant use of irony.

David Rubin's translation succeeds in this only to an extent. In his anxiety to remain faithful to the original, he has chosen to keep the translation "as literal as comprehensible translation will allow". As a result he often resorts to word-for-word translation which mars readability, and, which, for this reviewer, at least, militates against the spirit of Premchand's writing. For example, there are expressions like: "With the weight of a stone on her heart..." (p. 4); "for her there was a tremendous charm in preserving the vague image of a virtuous, honest woman flying through the skies forever in the memory of a man like him" (p. 26); "I'm surprised that at this instant I haven't gone

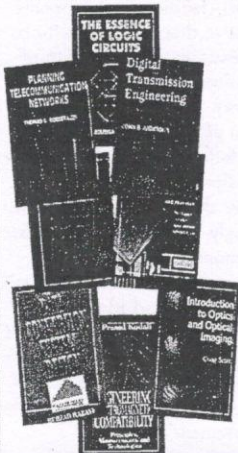
mad with happiness" and "On which day is the sun going to rise on my good fortune, Tara?" (p. 109).

Rubin's language becomes even queerer with the long sentences in which he sacrifices elegance as well as coherence. To give just one example, "She could not be so vile, no matter how many young men with whom she had acted out farces of love, no matter how many mad with love of her she had played for fools—never before had she experienced the least misgiving..." (p. 110). Also, at places, the translator seems to have mistranslated, distorting the meaning of the sentences, sometimes, even the drift of a whole conversation (e.g., pp. 9; 37). It is difficult to tell whether this is due to oversight, lack of careful revision, or actual inability to catch the nuances of spoken Hindustani but in the two stories that I could read alongside the original there were too many such instances.

Besides, the book is full of typographical errors. Considering that this book is aimed at stimulating greater interest among western readers in Indian literature, more care could have been taken both in its writing and production. ■

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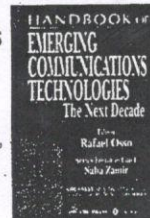
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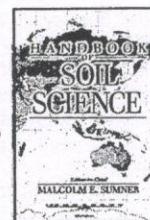
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Recent Oriya Poetry: Some Trends

By Sachidananda Mohanty

There are a number of socio-cultural reasons that must explain the perception of the predominant use of the poetic form by creative writers in Oriya. Although short stories and fiction in general regularly find a place in the various literary journals and periodicals, it is undoubtedly poetry that seems to be valorized by the literary-cultural establishment in Orissa. For all their mass appeal, many Oriya fiction writers regularly lament that their work does not receive due appreciation or recognition in the institutional context in the State. Further, the politics of literary awards in Orissa, some complain, seem to disproportionately favour the poetic form.

One reason for this perception is that in a largely feudal set-up, literary role models are of some consequence for the neophytes; and coincidentally or not, some of the writers that have received conspicuous recognition and generally come to mind at the State and at the national level happen to be poets. Ramakant Rath, Sitakant Mahapatra, Rajendra Kishore Panda and Haraprasad Das—all are members of the coveted All India Civil Services. Because of their service background, the vantage point and the institutional attention they can command, some argue, their achievements get magnified by the reading public. This is of course not to minimize or belittle their own intrinsic merit and excellence, but only to point at the larger socio-cultural matrix within which a literary work is inevitably produced and disseminated.

Whatever be the reasons, the poetry scene in Orissa is extremely active and vibrant. Different forms and experiments in the poetic form are constantly attempted. As elsewhere, here too, the traditionalists have given way to the modernists. A few of the earlier poets of the older generation like Sachi Routray still write and publish; the man generally acclaimed as the founder of literary modernism in Oriya poetry, Guruprasad Mohanty no longer does so. But his followers clearly reign supreme. While a large number of them employ their own idiosyncratic mode, it is also possible to discover underlying patterns in some of this poetry. This is what I shall attempt to do in my article; firstly, I shall attempt to indicate dominant trends and significant voices, and secondly, I shall try and underscore their achievements in style and technique through a comparison with some of the earlier practitioners. Most of the leading Oriya poets are all well known and appear regularly in journals and anthologies. Some of them are award-winners, others are equally

distinguished. Sitakant Mahapatra, J.P. Das, Ramakant Rath, Sourindra Barik, Rabi Singh, Haraprasad Das, Rajendra Kishore Panda, Haraprasad Parichha Pattnaik, Jayanta Mahapatra, Mamata Dash, Pratibha Satpathy and others have all made a mark in recent Oriya poetry. They are all basically from the middle class. It must be mentioned here that despite having a large tribal population, there is hardly any Oriya poetry of consequence that deals with the tribal experience, comparable to say what Gopinath Mohanty did in his novels like *Paraja* or *Amritara Santana*. Similarly, there is a glaring absence of the dalit or subaltern tradition of poetry in Orissa. The reason is simple: education in Orissa is still a matter of social and economic privilege, and protest poetry of the political kind hardly exists.

It is true that earlier, progressive poets like Sachi Routray expressed rage and indignation in their poetry, as poet Rabi Singh does even today. But these isolated voices can hardly constitute a tradition. Another caveat I wish to offer at this stage is that despite the presence of many short story/fiction collections, there is a dearth of anthologies of contemporary Oriya poetry. *Adhunik Oriya Kabita* (Janashakti Pustakalaya, Cuttack, 1968) and more recently, *Adhunik Oriya Kabita Sambhara*, edited by Jatindra Mohan Mohanty (Bhubaneswar, 1998) are perhaps two of the better known.¹ Most of the poetry produced is also not translated into English, and for a survey of the present kind, the critic has to depend on individual anthologies of the various poets in Oriya.

