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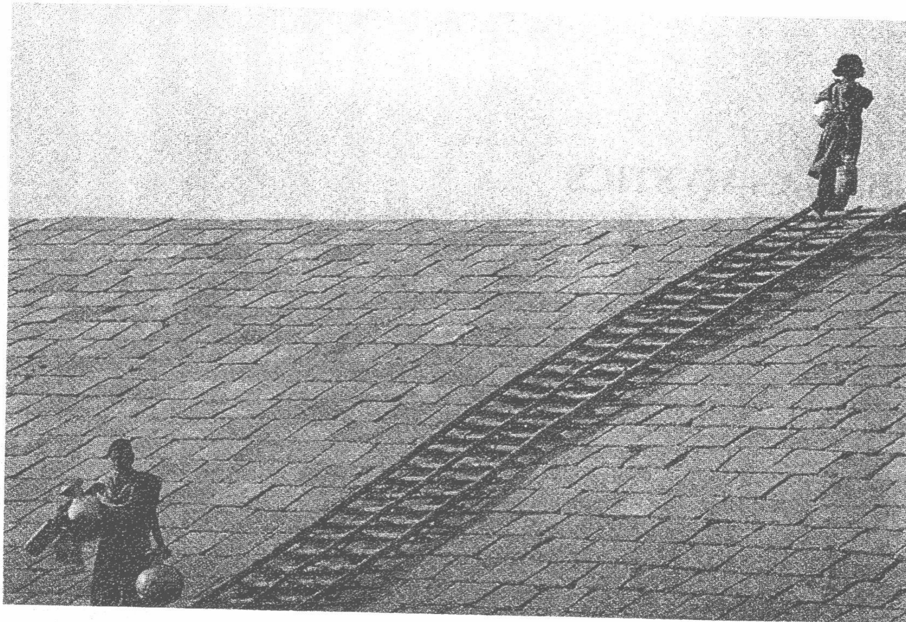

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Tragic Fate of the Idea of India

G.K. Arora

HARVEST OF HATE
By Swami Agnivesh and Valson Thampu
Rupa, Delhi, 2002, pp.140, Rs.150.00

LEST WE FORGET
Edited by Amrita Kumar and Prashun Bhaumik
Rupa, Delhi, 2002, pp.154, Rs.195.00

Driven as they are to seek consolation and strength from the religious quest for peace and harmony the authors suggest that there is clear need to articulate spirituality 'in the idiom of heresy', since the Gujarat crisis has visited us along the 'route of religion'.

The Hindus believe that there is no country like theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no science like theirs, no religion like theirs....If they travelled and mixed with other nations, they would soon change their minds, for their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation is.

Alberuni, *Kitabul Hind* (1035)

Love has converted me into an infidel. I no longer need Islam: Every vein in my body is a thread, I do not require the sacred thread of the Brahmin.

Amir Khusru (1253-1325)

From Ayodhya, 1992, to Gujarat, 2002, is a decade-long story, a long and sad story of a sustained attack on the 'Idea of India'. During the decade many things have happened. We are supposed to have broken the shackles that held us down to a low growth, low productivity regime of mindless controls and regulations. We have opened our windows wide open to the bracing winds of liberalization and globalization. We have emerged as a powerful nation after the explosions at Pokhran. But one feature stands out and dominates the landscape of change, and that is a relentless and continuous assault on the Nehruvian concept of the nation or rather the concept of the Indian nationhood as it emerged from our epic struggle against imperialism.

In Gujarat, in 2002, that inveterate hatred of the idea that India is a country where many faiths have lived together and where many cultures have interacted with one another and have given rise to a pattern of understanding and cooperation, received its most revolting expression in unspeakable acts of inhumanity and barbarism. The two books being reviewed here tell the tale of how a beautiful tradition where *difference* did not automatically translate into *enmity* was sought to be destroyed. The main intellectual weapon employed was, and is, a sinister doctrine based on falsehood and perversions of historical imagination. It regards Muslims as the 'other' to be hated, reviled and looked down upon. A chilling reminder of the Germany of the late twenties and the thirties of the 20th century. The Indian version of fascism is not a pretty thing to behold.

Harvest of Hate brings together a number of articles penned by Swami Agnivesh and Reverend Valson Thampu over a period of two months covering the Gujarat tragedy. The authors, the former an ardent social reformer and a political activist in ochre robes, and the latter a noted educationist and theologian, share a spiritual approach to life and society. It also includes two pieces, one by the famous novelist, Arundhati Roy, originally published in the *Outlook*, a well-known weekly magazine, and the other by Harsh Mander, a senior Indian Aministrative Service officer who resigned from the premier civil service as a mark of protest against the failure of government to protect life and property against pre-meditated violence.

Swami Agnivesh and Reverend Valson Thampu do not just describe what happened, though naturally the cruelty, the violence, the crude manipulation of religious symbols, the systematic debasement of all accepted standards of civilized behaviour form the subtext of their account, they also reflect on the damage done to the very fabric of our society, our polity and our value systems. In words aflame with anger and indignation but also suffused with compassion for those who were and are the victims of the ideologies of communalism, they analyse why such notions as Hindutva wreak such incalculable havoc on tens of thousands of innocent men and women whose only crime is that they happen to follow a faith different from the one decreed to be the true indigenous religion of the country. In the twelfth chapter, 'Communalism and the Crisis of Democracy', they approvingly quote Arthur Koestler, "We should not forget that it was using legitimate democratic means that Hitler murdered democracy." The rueful conclusion the authors come to after discussing the impact of communalism on our democratic structure and system is "the utter irrelevance of the people to the game plans of governance.... this glorious democracy has reached a stage in which citizens have ceased to matter."

Driven as they are to seek consolation and strength from the religious quest for peace and harmony the authors suggest that there is clear need to articulate spirituality 'in the idiom of heresy', since the Gujarat crisis has visited us along the 'route of religion'. They seek to purge the discourse on religion of the latter day accretions of crime, barbarity and intolerance. They argue passionately that peace among religions is basic to peace among nations and peoples. A paradigm shift is necessary for this to happen, from 'the conflictual to the cooperative and from the hegemonistic to the holistic'. In a moving chapter entitled 'The Sword of Self-Denial' the two savants recall the parable of the Garden of Gethsemene where Jesus tells Peter that loyalty expressed through the sword is utterly unacceptable to God. The ideologies of hatred propagated by the self-appointed guardians of Indian culture may be likened to the sword that true religion would ask to be put down.

The authors present a powerful indictment of the harm that communalism has done to our society and our polity. The shrill polemical tone was unavoidable, writing as they did in the midst of the gory happenings in Gujarat, but the sincerity and the eloquence of their plea for return to sanity and decency and for restoring the basis for conversation between different communities on their common destiny are to be welcomed, and indeed, commended. We do need such voices of courage and conviction.

Arundahati Roy's is one such voice. She voices her agony over the fate of Indian democracy threatened by 'religious fascism'. The depravity of the vision of an India violently deprived of her vivacious diversity is what concerns her as it does every thinking and feeling Indian. She raises the question, which few political parties and their leaders do—what and who will heal the wounds of partition, still festering in mutual hatred and distrust, when secularism, the very foundation of our national existence, has been hollowed out into mere tokenism. There are no answers but the slim volume by Swami Agnivesh and Valson Thampu highlights the nature of the issues and the challenge that faces us all.

Lest We Forget is also a collection of articles by leading writers and journalists, put together by Amrita Kumar and Prashun Bhaumik, with a characteristically robust and optimistic preface by Saeed Naqvi. The book is divided into three parts. The first part has pieces that describe, in graphic detail, the blood-curdling events that took the lives of over 2000 men, women and children at the hands of rampaging mobs of murderers, arsonists, rapists, looters and sinister distillers of communal poison.

These articles bring alive those moments of terror when piteous cries begging for mercy

were cruelly, instantly, calculatedly disregarded, foetuses were ripped apart, pregnant women were dragged out to be raped in front of their loved ones and then done to death with satanic glee, little children clung to their mothers as they burned in the inferno of hate, a pogrom was enacted to intimidate a whole community into submission at the point of the gun. A lesson was taught; a lesson was learned. What kind of a lesson was it? The second part deals with the issues the Gujarat holocaust has brought to the fore. Rajmohan Gandhi believes that the religious extremists have never forgiven Gandhi "his beliefs and his triumphs". The image of the Gandhi Ashram barred against hapless victims fleeing to safety tells another story. Verily, Truth is many sided. Vir Sanghvi injects a note of dissent and critiques the indiscriminate bashing of the Sangh Parivar by the 'secular establishment'. The evidence of authority looking the other way or conniving with the aggressor does little to support the claim of spontaneous rage irrespective of the secularists' default in not condemning the Godhra crime strongly enough. To put the record straight, Arundhati Roy did.

Dipankar Gupta and Romila Thapar demand that the guilty be punished according to the due process of law—something that is surely and sorely needed if the credibility of the state has to be re-established. However, the Best Bakery case shows that what was really behind the Gujarat carnage was the collusion of the authorities with those who planned and carried out the murders. Harsh Mander draws the obvious conclusion that the higher civil and police services are 'in the throes of an unprecedented crisis'.

Where do we go from here? The third part takes stock of where we have arrived. Saeed Naqvi, whose indestructible faith in the India of his dreams has already been referred to, laments the destruction of the grave of Wali Dakhini, the first great poet of Urdu. He was born in Aurangabad, Deccan, but lived all his life in Ahemdabad and Surat. Naqvi quotes Wali, *"Koochai yaar, ain Kashi hail Jogia dil wahan ka basi hai."* My beloved's neighbourhood is like the holy city of Kashi where the yogi of my heart has taken residence.) Gujarat 2002 has robbed Naqvi of his multiple identities.

Praful Bidwai finds a causal link between Pokhran and Gujarat. Militarization produces a different kind of mindset which can ignore present evidence of deprivation and hunger but takes refuge in pride in mythical achievements of the past. Amitav Ghosh calls attention to the fundamental obligations of governance—to maintain the rule of law, to prevent storm troopers of whatever description from usurping state authority, and to safeguard the state's ethical claims to legitimacy. He regrets that the present government has cavalierly disregarded these foundational principles of statecraft. He finds some reassurance in sporadic actions of civil society. It is no doubt a bleak picture of abdication.

Are we putting Gujarat behind us? Not until we have learned to call things by their proper names. In Gujarat, state-sponsored violence was described as the natural response of a people outraged by the Godhra outrage. Unstoppable orgies of murder and arson and rape for days together were seen as exemplary action by the authorities to control the situation. Intolerable conditions in the camps were lauded as state's strong commitment to humanitarian intervention. Use of force to compel conformity with the majoritarian code of acceptable behaviour was praised as a fine example of the proverbial Hindu tolerance. This Orwellian Newspeak "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" has to give way to Plainspeak to arrest the drift that has overtaken us.

The question remains whether we shall continue to vindicate Alberuni or shall we follow the model of Amir Khusru? These two books suggest some approaches toward a sane political order and will repay readers' effort and attention.■

G.K. Arora, a former member of the Indian Administrative Service, is currently Chairman, Noida Toll Bridge, U.P.

Ideologies of Primordialism?

Pralay Kanungo

HINDU NATIONALISM: ORIGINS, IDEOLOGIES AND MODERN MYTHS
By Chetan Bhatt
Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2001, pp. viii + 232, price not stated.

BJP AND KOMEITO: RELIGION AND POLITICS IN INDIA AND JAPAN
By Bhoopender S. Dalal
Confluence International, Delhi, 2002, pp. 226, Rs. 450.00

The emergence of Hindu nationalism as a dominant political and ideological formation in India during the last two decades has provoked many scholars to interrogate and explain this puzzling phenomenon. Chetan Bhatt makes a critical assessment of Hindu nationalism through his innovative methodological emphasis on idea, text and key personalities that symbolize and shape the contours of this ideology. While analysing intellectual and historical influences that contributed to its development since the mid-nineteenth century, Bhatt finds a thematic convergence in its ideological content. At the same time, he underlines critical epistemological disjunctures and political discontinuities as well, thereby dismissing the myth of Hindu nationalism's holistic continuity across a broad historical period.

Bhatt defines Hindu nationalism as a dense cluster of ideologies of primordialism. Paradoxically, this primordial nationalism is shaped by modern European influence. For instance, Aryanism, a major component of such nationalism, in the Indian context, represented a complex relation and deep negotiations between several external intellectual currents like British and German Orientalism, German Romanticism, and the indigenous processes of the upper caste, religious, regional and vernacular elite formation in colonial India. Bhatt critically examines various texts and ideas while narrating different shades of Aryanisms—Dayananda's Arya Samaj, Bengal Renaissance, Bankim's affective religious nationalism, Tilak's Hindu nationalist activism, Bipin Chandra Pal's Aryan race consciousness and Aurobindo's dharmic nationalism. Thus, Bhatt identifies the tangible relationship between Hinduism and Indian nationalism in the later decades of the nineteenth century, which was articulated primarily through a civilizational and cultural discourse of archaic Vedism.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, as Bhatt explains, Hindu nationalists went beyond Aryanism to project it more sharply against other religious communities and through a bio-power narrative that focused on political, social, cultural, physical and demographic 'threat', even 'extinction' of Hindus. Har Bilas Sarda's *Hindu Superiority* (1906) underlined the racial conception of Hindus. Lal Chand's *Self-Abnegation in Politics* (1909) harped on themes like the 'lack' of Hindu self-pride, the 'shame' in calling oneself 'Hindu' in the context of minority assertion. Lala Lajpat Rai's trajectory from Brahmo Samaj to the Arya Samaj, then to the Congress, and finally emerging as a leader of both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Hindu Sangathan, symbolized the communal shift of Hindu nationalism during this period.

Bhatt then enters into to the troubled, violent and puzzling period from the end of the First World War to the mid 1920s which witnessed the rise of distinct Hindu nationalist ideology and political movement. Savarkar's *Hindutva*, Shraddhanand's *Hindu Sangathan*, the formation of the RSS, the revival of the Hindu Mahasabha were the significant developments. Does Savarkar's *Hindutva* (1923) represent an epistemological break from previous forms of Hindu nationalism? Bhatt

perceives continuity rather than a break, though conceding that an exclusive 'Hindu state' or 'Hindu government' was vague and not programmatically formulated prior to the 1920s.

V.D. Savarkar defines a Hindu as a person who regards Hindustan as his *pitrubhoomi* (fatherland) as well as *punyabhoomi* (holyland) and lists three criteria for confirming Hindutva—geographical, racial and cultural. For him, Hindutva, not Hinduism, is to be definitive of Hindu identity; Hindutva is not a word but a history and Hinduism is merely a derivative, a fraction of Hindutva. Thus, Savarkar, an avowed atheist, displaced religious 'Hinduism' by non-religious Hindutva thereby strictly demoting religion. Ironically, Savarkar excludes Muslims and Christians on the very ground of religion. Moreover, despite Savarkar's strategic primordialization of Hindu identity and apparent rejection of western conception, Hindutva was decisively conditioned by the paradigms of German and British Orientalism. Savarkar's journey from revolutionary nationalism to exclusivist Hindutva is a complex process. Bhatt does not explain this anti-climax and the reason for his ignominious surrender to the colonial authorities.

Bhatt then discusses the origin and ideology of the RSS, which was founded by K.B. Hedgewar at Nagpur in 1925 on the ideological edifice of Savarkar's *Hindutva* and characterized India as a *Hindu Rashtra*. Increasing Hindu-Muslim riots, political assertion of non-Brahmins and antipathy to Gandhiji's emphasis on communal cooperation were the main reasons behind its formation. B.S. Moonje, one of the founders of the RSS, visited Italy and met with Mussolini and was greatly impressed by the Balilla movement, which organized military training and fascist indoctrination of young boys. The RSS, incidentally, followed a similar pattern; Hedgewar opened *shakhas*, recruited young Maharashtrian Brahmin boys, and imparted physical and ideological training.

M.S. Golwalkar, who succeeded Hedgewar, sharpened the ideology of the *Hindu Rashtra* in his *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939)—the 'Bible' of the RSS. The nation, for Golwalkar, comprised the famous 'five unities': Country, Race, Religion, Culture and Language. In Nazi Germany, as Golwalkar claims, each of his five constituents of the 'nation idea' had been boldly vindicated. His adulation of Hitler and prescription of the Nazi model for India became too controversial, thus forcing the RSS to withdraw this work and replace it by *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966), which also propounded the same philosophy, omitting overt reference to Nazism and fascism, however. Interestingly, it identified three enemies of *Hindu Rashtra*—Muslims, Christians and Communists.

Golwalkar's ideal social order is based on *varnashrama* despite the RSS's apparent opposition to caste and untouchability. As Bhatt argues, there is no critical scrutiny, condemnation, even mild disapproval of caste itself, its hierarchies or injustices, or brahmin or upper caste domination or propagation of caste ideology. Moreover, Hindutva's gender ideology has been constructed within an overarching patriarchal configuration. Thus, Bhatt summarizes that RSS's idealized vision of Hindu nation is of an organic, disciplined, integrated, ordered social formation based on the consolidation of a strong, collective Hindu majoritarianism. To achieve this objective, Golwalkar extended the presence of the RSS to every corner of India and also created an array of affiliates in different spheres of civil society — the Sangh Parivar.

Bhatt then discusses the evolution of the Sangh Parivar in Indian politics. During its ban after Gandhiji's murder, the RSS realized the urgency of having a political party to protect and promote its political interest. Thus was born the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951; Golwalkar deputed some of his trusted lieutenants to build this new party. But the RSS's plunge into the anti-Emergency agitation (1975-1977) and the Janata experiment brought Hindu nationalists to the threshold of political power. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the re-incarnation of the BJS, expanded rapidly from the mid-1980s by manufacturing a Hindu constituency, in which the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) played a key role.

Finally, Bhatt narrates the authoritarian landscape of the VHP, which adopted an innovative strategy of militant political mobilization by manoeuvring Hindu religious symbols and icons during the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation. Its militaristic discourse overwrote the content of the actual texts of Hinduism with slogans of strength, honour, obligation, violence and war, which reached a climax in the demolition of Babri Masjid. VHP's reign of terror was not confined to the Muslims. It organized anti-Christian violence in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and particularly in Orissa, where Graham Steins and his two minor sons were burnt to death, allegedly by an associate of the Sangh Parivar, Dara Singh. As the Sangh Parivar has an agenda to institutionalize an authoritarian, aggressive and intolerant form of Hindu nationalist governance, Bhatt warns, a clear BJP majority government would pose a serious danger to the religious minorities and destroy India's secular and democratic fabric. Gujarat pogrom only confirms his apprehension.

After the scholarly works of Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, Chetan Bhatt's book is another serious intervention which provides a methodological freshness and analytical depth to the study of Hindu nationalism. However, his analysis of the contemporary period lacks methodological rigour.

Exploiting religion for political ends is not an artistry of Hindu nationalists alone. Bhupender Dalal makes an interesting comparison between the RSS and Soka Gakkai, a Nichiren Buddist organization in Japan, and shows how under the mask of non-political, social and cultural, both strive for political power through their respective political arms—the BJP and the Komeito.

Both Soka Gakkai and the RSS were founded around the same time in response to the troubled times in Japan and India. Makiguchi, the founder of Soka Gakki, was opposed to the official patronage of Shinto shrines and aspired to convert his own sect as national religion; Hedgewar was opposed to the 'appeasement' of Muslims and wanted to convert India into a Hindu nation. The former emphasized on 'value education', and the latter on 'character building'. Both turned to western ideological paradigms: Makiguchi applied utilitarianism to Nichiren Buddhism and Hedgewar fused ethnic nationalism with Hinduism. Both gave priority to organization, recruited cadre by "playing on his psychological fears and needs" and extended the reach to different spheres of civil society to establish their hegemony.

Dalal mentions some organizational differences too. For instance, Soka Gakkai runs by rules and procedures; the RSS relies more on hierarchical oral transmission of orders. Soka Gakkai's method of raising finance is more transparent in comparison to RSS's *Guru Dakshina*. But fundamental differences exist in their ideologies. The RSS's mission is primarily political and its ideology and strategy revolves round the notion of hatred and hostility against the 'other'. Soka Gakkai, while pursuing political objectives, simultaneously propagates messages of religious contentment, thereby presenting a more constructive world view.

Both the BJP and the Komeito have steadily moved up the political ladder and captured power at the national level as coalition partners—the former emerging as the leader of the coalition government in India and the latter as an ally of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan. Though both have used religion in furtherance of their political power, there is a noticeable difference. While Komeito, over the years, has come up with a purely secular agenda consciously shedding its religious character, the BJP, on the contrary, has been drawing its sustenance from a 'Hindu' constituency with the support of the RSS; its 'genuine' secularism favours assertion of Hindu majoritarianism.

Any comparison across cultures is always problematic and Dalal also accepts it. However, he makes useful comparisons by drawing parallels between certain facets of Japanese history, society, religion, culture and politics with its Indian counterparts.■

Pralay Kanungo is Associate Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is the author of *RSS's Tryst with Politics: From Hegdewar to Sudarshan* (Manohar, 2002)

Combatting Communal Myths

Ajay K. Mehra

COMMUNAL POLITICS: FACTS VERSUS MYTHS
By Ram Puniyani
Sage Publications, Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2003, pp. 309, Rs. 295.00

Ram Puniyani, a professor of biomedical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai, presents a unique, but timely, exploration into the role of myths as well as deliberately invented and craftily concocted falsehoods in the spread of communal violence, and the consolidation of the communal mindset in India during the past couple of decades. He goes beyond cataloguing the myths that have been slyly invented and spread as a part of the majoritarian Hindutva politics by juxtaposing them with 'facts' to expose a Machiavellian design in the effort.

Recognizing that communalism is not new to India, Puniyani briefly details the socio-economic background of this scourge. In the fourteen chapters that follow, he goes on demythifying various periods of Indian history, as it were, carefully picking incidents and events that form the basis of myth-invention and putting them against facts analysed in scholarly historical works already published. Puniyani is right that the 'myth-making is designed to demonise the minority community and play on the fears and insecurities of the people;' more dangerously, 'it also seeks to draw the people who live on the fringes of the faith or outside it—the dalits, and the adivasis—into a collective approbation of a homogenised, Manu-sanctioned faith that is bred and nurtured by the upper castes.' This perilous process, Puniyani succinctly argues, '... is all about ... denial of the pantheist and syncretic traditions of the Hindu faith; deification of the man-God Ram to create a homogenised, North India-skewed, unitary religious system; and the demonisation of the minority faiths – Islam and Christianity.' As these myths become pervasive and deeply ingrained, they become the 'social common sense' not mere aberrations (p. 12). And, myths and falsehood as 'social common sense', particularly if they propagate and justify violence against citizens based on faith, religion, or ethnic origin are dangerous to any society and polity.

Since India's contemporary multicultural mosaic is not entirely indigenous, it has evolved over time out of a syncretic culture, which has absorbed streams of visitors, migrants and invaders over centuries, the arguments of superiority are invariably based on the 'ancient', which is not easily verifiable, despite loads of historical studies and labelling of the minorities as 'others' and 'outsiders'. Ancient scriptures, religious or literary, and their mythologies are claimed to be sacrosanct and authentic. Thus, 'Aryans were the original inhabitants of this land' is asserted, though the reputed historian of ancient India Romila Thapar, who is now being discredited, has shown in her several works that it is disproved by the best available archeological evidence (p. 31). Puniyani painstakingly refutes the Hindutva claim that Vedic society is the foundation of Indian civilization. He contrasts the myths advanced with facts to point out that 'a very different Indus civilization precedes it' and that, 'the Indus civilization is more advanced than the subsequent vedic civilization' (p. 35).

The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's strong Islamic inclinations, which led to many policies and moves against non-Islamic communities (mainly Hindus) are also being used as the historical basis of Muslim bashing by the Hindutva forces. Since the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi too is in the eye of the storm in contemporary communal politics, the destruction of the Vishwanath Temple by Aurangzeb, along with his misdeed in Mathura and Babar's destruction of the Ram *mandir* in Ayodhya, are highlighted as anti-Hindu acts of the Mughals. Puniyani brings out the context of the destruction. Since the Maharani of Kutch was dishonoured near the sanctum sanctorum by some of the *pandas* and the sacred precincts despoiled, the existing temple was razed and a new one built (p. 45). In fact, Aurangzeb, whose fanatic adherence to Islam is well established, gave *jagirs* for the maintenance of several temples. Puniyani convincingly argues with facts that destruction and plunder of temples have been part of both ancient and medieval periods of Indian history, to which Hindu kings also resorted for one political reason or the other. His listing of alliances and composition of *darbars* and armies during medieval India clearly shows that loyalties were based on political considerations rather than religious adherence. He does well to refer to Babar's will advising his son Humayun to be just, non-partisan and sensitive to the local populace in ruling Hindustan (p. 54).

Puniyani also tackles the myth about Hindutva's central and major role in the freedom struggle and nation building. Aside from Lala Lajpat Rai's observation that the RSS as an organization was never part of the anti-British movement and Hedgewar too dissociated himself from the freedom struggle from 1931 onwards, he quotes the Hindutva ideologue Golwalkar's lamentation that '(b)eing anti-British was equated with patriotism and nationalism. This reactionary view had a disastrous effect upon the entire course of the independence struggle, its leaders and the common people' (p. 78). Puniyani rightly argues that Partition was 'a logical culmination of communal politics to which everyone – the Muslim League, the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha—contributed equally ' (p. 99). Mahatma Gandhi, who is often blamed by the Hindu communalists for the partition of the country, 'believed in secular principles and treating Muslims on a par' (p. 98).

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With population data pointing to the contrary, Puniyani confronts the Hindu communalists' attempt to create a demographic fear of India being overwhelmed by Muslims. Remember Narendra Modi's repugnant comment about Muslims during his election campaign soon after the riots! The changes in the Indian constitution are being argued on the ground that 'ours is a Constitution based on western values. What we need is a Hindu Constitution' (p. 234). Obviously, it is an attempt to change the very secular democratic foundations of the Indian polity.

However, though Puniyani succeeds in countering the communal myths with historical, political and social facts, he appears to contradict himself by simplifying historical and political developments, particularly the part dealing with the national movement. As a result, this substantive and incisive challenge to Hindutva myths develops an underlying contradiction. For example, if the communal myths have become the social common sense of the people, as he argues, communalism has become more than an aberration and a deviation and there is no secular and democratic India. As he imprisons himself in this argument, he fails to analyse many paradoxes relating to communalism and secularism during the national movement and in post-Independence politics. Though he points out that the landlords and the upper castes, who 'wanted to sustain the declining pre-modern structural hierarchies', have always been strong and have formed the basis for the nationalists, Puniyani willy nilly blinks at their role in sustaining

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communalism (p. 287). Similarly, though he rightly argues that the Congress party, which ruled India for so long, had 'many leaders in important positions who were influenced by Hindu communal ideology...communalism remained dormant but never died' (p. 186), he sticks to his facile position on mainstream secularism in India. The book, therefore, does not succeed in its aim of a sustained engagement with the practice of secularism in the country.

Puniyani would have done well to avoid some glaring factual inaccuracies in a study of this kind. He says Aurangzeb's son Bahadur Shah Zafar succeeded him after his death (p.58). Aurangzeb was succeeded by his elder son Bahadur Shah in 1707, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor and a renowned Urdu poet, who became the reluctant symbol of the anti-British revolt in 1857, took over from his father Akbar Shah in 1837—ninth in the line after Aurangzeb. He also refers to the Mughal Empire as a sultanate; in fact, the Mughals succeeded the Sultanate (1206 to 1526). On page 94 and 96 he refers to the 1937 elections in Uttar Pradesh, though he means United Province. Despite referring to Jinnah's famous statement in the constituent assembly, that Pakistan would be a secular state (p. 99), ten pages later he contradicts himself saying that a new theocratic state of Pakistan was created on 14 August 1947. These and several typographical errors mar the value of an otherwise laboured study.■

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How And Why Of Identity Formation

M. Rajivlochan

COMMUNAL IDENTITY IN INDIA: ITS CONSTRUCTION AND ARTICULATION IN THE 20TH CENTURY
Edited by Bidyut Chakrabarty
Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003, Oxford in India Readings: Debates in Indian History and Society, General Editors Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, B D Chattopadhyaya, Richard M Eaton, pp. 325, Rs. 545.00

Professor Bidyut Chakrabarty has put together some of the most admirable essays on the question of the formation of the communal identity in this Reader. Social scientists have hitherto been concerned mostly with questions of communal conflict. The question of why and how this identity was formed in the first place has been relatively ignored.

The essays that are collected in this volume have already been much commented upon and cited. There is André Beteille's 'Race, caste and ethnic identity' which had appeared in the *International Social Science Journal* in 1971. In this essay Beteille had examined the question of communal identity using the idea of race and caste as foils. Read four decades later one is touched by the analytical helplessness that underlies this otherwise informative essay. For, having dealt with the diverse ways in which caste and religious identities have existed in India, Beteille asserts, to an essentially non-Indian audience, that the communal distinctions are definitely not like the differences in race. Repeating a point that became central in the 1970s to any understanding of communalism among those scholars who have condemned communalism, Beteille explains that Hindus and Muslims in India do not belong to separate races. They have co-existed as communities in different parts of India for a millennium. Yet differences along communal lines have remained, mostly defined in cultural terms. "There is no general theory which can enable us to delineate in exact terms the relationship between cultural differences and their organisation into mutually antagonistic groups", Beteille concludes.

The other essays in this book are best read in the light of the points made by André Beteille. There is A.R. Kamat's essay which was first

published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1980, discussing the manner in which the minority languages of India have been sidelined by an English-speaking elite. He even goes on to suggest that there is a close link between the language identity and religious identity. Kumkum Sangari's essay, which too was first published in the *EPW*, examines the interlinkages between religious identities, the nature of communities, and the idea of patriarchy. In an otherwise cogent essay here Sangari lambasts the demand for a uniform civil code being used as a tool by the Hindu communalists to hit out at other religious groups. Her overall effort, however, remains to trace back any kind of effort for political, social or cultural domination to the idea of patriarchy. That immediately highlights the contradictions inherent in enabling what she calls the politics of diversity.

The nature of the nation and the presence of regional identities remains a major concern with many of the essays. Bhiku Parekh and T.K. Oomen in their essays directly, and Gail Omvedt, Kumkum Sangari and A.R. Kamat somewhat obliquely, concern themselves with how the nation establishes an identity for itself, the problems that it causes for others and the stresses that occur between those who wish to assert sub-national identities vis-à-vis the national one. The essays by Sekhar Bandopadhyay, first published in the *EPW*, Gail Omvedt, from her book *Dalit Vision*, Ravinder Kaur from *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and Rowena Robinson deal with the political implications of identity formation. Whether it be the conflict between lower caste Hindus and Muslims, or lower caste Hindus and the Delhi government or the formation of the Jat or Christian identity, these essays essentially reiterate the basic conclusion that Beteille had already suggested.

In this otherwise admirable volume, though, one does miss the influential arguments made by two JNU scholars on identity formation and the conflicts that they engender. Both Satish Saberwal and Bipan Chandra, in their curiously contrary ways, have had much to say on the formation and assertion of communal identities. But both have been kept out. Even the two essays surveying the of ideas on nation, identity and community formation presented here by Professor Bidyut Chakrabarty do not mention these two.■

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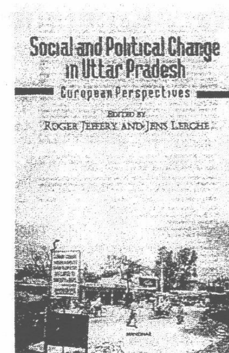
Continuity of the Change

Salil Mishra

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN UTTAR PRADESH: EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES
Edited by Roger Jeffery and Jens Lerche
Manohar, Delhi, 2003, pp. 317, Rs. 625.00



Few would deny that the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) did for a long time, and still does, mirror national reality, in a variety of ways. The question is: how has UP come to enjoy this status? What is it about UP that has enabled it to assume a certain pan-Indianness? This is one of the issues raised in the eleven articles brought together in a single volume under review. Apart from establishing UP's national importance, and accounting for it (pp. 17-21), the articles take up various other themes outlining the contours of the social changes that have taken place in the state over the last two decades. These are: the simultaneous emergence of Hindu communalism and Dalit assertion in politics (in less complicated terms, the rise of BJP and BSP), the East-West divide and its economic dimension, the demand for the creation of a separate state of Uttarakhand (named Uttaranchal after establishment) and the nature of the movement that led to it, indigenous perspectives on questions pertaining to development, perceptions on Muslim personal law and its impact on the lives of Muslim women, the swinging fortunes of the rich peasant movement under the leadership of Mahendra Singh Tikait, manipulative strategies adopted by the Jat peasants of Meerut vis-à-vis the local administration in preserving its advantages, and the new penetration of the print and electronic media in the cities of UP. All the articles are case studies of various towns and cities of UP and do succeed in bringing out the local flavour. The authors actually refrain from jumping to mega-conclusions and let the facts speak for themselves. Another feature of the volume, applicable to all articles, is its statistical richness, which does enable the reader to comprehend the nuances of the social change that has been underway in the state since the 1980s. The volume, to its credit, carries a certain stylistic explicitness that makes it difficult for the reader to read the articles in any way other than the one intended by the authors.

The volume engages in a significant manner with the almost simultaneous emergence of the rival formations of BJP and BSP. This has created dilemmas for both resulting in an ambivalent relationship between the two. It has been clear to both that, beyond a point, they cannot grow together and that one would have to grow at the expense of the other. BJP has been unambiguously pursuing the agenda of creating a pan-Hindu constituency in politics, its largely upper-caste support base notwithstanding. The BSP, with its agenda of carving out a separate political space for the lower caste groups amongst the Hindus, constitutes the biggest obstacle to the BJP project. On the other hand, the BSP would have its *raison d'être* taken away, if the BJP were to come anywhere near being successful in its game plan. This has resulted in an uneasy alliance between the two through the 1990s in which they have often come together albeit in brief spells. The spells have been inevitably brief because they know that they cannot get into a long-term alliance without damaging their own support base. Jens Lerche's article, 'Home, Village and Region: Caste and Class differences between Low-Caste Mobilization in East and West UP' makes the interesting observation that whereas the BSP has done well to emerge as a formidable force all over the state, its composition as a multi-class formation (landless poor, petit bourgeois, government servants, semi-elites) within a largely single-caste frame blocks the possibility of its transformation as a revolutionary force.

The dramatic rise of one caste movement/party can be compared with an equally dramatic decline of another caste party, Bhartiya Kisan Union in western UP. This has been done by Staffan Lindberg and Stig Toft Madsen in 'Modelling Institutional Fate: The Case of a Farmers' Movement in Uttar Pradesh' with the help of a framework that offers insights into the fate of movements crystallizing into organizations. Even though the BKU has declined, the same cannot be said about the class it represents. Craig Jeffrey's essay, 'Soft States, Hard Bargains: Rich Farmers, Class Reproduction and the Local State in Rural North India' talks about the successful manipulation of government machinery and other resources by the Jat farmers of Meerut in order to retain a position of economic domination. The last two articles, 'The Newspapers of Lucknow: Journalism and Modernity' by Per Stahlberg and 'Creative Television in the Siti of Varanasi: Television and Public Spheres in the Satellite Era' by Simon Roberts explore the nature, activities and penetration of print and electronic media in the cities of Lucknow and Banaras respectively.

The volume has its share of themes ignored or overlooked. It would have been interesting to compare UP's Dalit movement with that of Maharashtra. Why is it that the project of Dalit empowerment has been more successful in UP than in the historically more advantageous Maharashtra? Although the decline of the Congress in UP has been referred to at a few places, it is not clear what the authors make of it. Has the decline fed into the rise of BJP and BSP or is it the product of their emergence? It is important to note that the Congress-led national movement had something to do with the emergence of UP as the 'heartland'. The Congress continued to dominate the state till the 1980s before collapsing dramatically. We need to know why this happened as this contains the key to the subsequent social and political changes that have been redrawing the political, social and the conceptual map of UP. Also a more detailed examination of the Ram temple movement leading, apart from tremendous social unrest, to the demolition of a 500 year old mosque in Ayodhya would have been only appropriate. The constant erosion of UP's social fabric is one way in which the state's social map has been altered, and in order to understand that, we need to focus on the veins and arteries of a social and political movement that has led to it.

One final word on the title (the sub-title, to be precise). The term 'European Perspectives' can be a little misleading. On a superficial plane, it can smack of condescending anthropology ('viewing the other society'). On the other, slightly deeper, plane, it may refer to perspective(s) that have developed over the years as product of European scholarship, which have been pressed into service, in order to understand social change in UP. But upon a cursory examination, the reader discovers that it is nothing of the sort. The term European is there to designate, not any particular scholarship or perspective, but a simple ethnicity. The book offers a 'European Perspective' in the simple sense that all the authors (except Jayati Chaturvedi of Agra) *happen* to be Europeans. To put it more appropriately, the volume under review offers not a European perspective, but the perspectives of a few European scholars. *This* is how the volume ought to be read. Anyone specifically looking for 'European perspectives' is likely to be disappointed.■

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A Literary Experiment?