A good way of initiating a discussion of recent Oriya poetry is to signal its difference from the earlier kind. The latter tradition was represented in Oriya in the form of the Oriya literary romanticism: Mayadhar Mansingh, Radha Mohan Gadnaik, Annada Shankar Ray, Kalindicharan Panigrahi, Nityananda Mohapatra, Bidyut Prabha and others represented what is known as the tradition of the *Sabuja* or The Green. The use of a primarily lyrical mode, rhyme scheme, love of the romantic kind, a celebration of nature and the countryside, a valorization of intuition and imagination—all formed the bedrock of this poetry. The break came with poets like Guruprasad Mohanty whose *Nutana Kabita*, 1955 and *Samudra Snana* 1970 are regarded as landmarks. Some like Benudhar Rout and Sachi Routray also become transitional figures. Some of the poems they composed are also of the intermediate kind, betraying both the romantic as well as the modernist

sensibility. This becomes clear by looking at just three poems: 'Malayara Atmahatya', (The Suicide of Malaya) by Benudhar Rout, dated 1948 and two poems by Sachi Routray and Guruprasad Mohanty under the same title 'Alaka Sanyal'.

In 'The Suicide of Malaya' (1948) from the collection of *Pingalara Surjya* (first published in 1967), poet Benudhara Rout effectively reverses the romantic expectations of spring. Instead of the festival of gold that spring generally entails, we find the cry of anguish, the reality of poverty, and heaps of skeletons and bone that populate the urban landscape. The maiden here carries no arrow of cupid in her gaze. The bow of flowers associated with *Madana*, the God of Love, must give way inexorably to the "rotten odour" and the "forlorn cry" of the dispossessed. The early rays of the sun only bring in the warmth of the blast furnace and the reality of the smoky chimney. Such is the backdrop that must serve as Malaya's funeral.

If death, desolation and decrepitude pervade many poems of the collection *Pingalara Surjya* such as 'The Grief Beneath the Waves', then the contrast between the two 'Alaka Sanyal' poems also reveals the working of a modernist sensibility.

To begin with, 'Alaka Sanyal' by Sachi Routray employs a language and idiom that are colloquial and casual:

*When I first saw you O Alaka Sanyal
It was in the palace of Videha
amidst a pile of hide
of a million golden deer.*

The poet-narrator has clearly embarked upon a search after Alaka Sanyal that takes on mythical overtones. The shift from here and now to a world evocative of Nalanda 'Chitraratha Gandharva', 'Barunabantha', 'Kalinga Cuttack' and the 'Island of Spices' shows the working of both the mythical and the modern.

On the other hand, the poem by Guruprasad marks a clear-cut break. It is deliberately down to earth. The reference to the earlier poem by Sachi Routray is unmistakably clear in the opening line itself: "Perhaps Sachi babu spotted you once/I am not sure of this O Alaka Sanyal". Much of the imagery that follows, such as the 'hide of the golden deer' is reminiscent of the earlier poem. However, the similarity ends there. The series of later stanzas that capture the life of Alaka Sanyal are evocative less of the mythical world and more of the modern cityscape a la T.S. Eliot. There are references to the ritual of domesticity, to female sexuality, to the "buttoning of a blouse", to "hot water", "shoe straps", "cigarette smoke", allusions to "contemporary holocaust", to the "riots at Noakhali", the "photos of Netaji and Nargis" and the cry of crows and bats. Clearly, this Alaka Sanyal is not of a pure or the pristine kind. As the poet-narrator says, 'I have seen in your body the handbill of cinema! The

deliberate evocation of levity and the mundane commonplace is clearly suggestive of a deromanticized temper. The treatment of the heroine and the characteristic idiom used are also to be found in another poem of Sachi Routray called 'Pratima Nayak'. Pratima of Routray is not moulded in the romanticism of the earlier kind. Her listless profile full of pallor and pockmarks, devoid of a vibrant sexuality, is reminiscent of the women in *The Wasteland* who 'come and go'!

Like Sachi Routray's treatment of Alaka Sanyal, recent Oriya poetry is also characterized by the powerful use of myth. There are at least two full-fledged books that deal with mythological themes. *Sri Radha* (1985; 1990) by Ramakanta Rath that won him the Saraswati Samman award and *Sabari* (1991) by Pratibha Satpathy.

Speaking about his poem on Sri Radha, Ramakant Rath says in the epilogue:

The poems in this book are about Radha. One might feel that it is unnecessary and unreasonable to compose so many poems about a Puranic character. In fact, these creations are based on the ordinary circumstances of someone who finds a notable mention in the Purana and popular folklore. Of course there is no dearth of reasons to like these poems. I am certain that I have not been able to articulate all that I wanted to say about Radha. Most often, I have not succeeded in finding an adequate expression.

(Translation mine: p. 121)

Rath attempts the sense of the inarticulate experience regarding Radha in many places. One of the opening stanzas provides a characteristic instance:

*That dawn, at the river front,
bathing, I gazed at my feet
It was not my feet, not mine,
I thought:
This body is not mine,
Nor is it the history of my hopes,
my despair my own.
Spouse, home, herds of cattle
None of these are mine.
My life not my own.
And death?
When it comes one day,
Is not death.
I shall remain a destitute.
Always!
Between my stretched arms
I am a soaring emptiness.
After all,
it is the fate of some
to remain as a gap
for ever*

(Translation mine)

Like Ramakant Rath, Pratibha Satpathy in 'Sabari' makes her own statement in prose in the epilogue of the book. As she remarks:

Is it a dream or reality? Frankly I do not know. I do not know whether I entered into her being or she enveloped mine; if this was a dream, then to realize its truth, this must be a well chosen path. But why did I select her among all the characters of the Ramayana? Perhaps because of all the characters, who were adorned full of vanity and arrogance, she stood out alone and self-collected. Because I spotted that eternal presence within the body of an ordinary woman.

(Translation mine. p. 140)

Such mythopoetic imagination finds expression in many other contemporary Oriya poets as well.

Many poems of Sitakant Mahapatra skilfully interweave the mythic with the modern. The contemporary world of poverty, destitution, pain and suffering are not discarded. Instead, there is a reworking of the older myths in a renewed modern context. Such poems, built on a carefully structured pattern and the dialectic, lead eventually to an unexpected *tour de force*. Such an approach seems to be integral to much of Mahapatra's poetry. As he explains in his Jnanpith Award speech:

I hear my own recitation of the Oriya Bhagavata in the inner room of the house where so many gods were installed in a small wooden chariot. I hear the voice of Achyut Yashovant and Bhima Bhoi's bhajans at the tiny temple at one end of the village. I hear the stark fearsome voices of silence in the dark night of the village with cholera raging everywhere and the voice of the rain, of numerous deaths, of remembered loves and the passing of seasons, punctuating births, sickness and death...