Amiya P. Sen

VANDE MATARAM: THE BIOGRAPHY OF A SONG
By Sabyasachi Bhattacharya
Penguin, Delhi, 2003, pp.136, Rs.150.00

The political has its own ways of overtaking art and aesthetics and in certain contexts, the results thereof can be culturally quite puzzling. At a popular level, the novel *Anandamath* [1882] of which the poem 'Vande Mataram' forms an integral part, probably remains the best known of Bankim's works even though by the author's own admission and in the opinion of knowledgeable scholars, its artistry and literary finesse are decidedly inferior. The poem itself, notwithstanding obvious problems of linguistic usage, meaning and metre, continues to excite popular opinion more than a century after it was composed. But do the novel and the song therein represent some unique literary experiment and could their political value alone consistently explain their great popularity? Here, it would be relevant to note that mother symbolism is not unique to Bankimchandra or even nineteenth century Bengali literature. Again, while the great emotional appeal of the song and its multiple political possibilities are beyond doubt, these were not quite manifest in Bankim's lifetime. Cries of 'Vande Mataram' were not heard during the two major political controversies in the 1880s viz. over the fate of the Ilbert Bill and the prosecution of the nationalist leader, Surendranath Banerjee. Bankim himself is known to have written to a friend complaining bitterly about how *Anandamath* had failed to stir fellow-Bengalis. 'Vande Udaram'[Glory to the belly!] and not 'Vande Mataram'[Glory to the Mother-Motherland] was the cry that better suited the supine and self-seeking Bengalis, he added with considerable sarcasm. Finally, a look at the contemporary Bengali-Muslim press would reveal that in the pre-Swadeshi days, complaints from this quarter focused more on the depiction of the Muslim in *Anandamath* as also in the other novels, *Rajsingha* [1882] and *Sitaram* [1887] rather than any religious offence or cultural tyranny perpetrated by the song. However, as the work under review reveals, all this was to radically change in the coming years.

In a lucid and structurally compact narrative of about 120 pages, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya unfolds the history of the poem since its inception in the 1870s/1880s, bringing out the many contestations that developed around it, most recently in the 1990s, when the U.P. government made its singing compulsory in its schools.

By the early twentieth century, mother symbolism had become culturally very popular; the poem 'Vande Mataram' itself was translated into all major Indian languages, the significant exception being Urdu. Generally speaking, the incidence or intensity of Muslim objections to the song was directly proportional to the increasing appeal it had for the Hindus. On the other hand, one must allow for the fact that Muslim leaders like M.A.Jinnah turned into uncompromising opponents only in the 1930s when the Muslim League had begun to emerge as a serious rival to the Congress. In any case, dissenting voices were heard from even among Muslims; Bhattacharya himself cites the case of Rezaul Karim, a Bengali Muslim who, even in the charged atmosphere of 1937 could show some empathy for the autonomy of an authorial voice, more so in the field of creative literature.

From about the 1930s, the League was more explicitly alleged that 'Vande Mataram' did not deserve the status of a national anthem as it was distinctly 'idolatrous' and positively anti-Muslim. Here the charge of 'idolatry' was with reference to the second half of the poem which Bankim had especially composed for *Anandamath* and added to an unpublished poem of about the same length written in the mid 1870s. The stanzas in question do refer to the ten armed goddess Durga and her other Puranic manifestations which when seen in the over dramatized context of the novel, are intimidating to Muslims. One wonders therefore, if other charges notwithstanding, Muslim reactions were not triggered off by the fact that over successive editions of *Anandamath*, Bankim's vicarious nationalism substituted the English by the Muslims as the enemy confronting the heroic 'Santans'. Critics like Tagore thus endorsed the view, then emerging within the Congress, that only the first two stanzas of the poem with their descriptive ardour for the benign and bountiful motherland ought to be retained for purposes of a national anthem. For the Congress itself, such accommodation was necessary especially given Nehru's newly launched Muslim mass-contact programme.

There is a third aspect to the controversy represented by the attitude of British officials. Suspicions about the 'seditious' tone of *Anandamath* were raised even in Bankim's lifetime and temporarily suspended only after Keshabchandra Sen, somewhat infamous for his strong sense of loyalty to the British, testified to the contrary. In the post-Swadeshi days however, the bureaucracy clearly played upon growing Hindu Muslim differences and renewed charges of the novel and the song being strong exhortations to violence and political extremism. Some like George A.Grierson and Valentine Chirol offered what now seem untenable theories about the song being a invocation to Kali, the goddess of 'death and destruction'. This is indeed ironical for, in the novel [Part I, Chapter 11], references to Kali are made with a view to compare the ravaged state of the Bengal countryside to a cremation ground where this terrible goddess is said to reside.

Limitations of space do not permit me to put all my thoughts in print but let me at least draw the reader's attention to the subtle twist that Bankim himself gives to the song. In the 1875[?] version, there is a line which reads '*ke bale ma tumi abale*' [in Aurobindo's English rendering, 'who sayeth to thee Mother that thou art weak']. In1881, however, there is also the line '*bahute tumi ma sakti*' [in the arm, thou art might Mother]—a very different conception indeed. In the first case, the Mother is not only oblivious of her strength but seems to draw it from her 70 million children inhabiting undivided Bengal; in the other, the Mother alone is the source of all vigour and strength. One wonders what significations Bankim wished to indicate by this interesting change of conception; on a more jocular vein it might even be said that by the 1880s, the Mother had after all given up on her effeminate Bengali children!

I also remain somewhat unconvinced by the argument that the 'sense of anguish of a small alienated middle class' could be most effectively articulated by mother–symbolism [Partha Chatterjee quoted by Bhattacharya, p.79] unless of course one sees the poem purely from the perspective of a provincial nationalism. If the latter were true, it makes sense to give greater credence to the specificities of Bengali religious idioms and imagery. No less a scholar than Partha Chaterjee warned me once against associating Bankimchandra with Sakta theology. In Bankim's case, religious symbolism, whether of the Vaishnav variety or Sakta, did not have much theological import behind them and speaking of culture and power as he did, *sakti* was not necessarily tantamount to the religion of Saktaism. After all, the young men of the Anusilan Samiti who swore to political terrorism before an icon of the goddess Kali were not necessarily Saktas.

All the same, I have reason to believe that Bankim was not entirely unaware of Sakta metaphysics as would be borne out by his leaning towards the philosophical dualism of Samkhya wherein energizing *Prakriti* is also the Creatrix, the Mother. Note also that the very term 'Santan'[children, and connoting child's love for the mother] is typically Sakta; the Vaishnavs in fact used its very opposite—'Batsalya' , which denotes parental love for children.

For a short, critical narrative on the history of the poem, Bhattacharya's work has virtually no rival. This also assures it a unique place in the relevant field. There is a 'Notes on Personalities' appended to the text that some would find very useful. Oddly though, they also seem to include claims that are contestable. I am not sure if Bankim's *Durgeshnandini* [1865] is the first Bengali novel [p.124] even though it was able to emulate the English novel-form quite successfully. Also, the title conferred on the poet Bharatchandra was 'Raigunakar' and not 'Rai'[p122] which happens to be his surname. Speaking of the 'Notes' again, the inclusion of the names of Valentine Chirol, Henry Cotton and G.A.Grierson would have been quite justifiable.■

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Malayalam Poetry 2003

E.V.Ramakrishnan

Sometime back I came across a news story in a Malayalam weekly about a village in Kerala that has more than a dozen practising poets. If we go by the publication of first volumes there is, again, no dearth of poets appearing in print. Though most of what is published in the name of poetry is eminently forgettable, the quest of and for poetry is very much alive in the volatile society of Kerala, once known for its radical politics. One does come across poems marked by boldness of idiom and a sense of purpose, capable of communicating the contradictions of our times. The poets of the 90s have made their presence felt collectively and also individually. Among the best younger poets of today I will definitely include P.P.Ramachandran (who won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry this year), Anwar Ali, T.P.Rajeevan, Anita Thampi, V.M.Girija, K.R.Tony, P.B. Hrishi-kesan, Veeran Kutty, Rafeeq Ahmad and S. Joseph. In the death of Geetha Hiranian we lost a promising poet last year. P.Raman (b.1972) captured the imagination of sensible readers with an acclaimed first volume called *Kanam*. K.A.Jayaseelan (b.1940) who has been publishing poetry for more than three decades came to be recognized as a poet of substance only in the second half of the 1990s when his collected *Poems* appeared. Jayaseelan and Raman also show that poetry has nothing to do with chronology or calendar years. Apart from those mentioned above, poets like C.H.Rajan, A.C. Srihari, Surab, Lopa, Madhu Alapa-dambu, Biju Kanhangad and Abdul Rasheed, most of whom are yet to publish their first volume, also merit attention.

In his preface to an anthology of the poets of the nineties, Attoor Ravi Varma, an eminent poet of the earlier generation, wrote: " These poets do not resort to empty versification. They do not trust moth-eaten values regarding individual, family, society, nation and tradition. There are no simple answers and consolations. These poems have not assimilated dreams, ideologies and theories. These poets have been deprived of their ear-rings and shields. Interro-gation, defiance, resistance, ambivalence characterize their rough and crude ways." The loss of earrings and shields is a state of vulner-ability and implies that the poets of today have moved away from the safety net of 'ideologies'. Poetry can never be ideologically neutral but it is not in this sense that Ravi Varma says that poets have moved out of 'ideologies'. In Kerala poets have always prided themselves in their role of being crusaders and public defenders of certain values. The best poets of the '90s are conscious of the shrinking space of social imagination. The decline of the communist movement and the gradual depoliticization of the younger generation have resulted in the devaluation of moral idealism that sustained a sense of values in society. These shared values that secularized social life, gave a sense of direction to society and made dialogue and dissent possible, have now given way to conspicuous consumption and blatant arro-gance of the rich and the powerful (who are no more apologetic about corruption). There is widespread cynicism about anything that involves intellectual, ethical and artistic rigour. The consequent crisis of values is reflected in the rise of communalism, crime against women, alcoholism and the spate of suicides cutting across classes and castes.

Against this background, the poet of the new millennium finds himself a helpless and lonely figure. The younger poets do not make false claims in the name of poetry. They are acutely aware of the diminished role of the poet in contemporary society. K.R. Tony who has a flair for satire talks of the anxiety of the marginalized individual in a poem called 'Andhaparvam' (The Blind Canto). Cornered by the world, the speaker of the poem says: "I have no place to hide/ Nor do I have the talent to reveal/ This in-between state is/ Neither living nor dying." Veerankutty, one of the finest talents in Malalyalam poetry today, communi-cates his sense of a pervasive malignancy in a poem called 'Aashupatri' (The Hospital). The poem reworks the modernist metaphor of the world as hospital to emphasize immobility and terminal stupor. The still waters of the lake, with its broken hip, lies rotten while the rain is unable to clean the blistering wounds of the earth. Water the great purifier and the source of life itself is unclean and polluted. The last line says: "The needle of the night stitches my eyes." In a poem titled 'Veedu' (Home), Veerankutty problematizes the very concept of belonging. Instead of choosing the space enclosed by walls as his home, he would rather cross the bound-ary of walls and choose the other side of the wall as his residence. This quest for open spaces also implies a desire to rename the world. The poem ends with the line: "I am going home." These are poems which understate their themes with poignancy and great economy of expres-sion.

T.P.Rajeevan's 'Kannaki' is another remark-able poem to have appeared in Malayalam in recent times. A translation of this poem has appeared in *The Little Magazine* (Vol 3 No 4). According to the Tamil classic, *Silappadikaram*, Kannaki's wrath destroyed the city of Madurai. She had plucked out and flung away her breasts in a moment of utter fury which blew up the palace of the king. This explosion of anger is missing in the woman in the poem who wakes up to discover her breasts missing. In a patriar-chal society a woman feels imprisoned in her body. The woman says: "I doubt every one./ There are knives now that can cut off enough pounds of flesh without shedding even a drop of blood, I know. Breasts are not meant for wise sayings./ A kiss, at the most a pinch with the nail or a bite with teeth./ The poet now sings about mother's lost breast, not about the blown-up erect towers./ Where are my breasts." The poem, however, fails to make a coherent statement about the violence of a male-dominated society which is primarily reflected in its aggressive gaze. Rajeevan's poem does not succeed in problematizing this visual culture. A less sensational idiom is what I have in mind when I say this. A poem like 'Locks: Some Problems' by Abdul Rasheed effortlessly finds such an idiom to speak of our insecure times using the metaphor of the lock: " Some say the times will come when the lock will be an assurance/ Some say the time is not far off when locks will become unnecessary/ Between them locks continue to survive."

All the poems I have mentioned above are written in free verse which has the rigour of prose and the rhythm of speech. Those who insist on metrical poetry have their followers, like all religious sects. But readers of Malayalam poetry have proved to be much more discerning than them. P.P. Ramachandran, the best known poet of the 90s, is a good craftsman whose poems walk on the tightrope between speech rhythms and metrical patterns. In a poem written a couple of years back titled 'Horn' he describes a musical instrument that is com-monly used in temple festivals. In the poem, the sound of the horn is transformed into the sound of a wounded beast, a victim which wails in the wilderness of the night. The poem is able to probe the disturbing interiors of an ethnic identity where what sustains also deprives. P. Raman, who seems to follow in Rama-chandran's footsteps, is yet to find his own content despite a sure feeling for form. His epigrammatic language and haiku-like vision can be felt in these lines on death: "Newspaper

comes to the verandah of the empty house too./ It has only obituary pages./ The world has become a press that prints newspapers with only obituary pages."

The women poets of the nineties have been able to grasp something which their predecessors only vaguely felt. To use the terminology of some of the western feminists, it has moved from a feminist phase to a female phase. Women poets like Anitha Thampy, V.M.Girija speak confidently of their everyday world. They know that demonizing the male will not free them from patriarchal structures. In Anitha's 'While Sweeping the Courtyard' the broomstick becomes a pen or a brush as the woman leaves marks on the sand of the courtyard. There is no desire to derive a moral or sublimate an emotion. In this discourse of poetry the micro-politics of everyday life is stated with no attempt to transcend its inherent baseness. This trend is visible in the best younger poets in general. However, Vijayalakshmi (b.1960) who is a well-known poet with several awards to her credit, would still adhere to an idiom of transcendence. Her recent collection of poems, *Andyapralobhanam* (The Last Temptation), while communicating the angst of a woman who cannot change things around her, repeatedly resorts to a tired idiom. 'The Arrow' is a poem that speaks of being an instrument in the scheme of things without one's own will or volition: "I do not know who is at the other end: a warrior, the branch of a tree, a bird or Maricha." The destructive passage of the arrow does not allow it to return to its own past. The diction of the poem carries the signature of tradition. But with Vijayalakshmi who has acknowledged the influence of poets like Balamani Amma on her work it is not spurious or second hand. In 'Sunflowers' she speaks of the wild sunflowers that quiver within her. They are of moon born, armed with crescent-teeth, anxious to strangle her. In 'Intimacy' she laments the loss of intimacy from contemporary relationships. Like the dry river, scorched earth and starless sky life has lost its sense of intimacy. In poems like 'Sriravanan' and 'Andyapralobhanam,' the discourse of poetry becomes "epical" and to that extent, monologic. Vijayalakshmi's considerable achievement in the earlier volumes should have allowed her to examine more complex themes.

To read S.Joseph's *Meenkaran* (One Who Sells Fish), after Vijayalakshmi, can be a refreshing experience. Joseph hardly uses any word of Sanskrit origin. He has no use for elaborate metaphors or startling images. His 'Sister's Bible' is characteristic of his resolve to keep off from worn-out poetical language: "The things in sister's Bible:/ The ration card with its pages coming off/ Loan application form/ Money lender's card/ Announcements of local festivals/ Brother's son's photograph/ Directions on how to make a baby-cap/A one hundred rupee note/ School Leaving Certificate./ The things that are missing in sister's Bible:/ Prologue/ Old Testament, New Testament/ Maps/ Red outer cover." This raw sensibility strikes you as original and contemporary. Joseph knows what he is doing in his poetry. The first poem in his new volume is titled 'A Letter to Malayalam Poetry'. Here a rag-picker addresses Malayalam poetry and says: "I know your people/ People like big mansions/ They locked you up in squares and circles/ You saw the world through a hole/ You knocked against home appliances and fell down/ I can't forget that smile of yours / Sitting in the car/ Decked in clothes and cheer/ On your way to temple." No one has described the elitist bias of Malayalam poetry better. It is yet to liberate itself from its predilection for 'high-voltage' rhetoric and false pieties. Poems like 'Basket', 'Place' and 'Poems from Coastal Area' are indicative of a new aesthetic that emphasizes spatial and historical location of language and experience. It is not that this is the first time an attempt has been made to radicalize Malayalam poetic idiom. From Ezhutachan who is considered the 'father' of Malayalam poetry to Kumaran the eminent radical poet of the last century there have been several attempts to democratize the content and form of Malayalam poetry. Joseph internalizes the achievement of these radical traditions to liberate himself from false models. In recent times, poets like Sachidanandan, K.G.Sankara Pillai and Attoor Ravivarma have made their separate contributions to this secular-spriritual tradition that looks for an inclusive vision of man. The stark idiom of Joseph has the signature of a poet who is sure of himself and can interpret the tradition of Malayalam poetry from his own standpoint. In 'Chandalan' he speaks of an outcaste who is consigned to a place outside the village as "the walking anthill of a man". He is no Valmiki but a dalit with a sunburnt body and a wound in the leg. In 'An Encounter' an old man of the village tells the poet: "Your ancestors were our slaves." Joseph returns words to their concrete, objective settings recovering their history and revealing their ideological content. Joseph is indeed the bright face of Malayalam poetry of 2003.■

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Kalidasa Redeemed

K. Satchidanandan

UJJAYINI (Fiction-Poem)
By O.N.V. Kurup.Translated from Malayalam by A.J. Thomas.
Rupa, New Delhi, 2003, pp. xvii + 152, Rs.250.00

O.N.V. Kurup is easily one of the best lyric poets writing in Malayalam today. He belongs to the last generation of romantic poets whose lyricism while being organically related to Kerala's oral poetry is tempered with the close study of classical writers like Kalidasa, and a vein of progressive realism characteristic of the transitional writers in Kerala – those who appeared in the afterglow of the romantic (*kalpanik* to be tradition-specific) poetry before the rise of modernism. Poets like Vailoppilly Sreedhara Menon, Idassery Govindan Nair, N.V. Krishna Variyar, Olappamanna, Akkitham and M. Govindan were chiefly responsible for this gradual transition from the romantic to the realist mode that paved the way for the more urbane modernist mode as in N.N. Kakkad and Ayyappa Paniker, the pioneers of the new mode in Malayalam. Poets like O.N.V., P. Bhaskaran and Vayalar Rama Varma never gave up their lyrical moorings that defined their mode of articulation even of the harsher realities of the post-independence years even while some of their contemporaries struggled hard to invent, new, non-lyrical, at times even anti-poetic, expressive strategies to voice their angst, solitude and despair of the new life in urban India. They had a narrative vein too in their poetry that they put to radical uses to tell the tales of the marginalized or to create allegories of social revolution.

O.N.V. Kurup's *Ujjayini* – a long narrative poem, a 'fiction poem' as the poet would like to call it, that has been admired and condemned with equal vehemence in Kerala, is an attempt to recreate the life of Kalidasa from his works, a task as difficult as writing a biography of Shakespeare based on his plays. (Sonnets are a different case) To attempt such a narrative, the narrator has first to turn Kalidasa into a romantic poet whose poetry is basically self-expression, though in distanced and oblique ways. While this may well be a misreading of a classical poet – the principle of whose poetry is concealing rather than revealing the self – one cannot question the poet's freedom to read Kalidasa's autobiography in some of his works and passages. The subtitle of the English translation of *Ujjayini* – 'a fiction poem' – is perhaps also meant to further legitimize such a reading, an admission that it is just fiction and need not be (mis)taken for history. Once this illusion is recognized, the reader needs to bother only about the inner logic of the narrative and its aesthetic impact, not about the probable distortions of reality that make such a narrative possible.

Ujjayini in the poem, according to the poet's own understanding as stated in the preface to the original text, symbolizes of the basic features of power as it exists even today. Kalidasa represents the anguish and the dilemma of any poet destined to have a love-hate relationship with that power. O.N.V. refuses to believe that Kalidasa was a mere sycophant of the king, a lifeless jewel that illumined the seat of power. He could not have been that sensuous lecher of the legend; it was probably Kalidasa's refusal to be a feather in the crown that prompted the court to spread such spicy gossip that even speak of Kalidasa's death in a courtesan's house. Kalidasa's heroines like Malavika of *Malavikagnimitram* and the Yaksha's bride in *Meghdootam* seem to the poet to emerge from the real life of Kalidasa. He does not claim his discoveries to be the outcome of research, but they are the products of an uneasy imagination's visits to Kalidasa's world. It is "the truth that the heart perceives when history is shrouded in darkness."

From the beginning the poet seems to want to save Kalidasa from two accusations against him as a time-server and a fickle lover of many women from the queen herself to the courtesan of Srilanka. Kalidasa is portrayed as a poet who has doubts about the honours he receives from the King; the King dislikes him as Kalidasa does not seem to care for him and sends him to Ramagiri apparently to leave him in the blissful company of nature that would inspire him, not because of jealousy as the legends would have it. The first charge is thus dismissed. As for the second, the poet portrays him as an ideal lover, ever loyal to his beloved Malavika, a village girl fascinated by the magic of his verse. She comes from a lower tribe of troubadours. The triangle is complete with the King as the villain, who enriches his harem with this rustic beauty. Kalidasa can only sigh, 'Ujjayini has robbed me today of my jewel.' Kalidasa of *Ujjayini* is thus a reluctant rebel (there are no open conflicts), a disappointed lover deceived by his master and a popular poet who expresses his solitary self in his apparently classical poems. As the Malayalam proverb goes, we cannot question a story.

The original poem is rich in references to the texts of Kalidasa, like *Meghadootam*, *Raghuvansam* and *Malvikagnimitram* that almost define its texture; there are similes, metaphors and lines from Kalidasa that are smoothly interwoven with the poet's own lines and usages. Any reader with some acquaintance with the master's works can recognize those similes and metaphors in Malayalam; the first loss this poem has suffered in translation is precisely that of these quotations and allusions that contribute to the referential richness of *Ujjayini*. Even a relatively competent translator like A.J. Thomas feels helpless here. Shorn of these verbal suggestions and the native music of O.N.V.'s verse, the poem often reads like prose narrative. Translators of poetry know that while the image and thought are mostly translatable the music and suggestion, especially the intertextual one, are hard to carry over. If, in spite of this, the narrative has retained some of its convincing force, it is thanks to the translator's experience and skill.■

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Return of the Public Sphere

P.P. Raveendran

VIVEKASALIYAYA VAYANAKKARA
By K.P. Appan
DC Books, Kottayam, 2002, pp.154, Rs 60.00

ANTASSANNIVESAM
By Ayyappa Paniker
Kerala Bhasha Institute, Trivandrum, 2000, pp.156, Rs. 60.00

KATHAYUM PARISTITIYUM
By G. Madhusoodanan
Current Books, Trichur, 2000, pp.422, Rs 150.00

STREEVADAM
By J. Devika
DC Books, Kottayam, 2000, pp.157, Rs. 55.00

AALISINTE ADBHUTA ROGAM
By B. Ekbal
DC Books, Kottayam, 2002, pp. 90, Rs 45.00

SAMSKARAVUM DESEEYATAYUM
By K.N. Panikkar
Current Books, Trichur, 2002, pp. 224, Rs. 110.00

THANTETANGAL
Edited by Dileep Raj
DC Books, Kottayam, 2003, pp.124, Rs 60.00

Something interesting has been happening to the scene of literary criticism in Malayalam over the past two decades. The phenomenon of literature, which for a long time had been presented by the literary scholars in Malayalam as an autonomous domain of esoteric knowledge, started getting domesticated as part and parcel of local knowledge in the late eighties and the nineties of the last century. This began as an exercise in critical self-introspection in the early eighties among some of the writers who were aligned in an aesthetic sense with the modernists but who were nevertheless skeptical of modernism's political indifference. The trend got itself embroiled, at a later stage, with the debates on the relevance of post-modernism as a critical concept in the discussions of the evolution of contemporary Malayalam literature. Though the debates proved to be insubstantial in as much as they revolved around issues of nomenclature and failed to address themselves to the inherent dangers in the essentialist interpretations of literature, an interesting fall-out of the whole scenario has been the cultural turn that the literary critical sensibility has taken in the present period. There is a clear paradigm shift at work here, a shift of critical emphasis from the literary studies paradigm to the cultural studies paradigm. Gone are the days when literature used to be treated as a self-validating discourse whose formal and ethical merit received unproblematic approbation from the reading public. The serious Malayalee reader is awakening to the fact that literature as a discourse will now have to be re-situated within the general field of cultural production, even as he/she is aware that the knowledge literature produces cannot however be conflated with a universally valid cultural knowledge. The titles on literary criticism and cultural studies that are reviewed in these pages are, broadly speaking, pointers to this critical awakening. These titles have been chosen from the books published in the last two or three years with a view to giving the reader a representation of the multiplicity of voices that are articulated in the Malayalam critical scene today.

Of the titles under review, perhaps the most outmoded and fossilized approach to literature is contained in K.P. Appan's collection of critical essays, *Vivekasaliyaya Vayanakkara* (To the Discreet Reader). This has been included in this review primarily to suggest the dominant critical mode that the theoretically informed critic of today is steering clear of. Appan is a confirmed celebrity in Malayalam, one of the few critics in the language who, over the past three decades or so, has steadily remained popular among his fairly serious-minded readership. An able and early interpreter of the modernist sensibility in Malayalam literature, he has established a reputation for himself as a critic well versed in the developments taking place in the world of letters across the globe. His approach to literature however is rather narrow. Literature for him implies the highest achievement of man's aesthetic and moral merit, a culturally limited corpus of the best that has been known and thought by humankind. He is against any form of the political interpretation of literature. If one were to define the outer limits of his theory of literature, one may not go beyond a few furlongs down a hermetically sealed, historically blind alley. This is a legacy that has stayed with him right from his modernist days, in spite of his conscious efforts to renovate his sensibility since the departure of modernism.

The above characteristics of the critical personality of Appan can be seen in full play in the essays included in *Vivekasaliyaya Vayanakkara*. The book deals with a number of topics that appear to situate themselves beyond the conventional domain of literary criticism. These include questions concerning the role and function of the intelligentsia in the present-day world and the various literary disputes sustained by what can be called their combat value. But in dealing with these topics Appan does not seem to have been guided by new epistemologies as he claims in the prefatory essay. In fact his contention that the pivot of the new aesthetic succeeding modernism lies in the visual experience is merely an extension of his own modernist position and does not constitute, contrary to what he imagines, any sort of radical epistemological break. A fleeting look at the way he analyses the function of the intellectuals in the contemporary world in Part One of the book will bear this out. Though he uses Gramscian terminology in exploring this question, his avowed distrust of the political interpretation of culture drains such Gramscian categories as "civil society," "political society" and the "intellectual" of its conceptual content. This is true of the essays included in the other parts of the book. Look at the way he interprets, in response to a question put to him by Sukumar Azhikode, the political turn of contemporary literary criticism in the last section of the book. Instead of looking upon the current tendency to focus on the politics of writing by placing it in its larger theoretical context, he is inclined to read it narrowly as an indication of the depletion of the critic's interest in literature's aesthetic denseness. Indeed the author revels in inanities and superficialities in elaborating his positions, which are truly non-positions. In short, *Vivekasaliyaya Vayanakkara,* though representative of a dominant approach in present-day Malayalam criticism, is a book that attempts to retrace the steps along the cultural and political road that literary criticism has taken in the recent past as a result of the theoretical awakening mentioned earlier.

Three representative titles of the year 2000, however, emphatically mark the direction, or the multiple directions, toward which the awakening has been headed. These are Ayyappa Paniker's *Antassannivesam* (Ingrafting), G. Madhusoodanan's *Kathayum Paristhitiyum* (The Story and the Environment) and J. Devika's *Streevadam* (Feminism). What Paniker does in *Antassannivesam* is to read selected texts from Malayalam literature using the theory of literary production that he has formulated by ingeniously blending the principles of classical

Indian aesthetics with certain concepts derived, apparently, from the western theory of art. The book is a sequel to his earlier analysis of Indian poetics, *Indian Sahitya Siddhantam: Prasaktiyum Saddhyatayum* (Indian Literary Theory: Its Relevance and Possibilities). What Paniker means by *antassannivesam*, a term that critic Krishna Rayan translates as "ingrafting," is the subtle manner in which a word, an image or a whole text fuses with another word, image or text in a given context. The qualities of refinement and penetration involved in the fusion might allow one to distinguish *antassannivesam* from *upari-sannivesam*, or "ongrafting," in which words, images and texts are only superficially connected. Though Krishna Rayan in his epilogue to the book relates the concepts of ingrafting/ongrafting to Jakobson's conceptual pair of metaphor and metonymy and Derrida's ideas on grafting in *La Dissemination*, what Paniker actually does in the book as a whole is to provide a theory of intertextuality and multi-voicedness as it operates in literary works. The works analysed include, apart from Ezhuthachan's *Adhyatma Ramayanam* that forms the basic illustrative text, works by Unnayi Varier, C.V. Raman Pillai, Karoor Neelakanta Pillai, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Balamani Amma, Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, C.J. Thomas, C.N. Sreekantan Nair, and G. Sankara Pillai. Though Ayyappa Paniker's method could be criticized for being a little too formalistic in orientation, his book is representative of a tradition in Malayalam criticism today that endeavours to re-invent, with no revivalist craving, indigenous critical practices.

G. Madhusoodanan's study in environmental criticism, *Kathayum Paristhitiyum*, is a pioneering work in many respects. Though there have been sporadic attempts to introduce eco-aesthetics and eco-criticism to Malayalee readers previously, this is the first time that a comprehensive review of a whole genre of literature has been made from the point of view of environmentalism. What the author does in this work is to study selected short stories in Malayalam that are marked for their ecological content – numbering a little more than four hundred – in the light of the principles of eco-aesthetics. Most of the short stories that Madhusoodanan analyses date from the late modernist and post-modernist phases of Malayalam literature. Obviously, the anxieties about the cultural encroachment of consumerism and the impact of environmental destruction on the social, emotional and spiritual make-up of the individual loom large in these works. They re-enact what the author calls a "re-enchantment" of literature with life and nature, after the long period of disenchantment during the era of modernism.

Though Madhusoodanan's deep commitment to the problem that he studies comes through every page of his book, while going through it one gets the uneasy feeling that perhaps the author is a little too passionately involved in his work. One would also wish him to be a little more selective and discriminative. A closer analysis of a smaller, but representative, selection of short stories would have made this book more valuable. And the exclusive focus on the thematic content of the stories has limited its potential. Eco-aesthetics certainly implies a content, but it also implies a formal perspective that allows the critic to see things that conventional critics often overlook. Only such a perspective would make environmental criticism truly meaningful as a radical, alternative critical method that can work outside the literary studies paradigm.

J. Devika's *Streevadam* is a welcome addition to the steadily increasing body of feminist scholarship in Malayalam. Written as part of a series of introductory monographs on contemporary theory, this book is marked by the clarity of its presentation and its comprehensiveness. The writer has done a good job of summarizing the major arguments in the feminism debate in the three chapters comprising the book. The first chapter provides an overview of the general ideas and positions associated with western feminism, especially those that arose as part of the "first-wave" and "second- wave" feminism in the twentieth century. The second chapter is a recapitulation of the Marxist and psychological approaches to feminism and the third reviews the other, more recent feminist trends. The reader approaching feminism from a purely literary or literary critical angle—it is possible that a good number of literate Malayalees have their first encounter with theoretical feminism through discussions of creative literature by women writers—would find the analysis of the language question in this book inadequate. Though the author devotes considerable space for the analysis of the language issue in relation to psychoanalytic feminism in the second chapter, that is not likely to satisfy the "litero-feminist." But then this is a book on women's studies that does not have, unlike several other introductions to feminism available in Malayalam, an exclusively literary thrust, and that makes for its distinctiveness. What this shows again is the paradigm shift noted earlier, the cultural studies paradigm enriching itself with insights and knowledge derived from new areas of cultural production. It is noteworthy that no interpretation of individual literary works done today, even those undertaken in the literary studies paradigm, can proceed by totally ignoring the new developments.

The three books examined in the rest of this review further illustrate the diverse directions in which the critical sensibility has moved along the culturalist road: B. Ekbal's *Aalisinte Adbhuta Rogam* (The Strange Disease of Alice), K.N. Panikkar's *Samskaravum Deseeyatayum* (Culture and Nationalism) and Dileep Raj's edited volume, *Tantetangal* (Audacities/ One's Own Places). Ekbal's *Aalisinte Adbhuta Rogam* is a unique work that discusses the relation between literature and medicine, or rather between literature and disease. Critics like Susan Sontag have written on the metaphorical dimension of diseases described in literary works, like, for example, in the poems of Baudelaire and Eliot or in the novels of Joyce, Camus and Solzhenitsyn.

Using the metaphor of disease to talk about a society's decrepit state is a standard practice among creative writers. This, however, is not how Ekbal, a neurologist by training, relates medicine to literature. His reading of the works by writers like Lewis Carroll, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Arthur Conan Doyle has allowed him to see that the emotional, ethical and psychological aspects of diseases are handled better by creative writers than by medical doctors. In fact medical doctors can derive a lot of insight from reading creative works that deal with diseases. *Aalisinte Adbhuta Rogam* is a compendium of such insights derived from the author's reading of six writers: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Arthur Conan Doyle, Lewis Carroll, Marquez and Chekhov. Though conventional literary critics may not take kindly to this medical reading of literature, a cultural studies specialist will look upon this as providing proof for his/her contention that it may not be easy either to define with certainty the object of literature or to establish the distinction between the literary and the non-literary.

Ekbal's book renders problematic the organic theory of art wherein the art object owes its existence to autonomous textual structures that are independent of our reading of it. No Malayalee reader henceforth will be able to read *Alice in Wonderland* without reminding himself/herself that the visual fantasies of Alice are to be linked to metamorphopsia, one of the several symptoms of the brain disorder that medical experts describe as the "Alice in Wonderland Syndrome." Ayyappa Paniker in his preface to the book describes Ekbal's enterprise as a pioneering contribution to what he calls "medico-literary criticism." Perhaps one could also describe *Aalisinte Adbhuta Rogam* as a work that reminds the reader of the absurdity of using such labels at all.

K.N. Panikkar's *Samskaravum Deseeyatayum* in not a book written originally in Malayalam. It is a translated collection of essays on culture and nationalism selected from well-known historians' essays in English. The basic objective of the book is an exploration of the construction of subjectivity in postcolonial India. This is done by analysing the changes that have taken place in the colonial and postcolonial times in the realm of such social practices and institutions as religion, caste, family, marriage and literature. A casual survey of the "contents" page of Panikkar's book would let us know why the publishers have thought of bringing out these essays in translation for the Malayalee reader. This is because concepts like culture, ideology, hegemony, subjection, nationalism, modernity, domination and globalization are of

great relevance to the intellectual debate taking place in Kerala today. It may not be out of place here to suggest that Kerala is at the moment going through a severe crisis of confidence that gets reflected in the tone and tenor of the public debates there. The left of various hues which has always led these debates seems to be engaged in a fresh inquiry into the nature of the subjectivity—or subjectivities—that has emerged from the modernity project. The people of the state are facing threats from various quarters—from the forces of globalization and consumerism externally and from a sort of apolitical cynicism internally.

The embarrassment of the traditional left when asked to explain the influence of caste in social life is perhaps linked to modernity's evasion of the caste question. The return of several obscurantist practices that were once expelled from public life, the increasing assaults on the secular fabric of the society and the general climate of cultural revivalism are matters that warrant close, critical examination. It is here that the theoretical interventions of social scientists like K.N. Panikkar become meaningful. In the essays collected here Panikkar explores the network of culture, hegemony and ideology that gave birth to the postcolonial subject in Kerala by examining such institutions as marriage reform, indigenous medicine and literary taste. Perhaps it is the urgency and immediacy of the ideas broached in these essays that make them relevant for the present-day Kerala context.

A casual comparison of the way in which Panikkar discusses the intellectual question in the first essay in this book with Appan's delineation of the same question in *his* book will permit us to elaborate further on the paradigm shift alluded to in this review. The shift certainly is, as suggested earlier, political, but it is also one determined by the composition of the addressee audience. While Appan is addressing a captive fan following, Panikkar seems to be participating in a debate initiated by a newly emerging public sphere.

The last book reviewed here—a volume of essays, documents and short notes compiled by Dileep Raj—provides further evidence of this emerging public sphere. "Tantetangal" in Malayalam is the plural form of "tantetam" which literally means both "one's own place" and "audacity." "Tantetam" is the confidence one has in claiming one's place as one's own, its slight gender bias notwithstanding. The word is particularly appropriate as title for this volume of writings that articulate the positions of writers and intellectuals on the tribal question in the wake, especi lly of the recent incident at Muthanga in the district of Wynad, where attempts to reclaim alienated land by the tribals were thwarted by the state administration. The Muthanga incident had received national and international attention not only because it was widely perceived as an agitation for the right to live by an underdeveloped segment of the Kerala society that generally and complacently took shelter under the false pride that its model of social development had brought about a degree of equitable progress in all spheres of public life, and also because the agitation was spearheaded by the Adivasi Gotra Mahasabha (AGM) which had thrown up from among its own ranks, perhaps for the first time in the history of the tribal movement, a charismatic woman leader of calibre in C.K. Janu. Though the police excesses at Muthanga had received blanket condemnation from all sections of society, the decision of the AGM to forcibly occupy the forest land was initially criticized by a section of the intelligentsia for legal and ecological reasons. It may be pointless, at this late stage, to scrutinize the AGM decision for its technical correctness. But what is more important is the issue of identity politics that the Muthanga incident has brought to the limelight. Dileep Raj's book, a place where writers, academics and social activists including Kamala Suraiyya, Arundhati Roy and Paul Zecharia meet, would remind one of the need to rethink the stereotypical representations of the tribals that are in circulation in various sectors of the society. The question is whether the dominant culture is prepared to grant subjecthood to the adivasis. Though some of the writers included in this volume respond to the issue from a quasi-romantic perspective, there are also serious attempts, like the essays by M. Kunhaman and C.S. Venkiteswaran, to come to grips with the politics of the adivasi identity from fresh perspectives.