Thus, the opening stanza of the poem 'Cuttack', for instance, magically transforms the familiar cityscape in sterile summer into the epic battleground of the *Mahabharata*:

Even on crowded hot afternoons/the fiery sun's Bhima like roar/sends a million Duryodhana—in the Vyasa Sarovara of the Chandi temple/the afternoon shows and the offices.

Similarly, in the poem 'Cock Fight' a commonplace sporting event involving roosters "awkwardly armed to the teeth" at the village square takes on dangerous overtones of the Mahabharata war:

*The village trembles
in mild bursts
of shouts and battle cries
Pandavas and Kauravas
ranged in the battle field
of Kurukshetra.*

Likewise, the poem 'The Song of Jara the Hunter' makes an effective use of the famed myth in the *Mahabharata*. The poem, an eloquent elegy sung by Jara for his unwilling

act of killing the Lord, is built on a monologue. There is a series of interrogations that carry both mythic as well as modernistic overtones:

*If you are beyond birth and death,
If your existence is beyond history,
Why then the blue waters of Jamuna
weep for you, and for the fall of Kadamba flowers
the Govardhan hill, the flute tune
empty wavering*

In the same manner, in the poem 'Death of Krishna', an ironic transition in the middle of the poem creates an abrupt disjunction between the world of mythical festivity, of frolics and rasas, moonlight nights, "the myriad deceits on river banks" and the suddenly incongruous evocation of the metropolitan world: newspaper flashing "hurried obituaries", meetings that condole "the sad demise" and declare "another public holiday"!

In contrast, recent poetry by Oriya women show a marked preference for themes and concerns related to the female identity. The tone is often reflective and many poems express themselves through a primarily lyrical mode. Brahmotri Mohanty's 1988 poem 'Darpana' for instance, draws up a sharp contrast between identity based on the image of a mirror and identity rooted to the inner self "this majesty of my own being". And hence, the fact of "not recognizing myself". As the opening lines suggest.

*That image of mine only a mirror can reveal
amazes me, this majesty of my own being
so much light, so much radiance,
yet I never recognize myself.*

(Translated by Jayanta Mahapatra)

There is here a fear that after the initial "familiarity of praise" one may be left with "declaration devoid of brilliance".

Consequently, the mirror does not induce self-love or narcissism. And the poet declares:

*I step away from myself, unable to taste this
reality of mine
How can I experience the essence of an
indivisible experience?*

(Translated by Jayanta Mahapatra)

Similarly, poet Pravasini Mahakud's lyrical study of loneliness is marked by a set of insistent questions:

*Where is this loneliness I heard
where does it live?
Inside my agony?
Beyond, in the possibility of love?
Further on, in a lake of tars?
Or in the fear of death?*

(Translated by J.P. Das and Arlene Zide)

'This voice of loneliness' is redolent of images of a forlorn world: "abandoned castle", "gray marbles", "desolate forest" and "empty sky".

However, the loneliness paradoxically marks the presence of the other. As the poet says aptly "even in the scent of the Mahua, carried on the breeze/a frail voice reaches me".

Similarly, in 'My whole life for Him', Manorama (Mahapatra) Biswal plays on the theme of waiting. For the female self, all waiting is a matter of anxiety and anguish. How, for instance, is one to know that "I am not here any longer" if he were "to come under a silent sun" or a "heavy downpour". Difficult though, his search would not be without helpful clues, the neem tree and mustard flowers would surely remind him of the lost childhood. The interesting question comes at the end of the poem:

*But how would she know
for whom
A whole life passed
waiting, waiting.*

(Translated by J.P. Das and Arlene Zide)

Recent Oriya poetry is distinguished by other voices as well. In 'This Day' and 'Photograph' that appear in the translation form in *Kavya Bharati* (No. 9, 1997 issue) poet J.P. Das seems to celebrate ordinary commonplace moments and objects. 'This Day' for instance becomes sacred and eventful for the persona "simply because/you appeared for a while/in my morning dream". Consequently, there would be no news in the papers "except your face". All the phone calls and letters would be "from you" only, and "all the knocks on my doors/ would be yours alone. "If the work ended due to some cataclysm" and "only a fraction of man's dreams remained" even then there is the certainty that

*You will come to me...
assuming the wholeness of the relics
of that dream*

(Translated by Niranjan Mohanty)

Equally striking are some of the poems of Rajendra Kishore Panda. 'A Poem for my Daughter' seems to be a reworking of W.B. Yeats' 'A Prayer for My Daughter'. The experience is appropriately Indianized. The fate of an Indian daughter is depicted with a sense of irony and detachment:

*If your in-laws spit out
the well-cooked food
served to them, you will
suppress your sobs and smile instead.*

If the destiny is ominous then the suggestion is :

*Do not let yourself grow old daughter
you won't curse yourself, nor your fate.*

The poem ends not on a note of despair. It is not the model of Sita, to be swallowed up by mother earth that is being urged by the

father, but an alternative mythological model full of creative possibility:

*Never ask the earth to crack up
dear daughter, rather, you yourself
burst like Devaki and open the door
for the birth of God*

(Translated by Rabindra K. Swain)

Like J.P. Das, another Sahitya Akademi award winner Haraprasad Das too has made a mark for himself. The producer of many collections, Haraprasad too concentrates in many poems, on day-to-day events of domesticity. The poem 'Farewell' provides a good example. The opening line begins on a dramatic note: "I shall not be there at dawn".

It will be futile for the wife to unfathom the mystery of the husband's disappearance. For has he not said that many times?

*I shall go away,
Surely!
Haven't I said that
While again and again
removing the bone
from the fish
or swallowing
my saliva
or while beholding
the black spot
on your thigh.*

(Translation mine)

Clearly, she paid no heed to such threats. Now that he has gone to the other side of the road, from where he came, he offers a round of advice:

*do not search for me
or open the door to anyone else.*

(Translation mine)

Like Haraprasad, there are many other poets in Oriya with powerful individual voices: Rabi Singh, Sourindra Barik, Pramod Mohanty, Soubhagya Kumar Mishra, Haraprasad Parichha Pattnaik, Mamata Dashg, Bibek Jana, Deepak Mishra, Saroj Ranjan Mohanty, Bansidhar Sarangi, Surya Mishra and others easily come to mind. They have considerable achievements behind them. A survey of the present kind can hardly do justice to such a large variety of truly worthwhile poetry. An absence of translations is also a major hurdle for the interested non-Oriya reader. Hopefully, this lacuna will be overcome in future.

To sum up, recent Oriya poetry is active and buoyant. It speaks in many voices. Its limitations are obvious. Largely middle-class, it has not been able to cover a wider gamut of experience. It is not bereft of the political, but political is not a dominant trend here. Rich and many-hued, this poetry is sure to blossom more expansively in the next few decades. ■

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Robust Optimism

Satchidananda Raut-Roy

PHALGU (Perennial Stream)

By Sangram Mishra

Gyanajuga Publications, Bhubaneswar, 2000,
pp. 57, Rs. 75.00

The book *Phalgu* is a masterpiece of the eminent poet Sangram Mishra. *Phalgu* reflects the experience and feelings of the poet which is unique and refreshing. In the language of the poet the book gives a touch of the oasis in the hot desert of suffering and heart burning.

The poet has established his position in the lexicon of Oriya literature and all of his four Oriya books published are powerful pieces of poetry and smack of robust optimism.

Phalgu delineates the expression of the poet in the most powerful way. The similes, metaphors and expressions are effectively crafted. Poetic feelings perambulate like a passionate pilgrim and project it in the form of a perennial stream of happiness, joy and optimism.

Phalgu consists of forty-four poems. In his first poem 'Quest of God' the poet says 'Oh God if somebody asks me to build a temple for Thou, I will use my mind'. He further states, 'From pebbles to stone, from water to ocean, from sky to universe, if I search you and your creation, perhaps I will get dissolved in the glassful of water in front of my eyes'. Similarly in his poem 'In Search of Light' he projects a powerful vision: 'To see a mirror in darkness is to see darkness itself' and towards the end he says that the mixture of light and darkness is light only (not darkness). However feeble it may be, the remedy for darkness is light which will expose the darkness in public eyes at one glance.

In his poem 'Cyclone' which the poet has written after the super cyclone in October 1999, the poet says: 'Suddenly the storm made the race naked. The face which had decorated itself with mounds of intoxicating pretence and handful of deceit is looking ugly'. Further, 'race is dead/dying under the cover of desire in slumber—surrendered self-respect and accumulated deceit and nepotism'.

'History of blind alley' states that to sell a mirror in the blind alley means only buying hunger. Where the presence of darkness is true, the sparks of light are untouchable and unwanted.

In 'Definition of Relation', he writes, 'there is no definition of love, a handful of unique likeness is the chapter of relations. Above the virtue and vice the handwriting of relationship are symbols, like the union of green earth and blue sky at the horizon'.

It is a redeeming fact that Mishra with the responsibilities of a government official finds time to devote to literary pursuits. ■

Satchidananda Raut-Roy, Jnanpith Award winner for 1986, is poet critic, and novelist and author of forty books.

A Voice for the Wilderness

M.D. Madusudan

NATURE'S SPOKESMAN: M. KRISHNAN AND INDIAN WILDLIFE

Edited by Ramachandra Guha
Oxford University Press, pp. 291, Rs. 595.00

Writing in 1955, that exceptional man, Madhavaiah Krishnan, observed, "the [Indian] public (both literate and unlettered) has no interest in the great national heritage of wildlife, of which it knows little and for which it cares less." Although it is tempting to dismiss this as a cynic's gripe, it would be a sad mistake to do so. For one thing, the uninspiring state of our wildlife today is time's own test of truth in those harsh words. Besides, if any man could have marshalled the sanction of his conscience to make such a biting pronouncement, it was only Krishnan. For nearly six decades, the man used every one of the many skills at his command—writing, sketching, painting, and photography—to communicate his unadulterated exhilaration and joy at nature's wonders, big and small, and his deep distress at their disappearance. *Nature's Spokesman* brings together a delightful selection of Krishnan's writings on nature and beyond.

In India, the edifice of popular nature writing in English has largely been built around shikari tales. Shikari-raconteurs such as Sanderson, Dunbar-Brander, Pythian-Adams, Forsyth, and the now-legendary Corbett flourished during the Raj, as well as after Independence, when hunting was still permitted. Ironically, even as nature writing flourished under the shikari's quill, the species he wrote about fell precipitously to his trigger all over the country. A ban on hunting was gradually brought into force, which slammed the brakes on wildlife declines, but also effectively wiped out shikari writing that was then, by far, the most dominant form of nature writing in India. Thereafter, the field of popular writing about Indian natural history remained somewhat parched; parched, that is, but for the peerless contributions of Krishnan.

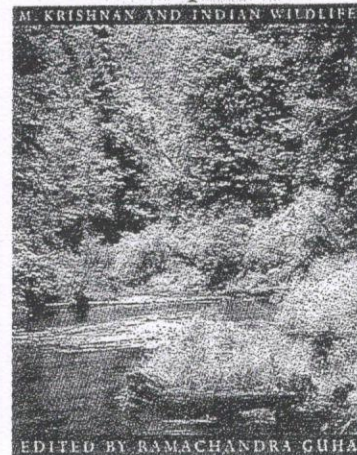
Few people know the rewards in the humble pursuit of observing of nature, and fewer still care to share it with others. Throughout his life, Krishnan ploughed a lonely furrow, knocking about the backyard, beach, and bush, learning lessons from nature that cannot be taught any other way. And, importantly, he shared with others, the education, excitement, and joy he gleaned as a student of nature. In contrast to the shikari, the trigger-unhappy Krishnan was not limited by one repetitive grisly theme to inflict upon his readers. Neither did he have to grope for subjects to write about: inspiration came to him from all around. He wrote of bubbly, backyard-dwelling babblers just as spiritedly

as he did about the stately, savannah-dwelling bustard. A true reflection of his mastery as a nature writer is evidenced in the assortment of natural subjects and situations Krishnan chose, and the flair with which he wrote about them.