It is often pointed out that Kerala had, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a culture of critical, public debate – referred to as the "public sphere," in the sense in which social theorist Jurgen Habermas uses it – that got thinner over the years due to various socio-political reasons till it finally collapsed a few years after Independence. The social factors that caused the collapse of the public sphere are here almost to stay, what with the consolidation and re-consolidation of these factors in new forms in the age of globalization. Yet there seems to be room for hope, if the books reviewed above are any indication. There are signs of a return of the public sphere, not perhaps in the shape in which it emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century, but also, certainly, not as farce. There is a churning process on in the domain of public culture in Kerala that involves, to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault, an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges." Most of the books reviewed here are pointers to this churning process.■

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In A Very Modern Idiom

R. E. Asher

I CAN'T HELP BLOSSOMING
By Ayyappa Paniker
Current Books, Kottayam, 2002, pp. 187, Rs. 175.00

How does one read a book of poetry in translation? Does one expect the translator to have given as much attention to form as to substance? Can one suppose that the poetic qualities of the original have been transferred to the reworking? May one hope that the author's attentions when he put pen to paper can be detected? Should the reader, in fact, be all the time conscious of the fact that he is seeing the direct effect of what it was that inspired the poet?

With *I Can't Help Blossoming* such questions do not really arise. One can put forward at least two reasons for this. There is firstly the fact of the author's bilingualism and his familiarity with the English-language poetic tradition, combined with the fact that some of the translations are his own. Where they are not, we can take it that the English versions of his poems have the author's approval. More than this, without reading the name at the end of a poem it is not possible to tell that five different hands have been at work. It is true that a variety of styles is evident in the book, but this has to do with a poem's theme and its treatment, not with the identity of the translator. We can only speculate on how this has been achieved. The poet's voice in Malayalam may be so powerful as to force a sensitive translator in a certain direction. The translators other than the author may be solidly in tune with the thrust of the source. Or did the author have the final say on how his poems should appear in the target language? Perhaps the published outcome involved all of these.

The second reason for turning aside from the questions with which this essay opens – not necessarily divorced from the first – lies in the poetic qualities of the translations. The poems can be read and enjoyed as original creations in English. A reader unacquainted with the fact that he is not reading the poet's first creation would have no cause to suspect this.

Having thus turned away from such questions, one finds oneself facing issues of a different, more substantive kind, such as the source of the aesthetic pleasure one experiences in reading these poems. There are, to take what must to many readers be a central characteristic, frequent striking images, of which the following form a random set:

... an expression like the moonlight
sliver of a soft
smile ...
Aarati, p. 29

... the delicate fragrance of truth.
Life transformed, p. 56

The breeze also holds its breath, ...
Ibid.

..., like a field
ploughed over by a hopeless despair
Holiday whispers: the Rahu phase, p. 71

... the petal
of the remembrance of your gentle touch
Holiday whispers: the Jupiter phase, p. 77

I light a wick of golden thread,
of moonlight thread,
in my darkening eyes,
On my death-bed, waiting for you, p. 106

... the sad notes of your life
flowing like a sorrowing rivulet
The lay of the anklet, p. 160

The unblossoming tree
in the winding embrace of the creeper
wept for the absent flower.
Whose pain?, p. 174

Ayyappa Paniker displays a particular ability to see familiar things from a new and original viewpoint. the very beginning of the book is a bold examination of an utterance that still has the power to move us when we hear or read it: 'a light has gone out of our life.' Another short poem gives a brilliant new take on the phenomenon of Alice going through the looking glass. No one could read 'The boy stood on the burning deck' again in the same way after reading Paniker's version of *Casabianca* (p. 36).

By composing poetry that is very much in the modern idiom, Paniker makes us ask ourselves what we understand by poetic diction. He uses not only such contractions as 'hasn't' and 'doesn't' but also an occasional 'O.K.', and even 'bloody nuisance' without giving the reader any sense of inappropriateness. By contrast, one can detect echoes of Shakespeare ('sans other devotees'; p. 81) or Keats ('weary and woebegone'; p. 77).

Though it is not a requirement of poetry that it contains instances of humour, no one who knows this poet will be surprised to find such touches in his verses. That he does not wish to be seen as uninterruptedly serious and solemn is shown when, towards the end of *Nest*, he writes 'after writing that mush' (p. 99). Lack of solemnity, however, is not equivalent to comedy. This is found in single telling phrases, such as 'some Banerji or Mukherji or Allergy' (*Kolkata – Thiruvananthapuram*, p. 87), or in more sustained satirical pieces such as the portrait of a politician in *Stephen Spender*, or the not-so-loving son in *Ready-made ashes*.

Let us ask another question: Is a collection of unrelated poems a book? Surely, one might say, each individual poem was conceived and written as an isolated unit. It may be no more than a publishing convenience that these fifty-three titles find themselves in a single sequence. One could claim that there is support for this in the extraordinary variety of the book's content. There are poems about the human condition in general, about relations between the sexes, about childhood, about nature. There are poems with stories of the Hindu pantheon as their setting. There are poems in prose. The range of moods is enormous, as is that of styles – for the style matches the mood. Paniker can even make a poem out of bad English, as in that of the beggar youth in *Khajuraho*. Yet somehow the collection holds together. Partly this has to do with the subtle repetition of subthemes, such as the opening one of light – and the lack of it: 'her body was/ lighted up by the glow of heaven' (p. 18), 'A white, white sky' (pp. 20 & 28), 'turn the day into night' (p. 34), 'double-tongued darkness' (p. 46), 'house-warming moonlight' (p. 71), 'the eyes whose light is put out by nights' (p. 76), 'the only light' (p. 78), 'the darkness thickens' (p. 100), 'The day is a prison for the night' (p. 163). More important, it may be, is the paradox that the very variation is a unifying factor: the poet's personality is of a sort that cannot be painted in a simple monotone.

Much of the above miscellany of comments could almost certainly not be applied unmodified to the poet's Malayalam compositions, for they have been made while ignoring the source text. The quality of the translation makes it possible to do this. Occasionally, nevertheless, the reader may find himself asking how a given effect might have been produced in the original. As one of the less profound examples, there is the boy (in *Retrospective effect*, p. 115) who was called Dummy because 'I'm darling to my mummy'. It is something more than this, however, that makes a reader who knows Malayalam as well as English wish to read the full set of poems in their final form – and something more, too, than a wish to double the pleasure one has experienced.

Paniker is right to remind us that poetry is for reading rather than for being talked or written about, when he asks the reader to speak to him,

... before the critic turns up
to disgorge his stupidity,'
The death anniversary, p. 146

Reading, indeed, is very much where the pleasure lies, for here without doubt is a poet who, like the golden cassia in the Vishu season, can't help blossoming.■

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Of A Near Extinct Genre

Swapan Chakravorty

UTTAMPURUSH EKBACHAN: EKTI BHAN
By Sibaji Bandyopadhyay
Disha Sahitya, Kolkata, 2002, Rs. 30.00

Uttampurush ekbachan: ekti bhan declares its generic lineage in its title: it is a monologue, drawing on the almost extinct theatrical convention of the *bhan*. The speaker remains nameless in the speech-prefixes and the title credits his lines to a grammatical cipher: *uttampurush ekbachan*, that is, first person, singular number. The action is a sequence of quick-change tricks from the nameless to the named, from side-text to text. It is trapped within such shifts, even as the speaker seems betrayed by his own verbal excess. The giddy spiral of verbal quibbles, the neurotic lurches from one register to another or from torrential prose to alliterative mayhem in verse, hardly offer a way out. However, this verbal surplus remain intractable within an 'action' in league with the settled laws of dramatic narrative. The speaker stays trapped, his redemptive 'action' is aborted, but the vital incontinence of his speech ensures that the radical promise of language as much as an alternative ideology of 'action' are never entirely closed.

The play imagines the relationship between dramatic utterance and action—and one rarely has the pleasure of saying this in a review—in a genuinely radical way, 'radical' in that it seems to make the relationship itself its historical problem and theme. In a terse preamble the playwright tells us that he, although a mere scribe reporting what others say, has had to live with this driven dealer in words for a number of years, but such knowing winks at the reader, as also the praise of anger and angst in a few unseasoned verse lines, are at best a pardonable bit of self-indulgence. The audience, who will be spared the preface, may justifiably feel that this monologue has no more business with the identity of the speaking subject than its nameless first person has with the proper name that eventually fixes him as a 'character', that the monologue is not so much about the singularity of the speaker's self than about the copia of speech itself. The speaker is singular, although much is said and with many voices: a pronoun cares little for credibility of motivation or consistency of register.

The *Mahabharata* denies Asvatthama his triumph and wildfire justice, but preserves him almost as a presage of its own endless re-writing. Bandyopadhyay's play strains such possibilities to a challenging limit, looks to redeem desire by the creative imperatives of language, even as it tells us the bleak story of how all such challenges are pre-empted and contained by the rules of narrative they seek to re-write.

All this is not to say that the play is without interlocutor or narrative: far from it. The speaker begins with a bantering mimicry of his uncle's chronic garrulity, gets incensed at the audience's suggestion that he too is in love with his own voice, and rues the decay of verbal coherence, of the pith and moment of epic discourse, and of the alliance of speech and wisdom. The high unison of the epic is invoked at a crucial juncture. For somewhere in the career of this tumbling cascade of words, we learn that he has been walking the earth for centuries, a witness to the cultural slide that has debased the sombre classical idiom into the vulgar syncretism of vernaculars. Doomed to eternal life and a disfiguring disease that keeps him on the tenuous brink of polite society, he is also the vengeful trace of myth that lay in wait for history, the skewed memory that connects the mythical Aryavarta to the 'historical' Bharat.

Further on, the speaker sheds the protean alias of the nameless first-person. We recognize him as Asvatthama of the Mahabharata, the son of the poor brahman who taught the princes the arts of war, and who perished on the treacherous edge of a paltering sleight. The weapon of equivocation was marshalled by Yudhisthira, supposed to incarnate the union of language and truth, and sanctioned by Krishna, the god who projected the carnage of Kurukshetra as collateral damage in a dubious scheme of political and ethical reparation. Krishna and Kripacharya, the latter being the speaker's loquacious uncle who had also coached the princes in the arts of combat, emerge as the protagonist's principal interlocutors. The play is a sustained argument with Krishna's providential plan and Kripacharya's faith in organic historical evolution. Krishna's design for human history is trumped, and Kripa's avuncular caution against rash moves mocked, by the contagion that the cursed Asvatthama spreads through the already plagued nations and communities of what was once Bharatvarsha. Asvatthama exists as an

The play imagines the relationship between dramatic utterance and action—and one rarely has the pleasure of saying this in a review—in a genuinely radical way, 'radical' in that it seems to make the relationship itself its historical problem and theme.

aberration in the authorized text, an unassimilated marker of inescapable excess, a supplement that threatens to dismember the epic narrative he is meant to complete. At the same time, he stalks the unfolding and unfinished plot played out on the Indian political stage, deriding its ethical pretence and thwarting its ideological claims.

The scheme has room enough for a swarm of issues that the monologue deftly gathers in its verbal surge—caste injustice, state violence, gender oppression. Most effectively, it enagages with the rhetoric of tolerance and dispassion that in our country has proved to be oddly concordant with the politics of slaughter. Asvatthama's monologue may hence be read as a dispute with the *Bhagavad Gita*. It pits the rationale of desire against the logic of detachment, and celebrates the disquiet of the creative and the anarchic against the injunctions of order. Asvatthama haunts the land as a forlorn reminder of the aborted possibility of an insurgent discourse. That possiblity expresses itself not in any tidy ideological blueprint, but in the play's linguistic abundance, its capacious allusions, and—what is hardest to convey in a review—its irrepressible sense of theatrical fun. There is, however, no exit for the speaker, cursed immortal that he is, and he lives on as the soiled promise of a swift redemption. The monologue slews inevitably towards a stirring report of that one attempt at radical redress, Asvatthama's raid on the Pandava camp in the dead of night, an expedition in which his uncle had been a reluctanct accomplice. Kripa later finds employment as the tutor of Parikshit, the Pandava scion who had survived the nocturnal onslaught, then secure in his mother's womb. The *Mahabharata* denies Asvatthama his triumph and wildfire justice, but preserves him almost as a presage of its own endless re-writing. Bandyopadhyay's play strains such possibilities to a challenging limit, looks to redeem desire by the creative imperatives of language, even as it tells us the bleak story of how all such challenges are pre-empted and contained by the rules of narrative they seek to re-write.■

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Textured Social History

Jayanta Sengupta

JAAL RAJAR KATHA: BARDHAMANER PRATAPCHAND
(The Tale of the Fake King: Pratapchand of Burdwan)
By Gautam Bhadra
Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2002, pp. 244, Rs. 125.00

Are historians like judges? Following Carlo Ginzburg in his *The Judge and the Historian* (1999), one would be tempted to say yes, considering that both are in the business of weighing evidence, assessing their reliability, accepting some, dismissing some others, and trying to cut through their maze—indeed, through their frequently exasperating contrariness—to zero in on what might actually have happened. And yet, despite this apparent similarity—as Partha Chatterjee has recently reminded us in his tour de force, *A Princely Impostor? The Kumar of Bhawal and the Secret History of Indian Nationalism* (2002)—the historian has an essentially different task. S/he does not have to pronounce 'the truth', but has to 'historicize' not only the evidence but the judicial process itself, using the available knowledge of the history of the contemporary society (which, for instance, acts as the background of a particular case) 'to reconstruct the ways in which the judges would have reasoned in order to arrive at their decision'.

In his latest book, Gautam Bhadra, the noted historian belonging to the *Subaltern Studies* collective, attempts precisely this. His book examines one of the most celebrated cases in colonial Bengal's legal history—the case of *Jaal Pratapchand* ('the fake Pratapchand') who was tried in the Calcutta Supreme Court during 1837-9, for seemingly coming back from the dead and claiming to be the supposedly deceased Rajah of Burdwan. The return of the Rajah was not only a sensational event and created a huge stir in contemporary society, both among the British ruling class and among various sections of the Bengali bhadralok and subaltern groups. It also represented an important turning point in the history of colonial rule in India itself, especially by legitimizing specific practices of determining what constituted 'reliable evidence' in a court of law, and how that evidence could be weighed and used to establish the *identity* of a person 'beyond any reasonable degree of doubt'. This moment marked the beginning of a process of displacement, of indigenous practices of believing, remembering, and recollecting, by the 'scientific', 'enlightened' rationality of utilitarian philosophy. This displacement took place at various levels, marginalizing not only the indigenous logical philosophy of *nyaya* but also completely dismissing the customary weight that popular lore, hearsay and native wisdom had pulled in the traditional Indian judicial process. Bhadra deftly lays bare the contingent and contextual nature of the British 'Rule of Law', unravelling how the universalist-objectivist pretensions of legal methods (e.g., in the matter of weighing evidence) concealed cultural (and, sometimes, deeply racialist) constructions of witnesses as colonial subjects.

The case of *Jaal Pratapchand* had many elements of drama—the reverence in which the Rajah, false or otherwise, was held by the common people, widely circulating rumours of conspiracies within the Burdwan Raj family, the expectant wait during the long-drawn trial for an eventual verdict in favour of Pratapchand, the painstaking process of gathering and distinguishing between testimonies of different witnesses, as well as of the 'scientific' weighing of the evidence, public disappointment at the Rajah's defeat, and many others. Woven into the book is a parallel text—that of Sunjeeb Chunder Chatterjee's (Bankim Chandra's brother) *Jaal Pratapchand*—written originally in 1882, and used by Bhadra to unpack the story-within-a-story, in this case the Bengali bhadralok's coming-into-being in the second half of the nineteenth century as an aspiring creator of nationalist histories. Bhadra looks at the intertextuality of rationalist utilitarian legal discourses, contemporary Bengali elite narratives as well as subaltern perceptions of the trial, and later-day bhadralok nationalist histories, to weave together a richly textured social history of early- and mid-nineteenth-century Bengal where the contours of the ideology of colonial governance and of the nationalist imaginary were both getting increasingly sharply defined.

Jaal Pratapchand—written originally in 1882, and used by Bhadra to unpack the story-within-a-story, in this case the Bengali bhadralok's coming-into-being in the second half of the nineteenth century as an aspiring creator of nationalist histories.

However, at the end of the day, some doubts persist over the fact that the author could not trace the original court records pertaining to the case. For reconstructing the case and for getting into the textual grain of the testimonies, therefore, he had to resort to government compilations and serials like 'registers', as well as second-hand accounts by either colonial officials or the Bengali literati. It is beyond this reviewer's guess whether his sources contain substantial verbatim citations from the original court proceedings, and no explanation is given to this effect. In the absence of such an explanation, one is left to wonder – somewhat wistfully – whether this exercise of reading colonial texts on law and governance 'against their grain' would have been facilitated further by an access to the complete records of the case. One has to concede, though, that—even without this access—Bhadra remains quite masterly in his analysis of the many levels at which the 'facts' of the Pratapchand case was perceived and constructed, both in contemporary Bengal and in the later period of nationalist awakening.

One could also take issue with Bhadra's distinctive Bengali prose, trying to combine the style of the raconteur of a *kissa* with the analytical rigour of a historian of colonial discourses and popular mentalities. Extremely readable for the most part of the book, his language occasionally loses clarity in a maze of stylistic twists and turns—unstated hints and insinuations, unexplained proverbs, and the like. To give just one example, Bhadra lets us know that the father of Raja Rammohun Ray was 'the chief dewan and something more' (p. 72) for one of the Ranis of the Burdwan Raj household. No further elaboration is made. The sub-text of legend, hearsay and rumour—one of Bhadra's long-term research interests—thus makes a guest appearance in his narrative itself. However—truth be told—these are but small slips in an otherwise fascinating book, a welcome addition to an excellent series of monographs that is making first-rate academic history writing accessible to the Bengali-language reader.■

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Communication

Congratulations!

I didn't know *The Book Review* had launched its website till I saw the September issue. I see that the site is still evolving—looking different from last week.

All the best

T. Vijay Kumar

Measures of Verse

Aveek Sen

CHHANDER BHITORE ETO ANDHAKAR
By Sankha Ghosh
Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1999, Rs. 35.00

Some of Ghosh's poems, glimmering with singular images or human presences, also recall Tagore's late paintings, whose darkness, when studied closely, often reveals dense reticulations in ink – like a secret layer of inchoate writing around and beneath the human forms.

Such darkness within the metre. This is how the title of Sankha Ghosh's recent volume of poetry – *Chhander Bhitore Eto Andhakar* (1999) -might be translated into English. The play of assonance, and the swing of the nearly-repeated joint-consonants (chhanda, andha-) are, of course, lost in English. Also, Metre precedes Darkness in the Bengali title. But the translation reverses this order of things. Yet the title is perhaps the surest way into this book of 42 short, but intensely difficult poems, arranged in two sequences of 24 and 18.

This is poetry that meditates on and experiments with the measures of verse. These "measures" are first a set of metrical, stanzaic and generic devices and conventions. As technical and formal elements, they have been integral to the craft of Ghosh's poetry. His career, in its sixth decade now, cannot by any account be described as a flight from prosody towards "free verse". *Chhander Bhitore* is evidence of this continuing engagement with the limits and possibilities of metre. But just as crucially, the "measures of verse" are also other kinds of deeper and obscurely internalized limiting structures—aesthetic, social, erotic, political, intellectual and linguistic. They pattern, contain, constrain, and even threaten to suffocate the life and play of his verse. They constitute what the American poet, Wallace Stevens, would call "ideas of order".