Krishnan's writing, almost invariably, was born out of close, first-hand observation and astute analysis. The richness of detail in his writing makes them a formidable repository of natural history. In an innocuous piece called *Cat Fight* (1957), he at once clarified that the caterwauling that often wrecks our sleep was usually not, as assumed, the amorous dueting of courting cats, rather, it was the grim duelling of rival toms. In the same piece, he noted how the kittens with whom he shared his abode, were in no danger from their putative father (and were even found playing with him), whereas the furtive and unfamiliar Persian tom which suddenly appeared on that beat, soon killed two kittens and left the third grievously wounded. Krishnan had reported—and unwittingly even explained—the puzzling phenomenon of infanticide in animal societies, which found formal scientific attention and discourse only many years later in the work of primatologist Sarah Hardy. Similarly, many of his other pieces—describing the fondness of sambar stags for aquatic vegetation, questioning the thoughtless sinking of waterholes in wildlife parks, and lamenting the impact of introducing exotic plants—betray Krishnan's close scrutiny and deep insight into the natural world.

Krishnan's language and style ably matched his faculties of observation and analysis. His narrative was unpretentious and easy, yet sharp. His expression was powerful and laced with a ready wit. Particularly where it involved descriptions of animals and their habitat, Krishnan's narrative just came alive. In a 1953 piece, *City's Bird Life*, he wrote, "White-headed babblers are characterized by pale, watery eyes, weak, tremulous voices that grow suddenly shrill in excitement, a certain laxity of plumage and purpose. They go hopping along to some corner, and one bird turns a dead leaf over while its fellows look on with a certain critical slant of their white heads—then, suddenly the party dissolves in hysterical squeaks, and whirrs across on weak wings to another corner of the compound, where they proceed at once to turn over dead leaves again." Anyone who has watched these dumpy birds go about their business will attest that there can hardly be a more precise and engaging description of their demeanour. Krishnan's anthropomorphic descriptions of

Nature's Spokesman



animals are hard to overlook. He makes the respectful observation that sloth bears are "shortsighted and given to deep preoccupations," while assuming a less generous tone with his room-mate, the lizard, Lenin, who was "a confirmed misogynist, ... unemotional and unsociable, ... for whom life is one continuous orgy." Solemnity of style came to Krishnan just as easily as animation and light-heartedness, although I daresay that his later writings were less lyrical, more factual, and wore a more sombre attitude. Despite his strong opinions, his style was tentative, without either a patronising or a sermonising tone. Situations that incurred his vehemence were marked by a masterful wryness, of which an excellent example is the piece titled, *Captive Bred Mugger* (1988). Even where vehemence took over, poignancy did not leave him. Of the exotic plant-invasaders that threaten India's native flora, he observed, "Ours is a hospitable country. Plants from distant lands flourish here with an exuberance they seldom achieve at home." Krishnan's writings also embodied an unshakably Indian ethos. His experiences, his examples, his pride, his insight, and his idiom were all solidly Indian. He also wrote with a disarming honesty: about his loathing for hunting and killing, about his impatience and despondence over a shallow understanding of nature's ways, and about his intolerance for the tedium of dry erudition.

Krishnan was deeply anguished at the system of school education, which, even to this day, robs the excitement of discovering nature from children. In a 1947 essay, he wrote, "The average educated adult knows little or nothing of the teeming plant and animal life of the country, and cares less. Livestock does not interest him, and the world is to him a place which holds only human beings. He can never make friends with a hill or a dog, and if he has no one to talk to, no book to read, and no gadget to turn and unturn, he is quite lost. School

education is solidly to blame for all this." Twenty years later, he set about finding out if things had changed for the better. He asked, how many among a bunch of university graduates could name two red-flowered trees or an exclusively Indian animal. Nobody passed his test. Later, he enquired, wryly, as usual, "is there something radically wrong with the education and culture of our young men and women that they should not know the answers to these reasonable questions, or is it that I have become a monomaniac and am therefore unable to perceive how unfair my questions are?" Today, I can tell you confidently—and quite unhappily—that the situation is no more inspiring than it was thirty-odd years ago. Even as our youngsters gather formidable knowledge in varied fields of human endeavour, they live in profound ignorance of the natural world around them. As they reach for the stars, the flowers at their feet are simply forgotten.

Krishnan's views on wildlife conservation flowed out of a very solid grasp of realities on the ground. He repeatedly referred to the intolerance of most animals to human pressures, and how animals thrived wherever sincere protection was forthcoming. The longest of his pieces in the book, *Animals of the Dwindling Forest* (1970), is devoted almost entirely to this aspect. Although Krishnan

lauded and cherished the conservation ethos of the Bishnoi and Vedanthangal, he recognised how very few and far between these indigenous traditions were. Everywhere else, people plundered more than they protected. The widely travelled Krishnan noted, laconically, "If there has been an authentic instance of the exercise of protective zeal by those previously engaged in depletive activities, I have not heard of it." He conceded that, "the ideal is where there are no parks or preserves, but where the beasts and birds are ceded territory and unmolested by virtue of a highly informed national consciousness." Until that starry-eyed ideal—of making a Bishnoi out of every villager, and a Vedanthangal out of every park—was achieved, if at all, Krishnan, the realist, knew that harsh and urgent measures were absolutely necessary.

Finally, a few words about the anthology itself. Krishnan published mostly in newspapers, a medium that is both potent in its reach and notorious in its short-lived currency. Were it not for this anthology, put together splendidly by Ram Guha, the works of this reclusive genius would largely have remained inaccessible to today's readers, myself included. The introductory chapter by Guha paints a most brilliant word portrait of the worlds of Krishnan. The essays in the

book are gathered in thematic sections, broken up with a sampling of superbly illustrated verses from Krishnan's *Animal Alphabet*. I certainly would have preferred a chronological sequence to Krishnan's writings, for they defy any other manner of organisation. Besides, a chronological ordering might have permitted the reader an easier glimpse into the changes his writings saw over the years, without diluting the recognition of his many worlds. The essays in the last section of the book, *Nature Transcended*, although thoroughly enjoyable and a further sparkling evidence of Krishnan's interests and literary span, do seem a tad out of place in a volume that sets out to make him a spokesman for nature. I was definitely disappointed that his outstanding photographs and sketches could not be included, but do hope that a later edition can include them. Overall, I heartily recommend this book to anyone who is willing give nature a toe-hold in his or her life, and do so in the fervent hope that Krishnan's delightful writings remain a voice for—not in—the wilderness. ■

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Stark But Spectacular

Sudhir Sahi

WHEN MEN AND MOUNTAINS MEET: THE EXPLORERS OF THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS 1820-75

By John Keay

HarperCollins, New Delhi, 2000, pp.277, Rs 150.00

To the generation fed on cybercorn, a nineteenth-century parable of remote Himalayan frontiers might equal a jigsaw of virtual exploration. It was a time when transcontinental distances were spanned over nights instead of bytes. Indeed, this reproduction of John Keay's magnum opus, nearly a quarter century after its initial appearance, revives the sort of cycloramic effect not usually associated with present-day bandwidth.

The book's three-part stories put a hatchet to the mountainous web of high Asia, laying bare a thicket of aspiration and intrigue in a somewhat unfamiliar part of the world. Not surprisingly, the explorers of those times were as motley a group of men as could ever have been found. To the gender-sensitive, this might present a grave archival flaw: surely those filibustering machinations would have had room for a Mata Hari or perhaps a Joan d'Arc, dismantling Keay's palpable monomorphism. Though on the plus side, it

does leave the field open for a possible millennium offering which could well be titled *When Women and Plains Part—Monocrats of Sino-Indian Fancy*.

Whatever their individual motivations, one curious trait was fundamental to this compelling bunch: an almost libidinal paranoia propelled them across the high passes of the Himalaya and the Karakoram. With this went an initial disregard of geographical detail and, therefore, also conjecture. When in 1820 William Moorcroft crossed the Sutlej near Bilaspur, arriving in Leh seven months later via the Baralacha Pass, the long shadow of Anglo-Russian mistrust was forming. The situation was compounded by the influence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court in Lahore, which had taken Kashmir the previous year, thus stretching from Tibet to Afghanistan and, down the Indus, to the deserts of Rajasthan and Sind. To run the gauntlet of numerous regional chieftains, disguise was necessary, at

"...travellers were less concerned with exploring the mountains than with crossing them. Bucharia, Kashgharia, Moghulistan and Tartary were all names for the fabled lands beyond. Not much was known of their geography, but what was known was the existence there of some of the oldest and richest cities in the world. Bukhara and Samarkand, Kashgar and Yarkand, Kotan and Khokand, these were places that fired the imagination...For centuries they had been shrouded in mystery, forbidden but not forgotten...In the nineteenth century the rediscovery of these places constituted one of the greatest challenges...It appealed not just to the missionary, the merchant and the naturalist but also to the antiquarian, the scholar and the statesman."

the literal risk of losing one's head.

Moorcroft's immediate lure was trade with Central Asia and his veterinarian credo of cross-breeding the Indian stud with Turkoman stallions. However, for the present, Central Asia had to be abandoned. Five years later, when he finally reached fabled Bukhara, the journey remained shrouded in his mysterious death.

It was not as though men and mountains

"A small white marble pillar was...placed on a cairn beside the crest of the Karakoram pass and there, on the grim windswept watershed between the rivers of India and Central Asia, at the gateway to which were directed the aspirations of all the early explorers of the western Himalayas, it may still stand."

had not met till then. Aeons earlier, Hannibal was credited with a crossing of the Alps. The purists would say that the Alps' highest peak falls short of the Khardung La near Leh on the old trade route by almost 3000 ft. As with other high trans-Himalayan crests, this was for long crucial to commercial and cultural flows around the roof of the world. Alongside, vast cartographical gaps were filled when Indian 'pandits' of the Survey of India performed their heroic forays into Tibet.

Not until 1835 did exploratory documentation acquire some reliability. That was when Godfrey Vigne reached Kashmir, becoming "...the first European to plot the courses of the Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum rivers through the Pir Panjal and the first to visit Kishtwar, Bhadarwah and Muzafarabad." His route took in the ridge above Skardu and Gilgit, going "...north up the Shigar and Basho valleys into the heart of the Karakorams."

The unveiling "...of this massive mountain system flanking the northern banks of the Shyok and Indus from Leh to Hunza put a whole new complexion to the western Himalayas. Geographers began to get some inkling that they were dealing not with a continuation of the Great Himalaya but its conjunction with a web of other mighty systems." Vigne had shown that the feasible land route to Central Asia must avoid Skardu and Baltistan and instead go "west of the Karakorams via Gilgit or east via Leh."

A significant political upheaval had meanwhile begun. During the 10-year period following Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, the Sikhs twice fought the British who finally took Lahore. But the vast mountainous tract from Jammu to Skardu and Tibet to Muzafarabad were snapped up by Gulab Singh, the Dogra raja of Jammu, who was anointed first Maharaja of Kashmir.

Symptomatic of exploratory overlap, Keay focuses for fifteen years from 1826 on the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush. The central figures here were rootless as before. Alexander Gardiner, dressed in Uzbek costume, Koran in hand, strode thirteen years across the steppes, crossing to the Aral and then up the Syr river to escape Dost Mohammed by fording the Oxus. Stragglers in tow, he finally slithered into Srinagar, pounding the track through Gilgit, Chitral and Kafirstan. Quite the trendy opposite, Alexander Burnes had already reached

Bukhara in 1832. Tiptoeing through the Company's boardroom and the Royal Geographical Society in London, he was soon regarded as the greatest authority on the region.