The poems in this volume unfold through incessant experimentation with poetic forms, translating such "ideas of order" into patterns of sound and shapes on the page. But there is another movement within the sequence. In this, the perfected forms of the poems become spatial structures. They create their own architectures and archaeologies, carving out rooms and houses, corridors and verandahs, shrines, churches, domes, *maths* and caverns, neighbourhoods and cities, each with its own internal organization, filling out or walling in the hermetic world of the poem. These interior spaces then become, as it were, the "insides" (bhitor) of these poetic shapes and forms, the within-doors of the metre. "Stanza" is Italian for "chamber"—the room in a poem, or the room of a poem, is then a camera obscura, Mallarmé's *salle d'ébène* (room of ebony), drawing the light of the outer world into its inner darkness in order to make an image.

Metrical play and the poetics of space are, therefore, inseparable from the narratives of inwardness and selfhood in this volume. The title poem, a 12-line curtailed sonnet, places its speaker within a circle, his feet rendered immobile by the many lines and limits drawn around him by the addressee. This person sits outside the circumference, perhaps trying to divine the speaker's "impossible desires". The lines and limits around the speaker have two effects. First, they confine his movements to circles and spirals, an endless series of turnings and returnings. A poem, 'The Letter', by another inveterate prosodist, W.H. Auden, comes to mind: "The year's arc a completed round/ And love's worn circuit re-begun,/ Endless with no dissenting turn." Ghosh's image for the "worn circuit" is fish in an aquarium. This poem's chamber is therefore an apparently transparent and neatly ordered one of glass, water and light, with tiny pebbles and roots. Second, this encirclement counters, with a "no", everything that comes easily to the speaker. Invariably faced with this negative, the lively words die on the lips of the pair in a few days, but they still carry the corpses around. The dead words are then arranged by the addressee's own hands, and the rhyming couplet asks at the end, "Such darkness within the metre have you ever known before?"

This circularity of structure and movement, and the sense of encircled spaces marked out by borders and peripheries, unify each of the two sequences, and also links them to each other. But cross-hatched by multiple lines and demarcations, the darkness inside these chambers and spaces takes on complex and differentiated forms. This darkness is not just a negative medium, in which inscrutable erotic or poetic transactions take place, or fail to take place, where gifts of words are sometimes offered, exchanged, refused or returned. In such a darkness, words are always stifled into the treacheries of reticence, turning poetry itself into a doomed struggle against the gravitational pull of silence. But it could also become a living medium out of which strange but distinct images, presences, colours and forms could emerge. A silent, dark and empty space could turn into a theatre of discoveries and recognitions. There could then be sudden awakenings into self-consciousness, when circuitous self-reflexivity glimpses the possibilities of transition and change. A series of poems invoking the rivers of Bengal – Usree, Kirtankhola, Roopsha, Sandhyanadi, each name like a little poem – brings to this poetry of stillness the restlessness of motion and transience.

The idea of words and images disappearing into or emerging from darkness and silence will surely remind the Bengali reader of those manuscripts of Rabindranath Tagore's poems from the Twenties onwards. Here, Tagore's deletions in the poems are made to converge around the writing, so that an inky and contrary blackness seems to be flowing out from between the lines to form fantastical images and grotesque faces. Some of Ghosh's poems, glimmering with singular images or human presences, also recall Tagore's late paintings, whose darkness, when studied closely, often reveals dense reticulations in ink – like a secret layer of inchoate writing around and beneath the human forms.

Behind the inwardness in these poems are also three important Tagorean clusters: the six songs about light and darkness, blindness and vision in the Puja section of Geetabitan, entitled 'Antormukhe' ('Facing Inwards'); the late poems of Prantik, especially no. 9 ['*Dekhilam – aboshonno chetonar godhulibelay*...']; and perhaps most importantly, the dark and silent moment of mystical forgiveness between Bimala and Nikhilesh in the novel, *Ghare Baire*. This is another inscrutable human exchange—comparable only to what happens between Shacheesh and Daminee in the darkness of the cave in Chaturanga—Tagore's account of which blurs the boundaries between fiction, poetry and painting.

While writing his curriculum vitae in 1954, the Bengali littérateur and Ghosh's post-Tagorean predecessor, Budhhadeb Bose, described Tagore as "a permanent factor" among his "favourite authors": "Tagore being one of those writers who grows in one as one grows in experience and whom it is impossible to outgrow". Ghosh's own mature creativity as a poet, and his sensibility as a critic and professor of Bengali literature, are founded on a profound engagement with the meaning and

substance of Tagore's achievements in vernacular modernity. This is a far richer and unmistakeable involvement than Harold Bloom's notion of the "anxiety of influence" – like Keats's happy immersion in his "presiding Genius", Shakespeare.

In Ghosh, the Tagorean inheritance is mediated through his extensive reading of European, American and Bengali writers, particularly the work of poets as different as Jibanananda Das, Bishnu De, Sudhindranath Datta and Samar Sen, together with closer contemporaries who would come together on the pages of the journal, *Krittibas*. In *Chhander Bhitore*, Tagore is an informing presence rather than a set of specific echoes and allusions. Its wrestling with the angels of darkness and silence owes just as much to Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Silence*, or its mastery of the art of transitions to Beethoven's late quartets, as even a cursory acquaintance with Ghosh's essays on the relationship between literature and the other arts would suggest. But poetry, however difficult and obscure, and not literary criticism, is the more precisely reflective and critical art in Ghosh's hands, concentrating the resources of the vernacular to an extent that is only sometimes achieved by the limiting gentility of even his most learned and eclectic essays.

In Tagore's *Prantik*, the terminal darkness of failing health and an impending crisis in civilization threaten the dissolution of the self. Yet, this last crisis carries within itself the germ of its own political and spiritual deliverance. Ghosh's 1999 volume ends with the "last darkness" at the century's end, with a martyr's stridently self-contradictory assertion: "Look, inside this death there is nowhere a trace of death." But the book's opening sequence ends with a less apocalyptic, but more self-assured poem, written in four beautifully spare, symmetrical quatrains. It lists the self's four achievement—stillness, emptiness, blindness and futility—wishing to give away each of these as some sort of a deeply cherished heirloom. This poem's last image of futility is a desolate, open field, as opposed to the single, airless chamber to which all whom the poet calls his own retreat with unnamed misgivings. In *Chhander Baranda* (Metre's Verandah), Ghosh talks about a small, fleetingly reached, but delicately aired verandah of modern poetic innovation, somewhere between the stifling chamber of strict metre and the open road of prose and speech. It is from this rare and liminal piece of private architecture—affording vistas, yet exquisitely confining —that *Chhander Bhitore Eto Andhakar* practises its crafts of darkness.■

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A Carnivalesque Exploration of A City

Moinak Biswas

KANGAL MALSAT
By Nabarun Bhattacharya
Saptarshi Prakashan, Serampore, 2003, Rs. 50.00

Nabarun Bhattacharya has made the titles of his two recent books, *Fyatarur Bombachak* (2001) and *Kangal Malsat*, inscrutable in keeping with the familiar yet unknown world they evoke. The country-city divide is crucial to Bengali fiction; its portrayal of liminal experiences still depends on that contrast.

Bhattacharya captures the experience of otherness in the heart of the city, clears for it a space at odds with the zones of representation that have come to constitute the familiar urban stretch for the reader. In the novel that launched this project (*Harbart*, 1993), a particular period was identified as the time of peaceful dissipation; it came after Binu, the Naxalite activist, succumbed to a bullet wound. 'Since then a rotten, stagnant and trivial epoch has set in for which it is difficult to find a parallel, at least in history' (*Harbart*, p. 29). As representation of the city is appropriated by the drama of middle class interiors, serious fiction in Bengal looks to rural or semi-urban realities for sustenance. Bhattacharya proposes an exploration of the excluded within the limits of the city, stretching its boundaries in more than one sense. The world that comes into focus in the pages of *Kangal Malsat* does not give us the comfort of distance: it seems obscure, absurd, but very close.

More than storytelling it is such exploration, an insane and carnivalesque counter-mapping of the city, that one is invited to join in *Kangal Malsat*. The author's main weapon is laughter, arising from deflation and caricature, but also out of an anger that recognizes its own helplessness. The reader, a target of a relentless verbal and narrative outrage, finds a point of identification in this anger. And it is in the indeterminate state of the politics of anger that the strength (and weakness) of the novel possibly lies. The regaling obscenities not only takes the wraps off language but, strangely, also provide readers with the focus of a makeshift solidarity. Bhattacharya does not allow his use of slang, the unprintable *khisti*, to lose its critical edge—his close predecessor in this would be Akhtarujjaman Elias's *Chilekothar Sepai* (1986) – and pass into a display. The verbal assault allows us to name the lies we feel we have been long silent about. Significantly, this strategic perversion avoids the depiction of sexual activity, which would have rendered it ineffectual. It has more to do with what could be called a negotiation of 'class' in the novel. The author does not know, neither do his readers, how to gather these new masses mobilized on the pages of his novel into a class, but it is a formation drawing close to that category if one thinks of the underlying theme of dispossession and conflict.

In the period of slumber that followed Binu's sacrifice in *Harbart*, the invocation of the familiar class agency has sounded increasingly hollow, not least because of the unbroken sleep of a leftist rule in Bengal. In the face of such loss of meaning the author here proposes a semantic dispersal of the category of class. In *Harbart* the new moment of rebellion was conceived around the figure of a madman, a holy idiot, descendant of an old Calcutta family, stuck in a time collapse; the local drifters seemed the only people able to include him in a community of sorts. The strategy there was to narrate a time in which nothing happens, in which dissipation and diffusion, accumulation of useless characters and images of a useless past lead to a sudden explosion. The dynamite sticks hidden inside Harbart's bed by Binu blow up the crematorium as Harbart's corpse is given over to the flames. The narrative recoil of that literal combustion is absent in *Kangal Malsat*, but as we read we are aware of an incendiary build up. The scope is much wider, characters more numerous, the narration more audaciously comic and complex: but always has a sense of everything hurtling towards a final explosion.

The immobilized meanings of class are subjected to a dispersal to signal a new gathering of class identity. The infantile dimension of this activity is acknowledged in the novel; it is full of adolescent gestures of disgust and lampoon. But the mobilization of the new agents of rebellion has its own grandeur in the way the action brings together the creatures of ressentiment and their targets into a common carnival. The rebels are led by the 'choktars', and they are joined by another species, the 'fyatarus', who first appeared in the collection, *Fyatarur Bombachak*. Their targets are almost everyone else, all who live above ground, all who have a stake in the sanctioned order of reality – policemen, museum curators, industrialists, politicians. The fyatarus can fly. In the earlier book they took on the mighty and the respectable all by themselves, creating unspeakable chaos in literary conventions and weddings. Now they meet the deadlier choktars, who are in direct contact with dead predecessors, sorcerers and conspirators. They are even more illiterate and vague, but are singlemindedly developing charmed discs, 'chaktis' that fly through the air and behead targets. They are raising an army to start an insurrection that will relieve a whole city of malfunctioning heads: an amorphous and protean army, like the very plot to which they

belong. But as the city is traversed by the narrative, as the lanes and liquor dens, junkyards and garrets create the effect of an expanding horizon of non-civic belonging, people from the other side—the tired and inefficient police spy, the party boss tormented by Stalin's ghost, even the industrialist out to overhaul the whole backward state—form some kind of community with the devilish choktars and fyatarus: without knowing it they herald their own beheading. Like the corrupt language they use the voodoo that the choktars practise is also corrupt, their chaktis, nevertheless, hit their targets; their great power of exposing dislocation is demonstrated as the commissioner of police, sitting in his balcony sipping whisky suddenly drops his head over his glass. For the rest of the story, he insists on wearing the helmet he has snatched from an underling so that the head stays in place. By showing such priorities the enemy unwittingly endorses revolutionary action.

The new agents come into being around the conspiracy, it cuts across citizens, moving from the space outside economy and politics into their interstices. The seduction of the novel's mad dynamics lies in this spatial reach; to imagine just a nether world of rejects would not have been effective in itself without this outward impulse. There is also a time collapse employed to the same end, to blast through the frozen identity of the historical agent, to make a ridiculous but grand gesture of starting from scratch. In the time-collapse some of the funniest narrative moves are introduced. The novel goes into meaningless but highly engaging digressions, launches bawdy and almost deranged discourses on countless issues, but also brings to life denizens of past times, obscure Bengali poets and tract writers, colonial sahibs and memsahibs. The references to the unknown poets are used to make fun of our ignorance: it is oblivion that makes us believe they are unreal, not their death. And the sahibs now have the whiteness of a loss of recognition, the sympathetic mockery does not exclude them. Under the leadership of Begum Johnson (one of the many memorable examples of naming in the novel), they move in a ghostly train through the city from time to time, a remarkable image that connects the twin delusions of time and space.

Registers of language shift with such travels: from obscene commentary to the formal sadhubhasha to a prose laden with English words (the last being the most interesting). There is, for a change, no retrospective mode, no nostalgic re-framing of surfaces of the past, but a genuine collapse of orders of reality and time, which scatters the effect of the explosion over the surface of the text. The last explosion, the insurrection, is a disappointment, but that is the consequence of the infantilism that the novel has adopted. With-out it the anger and hope of the tale, its great energy, would not have been possible either.■

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Transmitting Culture

Aruna Chakravarty

CROSSINGS: STORIES FROM BANGLADESH AND INDIA
Compiled and translated by Radha Chakravarty
Indialog Publications, Delhi, 2003, pp. 280, Rs. 250.00

As one who has translated a fair amount of Bengali literature into English I would like to open this review of Radha Chakravarty's *Crossings* with a few comments on the implications inherent in the transference of ideas and images from one language and cultural context to another and the filtering of the same from a male sensibility to a female's—the two main processes which are being put to the test here.

To take up the first. A transltion being, primarily, an attempt at communication on behalf of a culture, a tradition and literature the translator's first serious concern is with identifying the best authors of their heritage and, more specifically, their most significant works for dissemination to a larger readership. The choice of a target language is equally important for the wider its usage the larger the scope of transmission. The use of a certain language as a filter also involves the question of hierarchy of languages. For example when a work is translated from one of the regional languages of India into English it becomes the representation of a small, provincial culture for a powerful international culture. Thus, it is from judicious exercising of choices that national, even regional themes and ideas become international ones.

The operation, however, is fraught with difficulty. The more divergent the two literary traditions the greater the translator's dilemma. Uncertainty, hesitation and strain are evident in translations done even by great masters like Rabindranath Tagore. A comparison of the original *Gitanjali* with the translated text will bear me out.

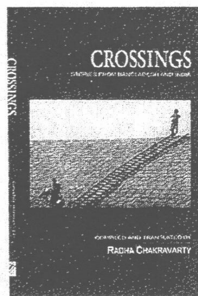
Beauty and Fidelity. These are the two spaces between which the translator swings, leaning sometimes this way—sometimes that. The golden mean, the exquisite harmony in which the strands are woven so lightly and easily that they raise no dust is the committed translator's El Dorado—forever sought; forever elusive. The struggle is an ongoing one because success is never total or complete. Following a system of checks and balances, maintaining discipline and perseverance together with constant self analysis and assessment are musts for a translator. The translating, then, becomes a measure of his or her commitment to the task. The translator is a tight rope walker engaged in maintaining a fine balance.

But there is another dimension to the attempt. The very act of translation entails the filtering of image and idea from one sensibility to another, raising questions of race, sex, religion and personal history. Translation, with its deep racial, cultural and gender implications, serves as a measure of the growth of a language, and also of the extent of domination of one language over another. At another level the very process of tranference reconstructs cultural identity and reframes the boundaries of language, idea and perception changing the terms of affiliation. How much of oneself, then, will the translator allow to seep into the work? How much shall he or she guard against? A translator of today, working on a nineteenth century novel, for example, will find himself or herself, quite unconsciously, orienting it to the expectations of a present day readership. A woman translator, translating the work of a male author will find herself giving it a gender slant. In both cases the shifts may proceed from natural human impulses and not from deliberate choice or premeditation. Should this be seen as a betrayal? Or as the expected consequence of the filtering of images and ideas from one sensibility to another?

Coming to the book under review, the cover, in black, white and sepia, depicts two women whose paths have apparently just crossed and who now stand at some distance from one another looking in opposite directions. But the book, a collection of short stories culled from the best authors of both sides of the border, lends itself to several interpretations. Apart from the obvious one of looking across and rejecting the notion of boundaries, political and otherwise, *Crossings* also operates on the level at which all transgressive impulses in the human psychic is probed and examined.

There are twenty stories to this collection. Ten from Bangladesh; ten from India. Despite a slight inconsistency in the choice—there are some brilliant stories and some clearly run of the mill—what is interesting about this collection is that it represents an amazing range of formal experimentation within the short story genre in Bangla prose. Though translations quite often shroud this aspect of a work it is to Radha's credit that she has been able to retain a sense of these experiments and innovations. The very fact that this collection lacks a focus; a theme—enriches and strengthens it. It wants to and does say not one but a number of things.

Desire and violence, in their myriad manifestations, form the connecting threads between all the stories. Rashid Haider's 'Incognita' is a strange story of a man's obsessive desire to make contact with an unknown woman only after hearing her voice on the telephone. Hasan Azizul Haq's 'A Mother-Daughter World'



vacillates between the desire for death and a passion for living. Rahat Khan's 'The shape of Things' concerns itself with the degenerate sexual desire of an insensitive middle class in a world torn apart by social and political unrest. Sunil Gangopadhyay's 'A Dream Day' describes the ephemeral desire that fails to drive yet cannot be driven out. It lies suppressed in the depths of one's heart.

But simultaneous with desire is the intimation of violence. In Razia Rahman's 'Irina's Picture' the violence from the sub textual level emerges in its fullness at the end of the story. My forehead splits open, the blood rolling down onto Irina's picture. Her white roses have turned red ('Irina's picture' p. 111).

Violence also operates at the level of interpersonal relationships. Stories like Manju Sarkar's 'Alone Together' and Suchitra Bhattacharya's 'Rainbow Colours' explore the decadence of urban middle class living and the existential angst that people have to struggle against in a crass materialistic world. 'Alone together' and Nabaneeta Deb Sen's 'Propreitor' present rivetting cameos of husband-wife relationships torn asunder by the pressures of humdrum living. 'Rainbow Colours' depicts the debilitating impact of modern education and the violence it does to a child's imagination.

The stories from Bangladesh offer a greater variety in terms of theme and representation. Their world is darker; the density of experience expressed greater than the ones from India. Their narrative structures are remarkable too giving the impression that the selection of stories from India was not discerning enough. If I have to fault this collection on any point at all I would say that better stories could have been chosen.

Radha Chakravarty's translations read very well. She is, obviously, not unduly obsessed with the idea of fidelity which so often leads translators to do a literal translation rendering them unreadable. Radha's stories flow smoothly and spontaneously and the reader sails through them with effortless ease.