More than cementing the Turkestani magnet, Burnes is credited with comprehensively stoking the nascent fires of the Great Game. Russian designs donned their blackest. Notwithstanding the 2000-mile distance to the north-western frontier of the British Empire, imaginary Tsarist armies were confidently predicted to strike through the length of Kashmir and Ladakh, the Central Asian Khanates of Khokand, Khiva and Bokhara, west off the Aral, the Caspian and the Kazakh steppes. Of course, nothing of the sort happened—at least not until the Russian army crossed the hallowed Oxus into Afghanistan just over twenty years ago.

As Keay wraps it all up, Zorawar Singh, Thomas Thomson, Shimla, Leh, the Karakoram Pass, Yarkand and Lhasa flit past while events move swiftly. Yakub Beg, the wily ruler of Kashgar, and so too the Chinese presence around the Kun Lun, reach centre stage.

However, Keay neglects later links near the end of the chain. By 1866, when the RGS awarded its Gold Medal to Thomson, the Matterhorn had been climbed and the Alpine Club of London was almost ten years old. The Great Game's metamorphosis in the closing third of the 19th century would see the emergence of yet another breed of men. Unlike Youngusband's crossing of the Mustagh Pass, their primary aim would be mountain climbing and exploration for pleasure. Mummery, Longstaff and finally Norton, Irvine and Mallory would lead the pack in the quest for the world's highest summit, while the likes of Aurel Stein would systematically pillage priceless artefacts along the old Silk Route, only to be acclaimed for 'enriching' the museums of London and Berlin.

A little over 50 years ago, in 1949, the Karakoram Pass closed for good. Unknown to Keay, one of the last Central Asian traders, Aziz Din, is still around at 84. But what greets him today in Leh bazaar bears no resemblance to the mule and camel trains that trundled in via the northern route from Kashgar or the eastern route down the Indus from Rudok and Lhasa. For the present, the thin veil of secrecy around the edges of that fragile part of the world must serve as its last embattlement.

Like the mountain desert, John Keay is stark, unremitting but never short on spectacle. ■

Sudhir Sahi is a commentator on the sport of mountaineering, tourism and the environment. Former Delhi Secretary and Hony. Librarian of the Himalayan Club, also Hony. Secretary of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation for two terms and has edited its annual journal *Indian Mountaineer* (the last nine issues).

NGOs in the Health Sector

Mohan Rao

VOLUNTARY ACTION IN HEALTH AND POPULATION: THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL TRANSITION

Edited by Sunil Misra

Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 274, Rs. 225.00

One of the most striking features of the current phase of globalization, liberalization and privatization is the growth of what is commonly referred to as the "voluntary" or the NGO sector. The UNDP notes for instance:

NGOs have emerged as major actors, both in size and in impact. In the United States employment in the NGO sector is nearly 9 million, in the European Union nearly 6 million and in Japan more than 2 million... The share of resources accruing to NGOs has steadily increased, even though official aid transfers have been steadily declining. NGO revenues in the US total US dollars 566 billion, in Japan US dollars 264 billion and in the UK US dollars 78 billion. In the developing world NGO budgets are nearly US dollars 1.2 billion, more than US dollars 200 million in Mexico alone.¹

NGOs comprise a hugely disparate group of institutions from the World Bank, to myriad caste and sectarian outfits in India (some of whom were involved in the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the communal conflagration that followed), to the FICCI which went to the Seattle conference on the Indian delegation as an NGO, to a large number of committed small health groups working in remote and inaccessible areas that the government has not reached. In the health sector more funds have poured into NGOs sterilizing poor people than those providing health facilities. Indeed NGOs now constitute the largest growth area in the health sector, even as the government, starved of funds as it claims, pours in borrowed money into NGO coffers.

But are NGOs the solution to the gargantuan problems of ill health and disease stalking our country? We have the largest proportion of undernourished children in the world. The largest chunk of deaths occurs in infancy and childhood, largely due to hunger and infections, the quintessential diseases of poverty. It is widely accepted too that solutions to these problems are beyond the ken of

That the structural adjustment programmes, involving withdrawal of the state from social sectors, have led to a deceleration, if not regression, in health indices across the globe is unquestionable.

medical technology. In this scenario, is there any country in the world where the private sector, or indeed the NGO sector, provided the answers?

Historically, and indeed contemporaneously, evidence indicates that health improvement in societies is a fundamental function of state involvement. In the established market economies, the share of the public sector in total health expenditure is as high as 61 per cent.² It is thus deeply disturbing that in precisely those countries in the developing world where state involvement in the health sector has been dismal, those World Bank policies seek to further curtail the role of the state. This is indeed paradoxical since even neo-classical economics, with its commitment to methodological individualism and the market, recognizes that health is a public good, with distinct characteristics of externalities, whereby the market is more often marked by failure than otherwise.

That the structural adjustment programmes, involving withdrawal of the state from social sectors, have led to a deceleration, if not regression, in health indices across the globe is unquestionable. Indeed it is estimated that in sub-Saharan Africa more infants and children have been killed in the debt war than by AIDS. In India too infant mortality rates (IMRs), one sensitive indicator of socio-economic development has distressingly increased in several states. Further data indicates that the proportion of the population seeking trained medical care at child-birth has only come down during the reform period, even as several states have tried to implement policies of fee-for-services making already poorly accessible health services even more inaccessible.

These are fundamental issues in public health in our country. The book under review offers a wide-ranging collection of NGO experiences in health and family planning, some of them rich, but none of which address these political issues. Thus the volume is marked by a smooth and unproblematic description of complex processes, eliding linkages and causes. Some of these sleights of hand are evident in the editor's Introduction, which on the one hand is obsessed with family planning and changing behaviour of the people, especially the poor, while on the other, makes obeisance to respecting people and their behaviour. On page 36 for instance changing health behaviours is mentioned thrice as if people are largely responsible for their health problems. Yet, as the editor

notes, this is no easy task since it has structural roots, beyond the control of the individual. "As a corollary, innovations in health behaviours would invariably extend over other spheres as the status of women, female literacy, general economic status and the occupational structure, reproductive health and reproductive rights of women, etc. on the one hand, and involvement of different loci of power in the community, on the other" (p. 36). It is thus surprising that NGOs are offered as the magic wand to complex and deep-rooted epidemiological and social problems.

There is no mention of how utterly and appallingly poor health budgets are, how inequitably they are distributed and how fundamentally misplaced they have been epidemiologically. Blaming victims for the system's failure, marking the neo-liberal discourse of Reagan and Thatcher, has had serious health consequences even in a country like England. The Black Report notes for instance that mortality rates among the manual classes in England, thanks to the Thatcher revolution, are even worse than they were in 1911!³ Similarly height differentials between rich and poor school children, which had been lessening over the twentieth century, have sharply increased over the last two decades.

Thus evidence from a host of countries, both the developed and the developing ones, reveals that curtailment or withdrawal of the state from the health sector has had serious consequences for the health of the population as a whole, with particular poignance for the poor. Yet increasing NGOization represents nothing but the state's attempts to shed its responsibilities, even as it means increasing subsidization of the relatively well-off by the poor by means of state support and subsidies to the NGO and private sector in the name of "efficiency" and "cost-effectiveness" neither of which have been empirically demonstrated.

The conceptual problems at the heart of the volume get reflected in the methodology as well. It is difficult to see how these findings, comprising primarily small qualitative studies in unique niches, however remarkable, can be generalized. The CHW scheme in the country offers a sterling example of

Indeed health behaviours themselves need to be systematically explained. Why do certain groups smoke and not others? Why do certain groups eat wrong foods and not others? Are there structural roots to such issues that need to be recognized, understood and addressed? If not is all the effort at modifying health behaviour quite misplaced?

how successes on a small NGO scale cannot be replicated in the larger health system and social system in the country.

Further, while at the individual level, health behaviour is indeed important—and thus the need for health information—at the population level, epidemiological data indicate that individual behaviours and proclivities account for a minor proportion of total health problems. Indeed health behaviours themselves need to be systematically explained. Why do certain groups smoke and not others? Why do certain groups eat wrong foods and not others? Are there structural roots to such issues that need to be recognized, understood and addressed? If not is all the effort at modifying health behaviour quite misplaced?

Fundamental doubts about the behavioural approach to public health issues have been cast by data from the Whitehall study exploring mortality differentials over a long period among British civil servants.⁴ The study found systematic differentials in mortality by social class. However behavioural patterns only explained a minor proportion of these differentials. In other words civil servants in the top echelons had better life chances than those lower down the hierarchy despite negative life-style patterns.

This is not to deny the extraordinary work done by some NGOs in the health sector. They have understood precisely how health is determined, how economics and politics mould health and influence health policy, even as they understand the critical role played by the state in health care. They also underline that health does not call so much for behaviour modification by the people as technology modification by policy-makers and planners. A section of these NGOs around the world are coming together to challenge the World Bank and the host of institutions spawned by its philosophy in health care. This magnificent event, the People's Health Assembly is taking place in Dhaka in December. What this event seeks to adumbrate is that public health is a profoundly political issue: it cannot be marketed or individualized without dire consequences for the health of the people. ■

¹ UNDP, *Human Development Report 1999*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 95.

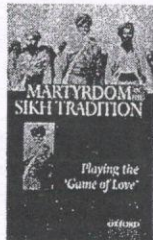
² Seeta Prabhu, K. "Structural Adjustment and the Health Sector in India", in Mohan Rao (Ed.), *Disinvesting in Health: The World Bank's Prescriptions for Health*, Sage, New Delhi, 1999, p. 119.

³ *Inequalities in Health: The Black Report*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990.

⁴ Marmot, M.G., Davey Smith, G., Stansfield, S., Patel, C., North, F., and Head, J., "Health Inequalities Among British Civil Servants: the Whitehall II Study", *Lancet* 337, 1991, pp. 1387-93.

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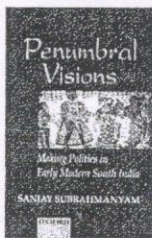
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Playing the 'Game of Love'
Louis E. Fenech

Praise for the book:
"Professor Fenech has produced the first major study of how Sikh concepts of martyrdom evolved, and what the process tells us not only about Sikhs but many other communities in India and abroad who are engaged in re-examining their historical roots. Combining a mastery of printed and unpublished documents, primarily in Punjabi, he traces the evolution of a doctrine which most Sikhs currently believe has been in place for at least four centuries. ... His work complements that of Harjot Oberoi and other scholars of the period, and will serve as the baseline study on the evolution of modern Sikhism for decades to come."

— N. Gerald Barrier, Professor of History, University of Missouri-Columbia
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Nur Jahan
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Ellison Banks Findly

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Growing up among noble families of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, given in marriage to a Turkish soldier of fortune, later widowed with a small daughter, Nur Jahan was noticed four years later by the emperor at a bazaar. She and

Jahangir were married in 1611 and, due to his increasing addiction to alcohol and opium, she immediately ascended into the vacuum of power.

Nur Jahan had a decisive influence on religious policy, artistic and architectural development, foreign trade, gardening, and the opening up of Kashmir. Barred from long-term power at Jahangir's death by her brother and stepson, Nur Jahan spent the last two decades of her life in exile in Lahore.

An intriguing, elegantly written account of Nur Jahan's life and times, this book not only revises the legends that portray her as a power-hungry and malicious woman, but also investigates the paths to power available to women in Islam and Hinduism.

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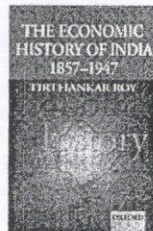
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The author shows how history explains the roots of economic growth and stagnation in South Asia. New research included here enhances the level and complexity of the debates on the role of the past

in shaping the future. A distinctive feature of the book is the comprehensive annotated bibliography highlighting essential and optional references at the end of each chapter.

An invaluable resource for undergraduate students, the book will also prove to be a handy reference for teachers and researchers in economics and history.

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Hindu Women and Marriage Law
From Sacrament to Contract
Monmayee Basu

This book is an in-depth study of the developments and changes in Hindu marriage laws over the past 150 years, through the colonial period to the present. Highly contentious issues like child marriage, dowry, sati, widow remarriage, and divorce laws are analysed to explain constructions of women's positions in Hindu society.

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