A word about the production of the book. Though the cover is impressive the inside is not. The paper is rough—the binding and numbering of the pages is faulty. Page 225 comes after page 208. Page 225 appears again after 240 and carries on till 280. The pages between 208 and 225 are missing.■

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From Pre- to Postcolonial

Meenakshi Bharat

HER STORIES: 20TH CENTURY BENGALI WOMEN WRITERS
Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta
Srishti Publishers, Delhi, 2002, pp.195, Rs. 195.00

Her Stories: 20th Century Bengali Women Writers translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta is a collection of eight stories which has the signal effect of garnering much needed attention to strong contemporary creative voices from Bengal. Arranged chronologically and paying due deference to what the translator calls the 'seniority' of the writers, the volume, by default and by design, becomes documentary evidence of the transition from precolonial to post-colonial Bengali culture, from Ashapurna Devi to the absolutely current Suchitra Bhattacharya and Anita Agnihotri. The co-option of 'big' names in Bengali literature like the potent pioneering voice of the Sahitya Akademi and Jnanpith award winner, Ashapurna Devi not only serves to help focus the critical eye but also becomes indicative of the essential concerns of women writers from Bengal.

What is significant in this volume is that the stories are prefaced by brief and interesting insights into the creative personality through interviews and comments. It is thanks to this innovative section that the non-Bengali reader gets to know that Ashapurna Devi, writing in a Bangla absolutely untouched by English, was a woman of many parts ushering in the winds of change through her enormous output—189 novels, 1000 short stories and 400 stories for children; it is through this extra-textual probing that one is able to make a fuller assessment of the activist writer, Mahasweta Devi.

This effective and novel format for the collection does justice to the clearly feminist programme of these stories. The translator's notes seems to specify that the tales are specifically chosen for the feminist agenda of the resistance to, the reconciliation with, and the rejection of, patriarchal ideology. Yet, though the issue of gender dictates the preliminary selection, the effort is, while doing so, to cover other wideranging themes such as class, modernity, and social mores. So, though Ashapurna Devi's protagonist's 'entire mind and body protest[ed] in stunned resentment' in 'Opium,' the gender issue is bolstered by the concerns of class and status, and the seductive corrupting influence of wealth. Apart from being a woman's story, it also deals with the primary notions of identity and self-worth in the context of contesting binaries such as the rural and the urban, the civilized and the uncivilized. Ultimately, the story becomes a comment on the wily complexities of the human mind which dramatize the erosion of values. This story thus sets the pattern for the treatment of multifarious preoccupations of the rest of the stories that refuse to be limited to feminist margins only.

Hence, 'Chinta' reveals Mahasweta Devi as both a feminist and an activist; talks both of sexual and economic exploitation. Nabanita Dev Sen's 'Surrogate' while becoming the occasion for the iteration of a daring feminist decision in the closing 'Sarama had made up her mind,' yet opens a window to the limitations of the middle class. In Jaya Mitra's 'From the Heart of Darkness,' the disturbing issues of rape and sexual abuse are concomitant with broader social problems like child marriage. That the protagonist of Minakshi Sen's 'Face' is a woman in a *woman's* story certainly imbues the feminist dimension to a tale which is otherwise a powerful insight into human psychology studying the impact of forced isolation in jail on the psyche, and the critical change it wreaks in human perception. Equally importantly, this story also becomes an eye-opener to the experimental daring of these women writers in deploying sophisticated modernist techniques: the smooth use of the stream of consciousness technique to highlight the working of the mind outside and within the jail in this story looks forward to the psychological delving into the genesis of meaningful relationships in pain in the final story, 'The Drowned Man' by Agnihotri.

The only let down in this otherwise exceptional volume is the intrusion of lapses in translation with stilted passages of unpardonable Indianisms 'you might be knowing all about her' or 'being a graduate woman' or downright clumsy, ill-sounding renditions as in "it was winter evening when we reached my place' and 'After telephoning she put on the T.V.' 'Fear destroys the human person,' a character 'spitted.' The slip-ups in spelling, 'prematurly' and 'toady' instead of today, do nothing to alleviate the problem. If the agenda is to bring writing in the indigenous languages of India to the forefront, then greater care has to be taken with the 'finishing' of the product lest the project take a beating on these counts.

However, such committed efforts of publishers and translators is an acknowledgement and appreciation of the fact that there is prolific creative activity by contemporary Bengali women writers of fiction. And this translation performs the important function of bringing two languages into a meaningful colloquy.■

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Shelke Revisited

G.P. Deshpande

EMBERS (DHAG)
By Uddhav Shelke. Translated from the Marathi by Shanta Gokhale
Macmillan, Chennai, 2002, pp xiii+ 225, Rs. 147.00

How does one review a translation especially when the reviewer is relatively innocent of translation theory as the present reviewer happens to be? The excellent translation by Ms. Shanta Gokhale took me on a trip of the sixties of the last century. A whole range of memories and impressions crowded in my mind. I suppose there cannot be a better tribute to a translation than that. Can there be?

The sixties were an interesting period. The Marathi novel which had had a precarious existence since the days of H.N. Apte and his generation was in dire need of some elixir of life. It had barely survived a frontal polemics against it and its versions of realism by Rajwade in the early years of the last century. The picture was not very different in most parts of India; one must hasten to add.

It would seem that modern India came to terms with several aspects of modernity. It however took fairly long in creating its own novel. (I am not talking here of the writing which seems in the main to be intended for the foreign markets or for the no less alienated upper middle classes of India.) In one sense the novel in the languages of the natives is a post-fifties (of the last century) phenomenon. To be sure, you can count a few scores of good novels in the native languages written prior to the sixties. But it is a small number. It is in the sixties that we see the rise of the great Indian novel/s.

Nemade's *Kosla* and Shelke's *Dhag* were two most outstanding examples of the new novel in Marathi. (Incidentally translation of *Kosla* has also been published in the same series called 'modern Indian novels in translation' by Macmillan.) It is not easy to say what made them different and new. It was however clear that the world of *Dhag* was an unfamiliar world, shocking and moving in its very unfamiliarity. Indian fiction has long been one long story of the upper classes and castes, a long story of the *Bhadraloks*. I do not mean to suggest that the stories of the upper castes cannot be literature. They surely can be. The problem was that the story was nearly completely told. In Indian fiction in several languages the same story was being told time and again. There were fewer and fewer form-oriented experiments. The language literature in Indian languages did not have the option of turning the Indian reality into an ethnic reality and sell it to the western market as the Indian literature in English could do. It was not even open to it to be the so-called "Indian literature". It had to be Marathi, Tamil or Hindi and the like. It could be great, if at all, by becoming a shade smaller than the alleged Indian literature. India is several experiential worlds. To try and pretend that there is one Indian world was meaningless. There is an Indian world, dialectically speaking, precisely because there are many Indian worlds.

The problem with our fiction was that it was unable to portray the plurality of the Indian world largely because it had got stuck with the upper caste *Weltanschauung* which had in fact narrowed its world. There were some very readable (and sellable) novels. But that's all. The Marathi novel was waiting for its moment of liberation.

It came with a few novels in the sixties. Dhag was one of them. Uddhav Shelke brought a new fire to the stale upper caste world of fiction. Shelke was a prolific writer. He must have written more than 150 novels and collections of short stories. At one stage his prolificity became a problem. He fell into the familiar trap of telling the same story several times over. He was also paying the wages of living off writing in a native language. And yet the great author in him never really died. *Dhag* which was first published in 1960 was easily the finest piece of writing.

It is a story of Kautik, a woman belonging to the *shimpi* (tailors) caste. It is about her struggle to live. It moves inexorably to a tragic end. But then her grim struggle to survive is what the novel is about. It is a small world made of small people. Or to put it differently, it is a world of a remarkably small expanse. The needs are small. The geographic expanse is small. It is not an ambitious world. It is a world of pathetically modest hopes and expectations. The tragedy consists in the fact, rather in the inexorability of it, that these hopes and expectations cannot possibly materialize. Life is one long, dark tunnel with no light at the end.

There is no light but to be sure there is heat. The title of the novel is brilliant. As Ramdas Bhatkal, the publisher of the original marathi text points out in his neat, brief introduction to this translation, this word has several meanings, The embers, the heat from them are the literal meanings. The word is often used to suggest suffering not caused by one's own actions. It is suffering imposed by destiny, inexorable and irremediable. The philosophical undercurrents of this story are mind-boggling.

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In the middle of all this heat there is a peculiar humour of the narrative. The village society is miserable. You do not miss even an iota of that misery and yet there is a bizarre coexistence of smiles and suffering in this story. You cannot put it down. It speaks volumes for Shanta Gokhale's translation that you do not miss one bit of all that.

Then there is the language. Shelke employs standard language for third person narrative and the local dialect for his characters' speech. It is near impossible to find a suitable parallel for the dialectal component. This translation succeeds in establishing the two varieties of speech. The restraint of the translator in choice of speech is admirable. It was thought when the novel was first published that the use of the dialect gave a certain authenticity to the work. I have never entirely understood the argument. But let that pass. One thing is nevertheless true that the problem of language does not entirely lie in the real or imaginary authenticity of speech. It lies more in its intensity. Shelke's work is nothing if not intense. The translation has succeeded in conveying to the reader a bit of that intensity. A good translation really need not do more.

As I read this novel a third time, I suddenly realized that we would soon be required to distinguish in the main two kinds of fiction in our literatures and in our country generally, one that gift packs the Indian reality in lovely wrapping paper, and the other which throws that reality at you in its utter nakedness in a rather menacing manner. Shelke's classic belongs to the latter kind. Gokhale and Macmillan deserve our thanks that they made this book, little known outside the Marathi world, available to the larger literary world.■

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Urdu Short Story: Creativity and Criticism

Davendra Issar

DUS AFSANE (Ten Short Stories)
Compiled by Zubair Razvi
Zhene Jadeed, Delhi, 2001, pp. 200, Rs. 60.00

JADEED AFSANA: CHAND SURTEIN
(Modern Short Story : A Few Facets)
Edited by Saba Ekram
Zain Publications, Karachi, 2001, pp.128, Rs. 150.00

Dus Afsane, subtitled 'Ten Significant Short Stories', written in the last hundred years, is an attempt to showcase stories which give an authentic feel of living experience and are written by writers nurtured in the tradition of classical literature writers who have a contemporary pulse. For this selection an Adab Paima (a literary survey) was carried out by Zubair Razvi with the help of twenty-seven prominent critics such as Waris Alvi, Shamim Hanfi, Gopichand Narang, Shamsur Rahman Farooqui and creative writers like Surendra Prakash, Balraj Komal and Nayyer Masood.

They identified 132 stories, of which the following ten were short-listed : 'Kafan' (Premchand), 'Anandi' (Ghulam Abbas), 'Toba Tek Singh' (Saadat Hasan Manto), 'Gadaria' (Ashfaque Ahmad), 'Lajwanti' and 'Apne Dukh Mujhe De Do' (Rajinder Singh Bedi), 'Chauthi Ka Jora' (Ismat Chughtai), 'Housing Society' (Qurratulain Hyder), 'Zard Kutta' (Intezar Husain) and 'Hattak' (Saadat Hasan Manto). The compilation is fairly representative of what is known as the Golden Era of Urdu short story.

Although these stories are significant, there is no escaping the fact that such exercises of selecting the best of stories can be subjective and hazardous. However these random non-structured surveys do provide some kind of a benchmark.

In times like ours when the meta-narrative is challenged and canonization becomes problematic, it is a bit surprising to note that all the stories identified for this volume are written by the first generation of post-Premchand writers. Four of these ten stories are written in the backdrop of the Partition. Interestingly, the stories included in the volume attempt to map the psycho-scape of their characters rather than the violence of death and destruction outside. Is this the reason of their survival? These stories are not merely recording history but they are creative responses to the tragedy of the 'Great Divide'.

Interestingly, *Angare* (The Embers) published in 1932, too, had ten stories between its covers. This was a collection that announced the new sensibility in Urdu. But if the genre of the short story emerged from Gogol's 'The Overcoat' (1842), the new Urdu short story came out of Premchand's 'Kafan' (The Shroud) in 1935. The subaltern rural India pulsates in the story with all its complexities and socio-economic undercurrents.

The glaring omission in the compilation is that of a story by the famous Urdu writer Krishan Chander who not only edited Naye Afsane but also experimented with new themes and techniques. Manto and Bedi are represented by two stories each. Perhaps because they are less pronouncedly progressive than Krishan Chander. This then raises a pertinent question regarding the interaction between art and ideology. Where and how does one draw a line between the two?

Looking at the unforgettable characters of the stories of this volume, Madhava and Ghisu (*'Kafan'*), Bishen Singh ('Toba Tek Singh'), Dauji ('Gadaria'), Lajo ('Lajwanti'), Surraiya Hussain and Salman Mirza ('Housing Society') and Saugandhi ('Hattak'), one is baffled with the uniqueness and universality of each of them. They are not demographically representative. For instance, Saugandhi of 'Hattak' does have a group identity, that of the women of her profession, as a prostitute, but her predicament, dilemma and angst are such that even if her persona is shattered, she emerges as a woman of substance. From the loss of dignity and innocence in 'Kafan;, the very first story of the volume, to the regaining of the same in the last story, 'Hattak', this collection captivates the reader.

Bishen Singh who becomes the 'land' itself, a la Toba Tek Singh, in Manto's story by the same name, is contrasted with the power elites who keep the borders intact and secure with wired fences and explosive mines. The latter may not be able to understand the angst of the uprooted humanity. This is reflected in Ghulam Abbas's story 'Anandi', Bedi's 'Lajwanti', Ashfaque Ahmad's 'Gadaria', as also in Qurratulain Hyder's 'Housing Society'. Is the death of the insane in No Man's Land the final solution or the only salvation? And is then schizophrenia a blessing or a curse?

The existential dilemma regarding the tussle between the self and the soul gets depicted in Intezar Husain's story 'Zard Kutta' (The Yellow Dog). 'The Yellow Dog' represents a rather base instinct of man. The dog needs to be ousted for ultimate salvation and transcendence from self to soul. The story raises the eternal question of the destiny of man. Though Intezar Husain draws deeply from the Islamic philosophy to answer this question, there are also some shades of the *Upanishads* and Buddhism visible here. On the one hand this is the tragic tale of man's mental, moral and spiritual collapse, and on the other it probes the quest of the 'Modern' in search of a soul.

It is here that Saba Ekram's book *Jadid Afsana: Chand Surtein* (Modern Story: A Few Facets) becomes significant. It creates a new awareness in understanding and evaluating the short story. Earlier there were stalwarts such as Mumtaz Shirin and Hasan Askari in Urdu criticism who created a critical culture of serious study of the short story. Saba Ekram has devoted his critical energy in raising awareness especially related to modernity in literature. However, it may be pointed out here that the time for the arrival of modernity in Urdu literature was not the same as the one for Europe.

Ekram has however in this book, failed to analyse the elements of literary modernism in the way it is done by Irwin Howe in the West. How modern then is the modern Urdu short story? The eminent modernist critic, Shamsur Rahman Farooqui, believes that every generation has to create its own critics. This assertion has been hotly contested. The book under review partially conforms to what Farooqui asserted. The volume is an updated and revised version of articles earlier published in an avant-garde Urdu journal *Auraque* (Pakistan) edited by Wazir Agha who, incidentally, has also written the introduction to the present book.

The author presents his study of the modern short story in seven chapters dealing with its evolution and themes such as exodus, lost identity, zeitgeist, social problems and the marginal man. Two of the essays relate to the problem of communication through the symbolist story. Another section deals with four contemporary short story writers, namely, Joginder Paul, Ali Hyder Malik, A. Khayam and Firdaus Hyder. Joginder Paul is a senior writer who writes with a contemporary alertness and for the way he presents his stories, he is acknowledged as an evergreen modernist writer with progressive ideals.

Ekram stresses the need to find deeper and sometimes the hidden meaning in the text through a thorough examination of the story. He believes that tradition is not in conflict with the experimental story. Tradition reinvents itself with paradigm shifts in the socio-cultural milieu. In this context, he mentions Manto's 'Phundne' (Pompom) as the harbinger of the new trend in Urdu fiction.

The 'myth' of origin and migration have been a recurrent theme in the Urdu short story. Saba Ekram who himself is a Muhajir examines this in his essay 'Jadid Afsana aur Hijrat ka Masla' (Modern short story and the problem of migration). Qurratulain Hyder and Intezar Husain have been sensitively engaged with the problems of the divided countries, ruptured history and displaced identities. Gautam says to Roshanara in 'The River of Fire' (Qurratulain Hyder): "In this divided world, we can meet each other only on borders". In these stories, memory and history, illusion and reality, myths and metaphors, and tradition and innovation blend in a manner that the reader is face to face with a psyche never imagined earlier.

I would like to end this review by pointing out how this critical book of significance, entitled *Jadeed Afsane* by Saba Ekram, emerges as a spontaneous response to the modern short story in Urdu, both in India and Pakistan. It was published in Karachi in 2001 and by bringing our stories together, this volume serves as a reminder of the deeper links between the two countries.■

Davendra Issar is a senior writer and critic in Urdu and Hindi.

In A Few Words: Short Shorts in Urdu

Prakash Chander

PARINDE (Birds)
(A collection of short stories in Urdu)
By Joginder Paul
Takhleeqkar Publisher,Delhi, 2000, pp. 160, Rs. 110.00

Joginder Paul is unquestionably among the most eminent short story writers in the subcontinent. Always breaking new ground, whether in form or content, he pioneered the tradition of what may be called the "mini story" in Urdu. He uses the word "afsaanche" for them, derived from the Urdu word "afsaana". Though there are many others who have tried their hand at it, Joginder Paul is far ahead of them in both quality and output or in the range of themes. In his book *Parinde*, he has included more than 175 afsaanche.

Most short short stories in *Parinde* have their ground in the reality of ordinary living. Touching moments and thought-provoking experiences find expression in an elegant and rather captivating form chiselled and honed into smartness with a masterly pen. For example the little story—'Parkinson Disease'—strikes a threatening note when it indicates the possibility of a prime minister's inability to restrain his hand from pressing the button to launch a nuclear missile – he suffers from Parkinson's disease! How would his brain co-ordinate with his hand? This story raises many questions and identifies a very real danger to human existence when control over technology may be lost, for whatever reason.

As in his longer stories, in several of his short short stories, Paul displays his penchant for symbolism, not mere abstraction as many are wont to do. An effective use of symbolism lends the narration an aura of multiplicity of meanings and functions at the level of sugges-tion. Each vignette acquires an aura of being a mystique that captures the reader's imagination at once. Use of abstraction may just have taken the stories more into the realm of philosophy but most of these stories find their ground in concrete reality.

Paul has mastered the art of short short stories over the last many decades. Urdu journals in India and Pakistan have been publishing them sometimes as a bunch and at times a whole page has been given to one small story of a few words. The vacant space around the mini story is filled by the reader's imagination triggered off by the evocative words, few in number but generous in terms of value and meaning. The symbolic ramifications grow in the mind and the impact of the story stays for a long time. Let me give an example:

Kalyug: "Why have you spent a life-time in prayer and meditation, Baba?"

"My child, so that Lord Indira keeps sending ravishingly beautiful apsaras from Devlok to disrupt my prayers."

This is just a sample demonstrating how Paul's "afsaancha", despite its few words, manages to say plenty about the culture from which it comes, the age it portrays and the distortions of tradition with the change of human sensibility.

This book of mini stories by Paul presents a wide range of situations which show how the author is essentially a humanist with compas-sion and concern for human suffering. Also, there is a strong moral consciousness at work in these stories. Sometimes ironically and at times even through humour, he brings out the degeneration in human living: His little story 'Devil's Climb-down' is an example… 'The devil appeared gentlemanly and civilized at the press conference. "Till now, man was a victim", he told the newsmen, "of my blandishments and used to come to my hell", he stopped to look at each of the faces around and added, "but now I have fallen to his inducements and have come to his earth."

The above story reminds one of the bunch of episodes written as the story of the fate of Lord Krishna by the same author in an ironic and rather unusual style: Krishna himself forgets his identity as God in this Godless world!

Translating this genre of literature is truly a challenge since each story tells itself in a very concentrated language. There is no room for any looseness in style, nor can there be any indulgence in the usage of words. In fact, there are many mini stories in this volume that can be read as poems. The content is poetic and so is the style that offers no explanations, as in all good poetry. Translating these stories into English is even more problematic since the ethno-geography of many of the stories is local to the Hindi-Urdu culture.

In the few-lines-long story, 'Headlights', Paul makes the reader confront his shortsightedness head-on without mincing any words: 'Driving along a pitch dark, winding and unfamiliar road I could see only as far as the headlights lit the road, a three-hundred and fifty yard shifting shaft of light. And then, suddenly it dawned on me, this is what happens in life, too."

For lack of better nomenclature, these stories are sometimes referred to as observations, comments, incidents, episodes, each sounding quite inadequate for what they express. Call them what you will, each one leaves back a spell. Broadly, Paul's subjects fall in three categories: man vis a vis God, man's attitude to animals, and religious readers' chicanery and shallowness. *Parinde* is the author's third book of afsaanches [*Silvaten*(1975) and *Kathanagar* (1998), were the earlier volumes].

The vacant space around the mini story is filled by the reader's imagination trig-gered off by the evocative words, few in number but generous in terms of value and meaning. The symbolic ramifications grow in the mind and the impact of the story stays for a long time.

Joginder Paul's genius is known to find expression in long and short fiction; and, indeed *Parinde* amply displays his deft handling of short short fiction for which he has been a long-acknowledged pioneer. There are critical debates in Urdu, trying to define this literary form but as yet there is no fully developed critical theory that examines the aesthetics of his highly sophisticated and yet so natural a form of telling a story. Brief, pithy and subtle. Their brevity does not affect their import in any negative way; the reader can link them to his own observations, experiences and values. They evoke contemplation, provoke discussion and assail the reader with questions. *Parinde*, I am told, is being translated both, into Hindi and English and will soon be available for the reader in English.■

Prakash Chander is a retired senior journalist.

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Evoking A Time Of Innocence

Alok Rai

THE CHRONICLE OF THE PEACOCKS
By Intizar Husain. Translated by Alok Bhalla and Vishwamitter Adil
Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002, pp. 257, Rs. 395.00

Patricia Highsmith, inventor of the inimitable Mr. Ripley, pulls off all kinds of fictional feats. But one of the most unsettling of these is the way in which, by manipulating the point of view, she forces us poor delighted readers into the position of the murderer Ripley, risking imminent discovery as the recently "despatched" victim begins to stiffen on our shoulders. Having slipped beyond blandishment and deception, rapidly slipping into inconvenient *rigor mortis*, the dead in Highsmith's world are much more *trouble* than the living. That seems like a pretty good reason for not murdering people—indeed, it seems to be about the only one available in the bleak amoral universe of Highsmith's fiction and, come to think of it, in the world of Partition fiction too. After all the hatreds have been spilt into the public domain, and all the hastily legitimized prejudices have worked their acid, there is precious little else that remains to which anyone can appeal. But even in Gujarat, in Our City of Sorrows, one *can* still insist that killing people is no solution. The problems that make killing appear like a kind of solution—come on Mr Modi, don't go all innocent on me now!—will still be there. "Day breaks upon the world we know..." And meanwhile, the dead will not go away discreetly, they will become ever more lumpy and awkward, and stick out at inconvenient angles, and show up unexpectedly in all the wrong places, like the corpse in *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*.

Intizar Husain has been fortunate in finding a diligent and sensitive translator in Alok Bhalla (along with the late Vishwamitter Adil.) Over the years, a considerable portion of Husain's *oeuvre* has become available in English. As such, his reputation as a writer of Partition fiction has been consolidated in the only language in which, apparently, a meta-discourse, reflecting on the fictional discourse that deals, in various ways, with the melancholy events that overtook the coming of Independence to this benighted sub-continent, can form.

The initial response of imaginative writers to the experience of Partition was, as it happens, not very imaginative – though it can be argued that that was because the hitherto unimaginable was being translated into gory reality in the weeks and months around August 1947: such extravagant translation beggars the imagination. Mercifully, however, by the time we come to Intizar Husain, we have left the trains full of bodies, the dismembered limbs and other such iconic objects far behind. What remains is a deep-seated melancholy, a stubborn yearning to find symbols adequate to capture the horror of those excessive realities. Though he seeks to write *A Chronicle of the Peacocks*—an evocation of a time before even the thought of Partition could have been possible, a time of innocence in which the tail of a dancing peacock covers and so *becomes* the universe—the story itself, *Tristram Shandy*-like, is about the *failure* to write that "chronicle". The spectre of Ashvatthama, thirsting for more violence, stalks both sides of the border—perhaps all borders: it inhibits the imagination, and terrifies the peacocks.

The crucial question, which we are only now beginning to feel the full weight of, is simply this: when did Partition happen? And where? Is it a set of events happening about a border, so to speak? Not surprisingly, the first generation of writers were too overwhelmed by the immediate violence to be able to venture into these complexities. But it is imperative for us—with the help of writers like Intizar Husain—to ask; when did Partition begin? When did the countdown to the inevitable catastrophe start? The politicians—and perhaps even the historians—will answer these questions in their own ways. But imaginative writers, free of the constraint of the written archive, are in a position to probe the "prehistory" of Partition, to seek out those smudged, dim lines of stress and antagonism which, in the run of time, become amplified into fractured communities and irresistible social forces. "Prehistory" is, of course, ambiguous—like the "post-" in "post-colonial" that famously isn't like the "post" in "postmodern"! I suspect that our "pre" partakes of both—it is the time "before", before Partition is even conceivable, a time of innocence and harmony and "happy" normalcy; it is also the time that, proleptically, points to the grim future. Unfortunately, however, the two times are in fact, one. That, indeed, is the challenge for the creative writer—to see the worm in the bud, the monster in the womb.

The other and related question—and it is one that weighs heavily on Intizar Husain—is, when did Partition end? Are there ways in which in which it can *never* come to an end? Like the reiterated Jewish memory of expulsion from Palestine, or the grief of Karbala, it becomes a kind of permanent matrix, into which specific historical experiences—sometimes very *mutatis* indeed, as in the Israeli occupation of Palestine today—are accommodated. It is some such impulse, I think, that motivates Intizar Husain to seek to mythicize the Partition in several not necessarily compatible ways. Thus, there is the mapping of the modern tragedy—though "tragedy" is too glorious, too exculpatory of the small-minded political operators who helped to produce the bloody extravaganza—onto the Mahabharat. And though we might quarrel about who the modern equivalents of the Kauravas and the Pandavas are, it is evident that Ashvatthama haunts that border—not only on the ground—still. There is also the suggested mythic parallel between the movement of harried people in those weeks and months, and the *hijrat* of the one and only Prophet. Do these grand analogies help to lessen the pain of loss, of a cultural haemorrhage that, far from abating, seems to be getting worse? I'm not sure whether one should even wish that they would.■

Alok Rai is Professor of English, Department of English, University of Delhi.

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Intellectual Musings

Taqi Ali Mirza

GHUBAR-E-KHATIR (SALLIES OF MIND)
By Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Translated from the Urdu by D.R. Goyal
Shipra, New Delhi, 2003, pp.322, Rs. 495.00

It was said of Shakespeare's 'Sonnets' that it was with them that "unlocked his heart". It may be said of *Ghubar-e-Khatir* that through these letters Abul Kalam Azad laid bare his personality. These letters which were written over a period of nearly three years during his incarceration in Ahmednagar Fort were addressed to one of his closest friends, Maulana Habibur Rehman Khan Sherwani, Nawab Sadar Yar Jung. The letters were not meant to be printed and published. It was on Hakim Ajmal Khan's insistence that Maulana Azad agreed to the publication of the letters in 1946.

The title *Ghubar-e-Khatir* was chosen by Azad himself or was borrowed from a couplet by Mir Azmatullah Bekhabar in a journal which has the same title. D.R. Goyal has used the Sahitya Akademi edition of the book edited by the well-known scholar, Malik Ram, published in 1967, for his rendering into English. It is possible that Ajmal Khan's edition could have been used with some advantage, for he was, in a sense, "the onlie begetter" of this remarkable work. Ajmal Khan's introduction, as may be expected from a person who was so close to Maulana Azad, is very personal. He says, in the course of his introduction, that Azad steadfastly refused permission for the book to be translated into other Indian languages, or into English, despite great pressure from English, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali or Tamil publishers, his argument being that, except for a few letters, the majority of them, stylistically, would not be easy to render into other languages.

The present reviewer does not know if the book has been translated into other languages. Azad's fears appear to have been well founded, and D.R. Goyal's English translation, which he has done on behalf of the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata is for this reason, all the more commendable. Incidentally, nowhere in the book has any information about the translator been made available. Malik Ram's introduction to the Sahitya Akademi edition is very scholarly with copious notes on events and personalities, and the sources of the quotations which are an integral part of the letters. It also has a fairly comprehensive biographical note on Nawab Sadar Yar Jung to whom the letters are addressed. The salutation, "Sadeeq-e-mukarram" is erroneously read by most readers as "Siddiq-e-mukarram". The Arabic word Sadeeq which means friend is rightly translated as "dear friend". This is a typical touch by Azad, characteristic of his patrician disdain for the intellectually lowly. It is, therefore, difficult to agree with Malik Ram's view that Azad's style in *Ghubar-e-Khatir* is simple and lucid. One has only to read the opening paragraph of the first letter dated August 10, 1942, written from Ahmednagar Fort to realize that this claim has no substance. Azad knew only one way of writing, or it would be wrong to expect him to write in any other manner. The comparatively "weaker" letters are those which dilate on philosophy and history. The absolutely delightful are those in which the Maulana talks about his many and varied interests—trees and flowers, tea, music, revelatory of his many sided personality.

There is also an underlying vein of humour throughout. The most remarkable feature of the letters is the profusion of quotations from poetry, Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Maulana had a phenomenal memory, and the couplets and lines come to him naturally, and they form an integral part of the letters, written at a time when he had no access to books or any library. Malik Ram has counted some seven hundred quotations, all of them notable for their spontaneity, appropriateness and impeccable literary taste. The majority of verses quoted are from Persian, then Urdu and a few from Arabic. Invariably they are from the classical poets, Hafiz, Nazeeri, Urfi, Nizami, Jami and Khusrau, Bedil or Ghalib, from Persian and Mir, Sauda, Momin, Zauq, Mushafi and Ghalib (again), from Urdu. Goyal has provided the Roman transliteration of the verses, with a fairly close translation into English and explanatory notes wherever necessary, based, of course, on Malik Ram's annoted text. Maulana himself says, as pointed out earlier, that the title of the book came from a couplet by Azmatullah Bekhabar. One, however, would like to believe that at the back of the Maulana's mind must have been the beautiful couplet by the Urdu poet, Insha, in which the phrase occurs:

Kisi ki barbad na ho mitti, Koi na mardood-e-dostan ho,
Juda hua shakh se jo patta, ghubar-e-khatir hua chaman ka.

The carefully worded and thoughtful foreword by Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee enhances the value of the book.■

Taqi Ali Mirza, a former Professor and Chairman, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderbad, has translated a number of books from English/French into Urdu.

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Keeping A Spiritual Tradition Alive

Gillian Wright

THE FEMALE VOICE IN SUFI RITUAL: DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES OF PAKISTAN AND INDIA
By Shemeem Burney Abbas
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2003, pp. 208, Rs. 595.00

Like many South Asian academics who spend a significant part of their lives teaching abroad, Shemeem Burney Abbas has decided to reclaim her roots. After teaching English and Applied Linguistics in Texas and Islamabad, she has turned to the music of Sufi shrines and the women who participate in shrine rituals. This is a field which has upto now been largely ignored.

Pakistani scholars have fought shy of analysing women's roles in shrines and foreign scholars have very often been excluded simply because they've been men. Therefore, Shemeem's research is important, especially as it looks mainly at shrines which Indians have little chance to visit.

Sufi shrines have for centuries provided important spheres of religious and spiritual participation for women because they've had little access to mosques. Medieval Sufis, well aware of the verses of the Qur'an which show that in faith men and women are equal before Allah, directed much of their poetry specifically to women. These include their songs about spinning, weaving and husking grain. They also wrote in the female voice, as if the protagonist were a woman, to spread their message of love, tolerance and the one-ness of God. Perveen contrasts qawwali, performed by men, with sufiana kalam, a genre just as old which is a solo or group performance based on folk melodies with minimum instrumentalization and is performed by men and by women - Abida Perveen being the pre-eminent example.

The province of Sind, home to a lakh Sufi shrines, was the most fertile ground for her research. At the shrine of Hazrat Shahbaz Qalandar, the celebrated "damadam mast qalandar" of a million qawwali performances, a huge number of women singers converge during the annual urs, an event marked by music and a whirling dance like that of the dervesh followers of Rumi. Men and women both dance, and women suffering from mental illness are brought for cures. It was here, singing in Saraiki, that Reshma was discovered in the late sixties and rose to international stardom. In an interview with the author, she describes her relationship with the saint, speaking as if he were still alive. She says that her tribe originally traded livestock between Bikaner and Sind and that their "patron" is still Bheron (perhaps Shiva - Shemeem offers no comment).

Shahbaz Qalandar, whom she calls her "master", summons her to sing for him at least three to four times a year.The shrine of Shah Latif, which has a huge female following, and where the caretaker of the tombs of his female relatives is a woman, draws musicians who are men but sing in falsetto in imitation of the women protagonists of the saint's poems. His *Risalo* is a collection of thirty verse stories, at least ten of which have women as the main characters. They are heroines from local legend like Sohni, Sassi and Marvi. In their tragic love stories union with the beloved comes only after death. They demonstrate not only true human love, but also the nature of the Love of God experienced by the spiritual seeker.

In another interview, the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan confirms that the female voice is dominant in Sufi poetry. "The entire sufiana kalam," he told Shemeem, "that entire discourse is in the female voice...You can see this in Amir Khusrau's texts that are in Hindi - the old Punjabi mystical texts—then when you read Baba Farid, Bulle Shah....There is an elegance, a humility in the female voice... they [the saints] found their spirit—their soul—the essence of what they wanted to say in the female voice..."

Shemeem admits that the writers of Sufi poetry took a great deal from "indigenous" or "aboriginal" traditions—the doha, songs replete with imagery drawn from local festivals and the seasons, and the concept of shakti in female heroines like Hir, but her reluctance to even mention the word Hindu limits her scholarly interpretation. Though she finds the female voice in early Persian verse, she doesn't examine the strong Hindu tradition of God being the only Man, of all his devotees being female. When she mentions Mirabai—the subject of a qawwali performed by the Sabri brothers—she describes her life without once mentioning Krishna. It may be true, as Shemeem says, that she sang about the oppression of women and caste prejudices, but first and foremost she adored Lord Krishna, and the interesting thing is that in the Sabri Brothers' qawwali Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti is the object of her devotion. Shemeem explains Mirabai's presence in the performance as "modernization" and offers the rather lame explanation for Hindu mystical songs recited at Sufi gatherings from the 13th century that the musicians were newly converted Muslims. This doesn't explain why this tradition has continued, according to the qawwals of Hazrat Nizamuddin, unbroken to this day and why it is proudly maintained.

> "Whether or not the Sufi poets were "feminists" cannot be claimed here as the term "feminism" is a fairly recent one. However, the female myths in Sufi poetry certainly represent the voices of the marginalized groups and continue to be used as representative frames even today."

But the main fault of this book lies in organization of ideas and sloppy editing. The major points are repeated time and time again, and the years of research presented in a disjointed fashion. This is a great shame as the book should have a lot to offer. It shows how women musicians relate to what they sing and how they can now make a reasonable living—although not as profitable as men—recording cassettes, performing on radio and television and even being sponsored by Pepsi. Conversely it shows how in traditional communities it is now considered a social stigma to have women singing, and women musicians are increasingly confined to the home while the men take government jobs and hope their sons get MBAs. It also is one of the first, if not the first book, to compare the musical and saint traditions of the Sidis, originally African slaves, in Sind and in Gujarat.

Finally Shemeem reminds us of how key women are to the living traditions of spirituality and the mystical understanding of God in the subcontinent. As Abida Perveen sings spontaneously during her interview with the author,"Masjid dha de, mandir dha de/Dha de jo kuch dhana", (Demolish the mosque, demolish the temple, Demolish all that can be demolished.)■

Gillian Wright is an author and translator who has written on the various Islamic traditions existing side by side the shrine of Hazarat Nizamuddin in New Delhi.

Writing for Self Empowerment

Tejwant Singh Gill

NIRDESHAK (Director)
(A Collection of Poems in Punjabi)
By Asi
Nanak Singh Pustakmala, Amritsar, 2002, pp. 112, Rs. 100.00

AHSAAS (Feeling)
(A Book of Poems in Punjabi)
By Manjit Pal Kaur
Ravi Sahitya Prakashan, Amritsar, 2002, pp. 104, Rs. 104.00

Much of the poetry being written now revolves around the leitmotif of interminable feeling of loss around which pain, deprivation, debility, old age, bitterness and failure weave themselves into a net. This net has a tenuous link with the interlocutor's life, age, gender and experiences.

With the beginning of the 21st century and the onset of the third millennium, Punjabi poetry seems to throb with fresh life.

The way literary imagination has forged itself on the terrain of the Punjab reminds one of its geography, as the land of the five rivers. People in the Punjab have generally excelled in worldly achievements and material prosperity. They move ahead and Punjabi poetry too, in the last few years, demonstrates a similar trend.

Much of the poetry being written now revolves around the leitmotif of interminable feeling of loss around which pain, deprivation, debility, old age, bitterness and failure weave themselves into a net. This net has a tenuous link with the interlocutor's life, age, gender and experiences. Earlier, poetry in Punjabi concerned itself much more with the "other". The poet's own subjectivity was not in the forefront.

The reasons for that are not far to seek. For over a decade, the Punjab remained gripped by terrorism of the most brutal type. Young men and women were victims of this terror. Poetic expression lay generally repressed. It required extraordinary courage to articulate the oppression candidly. However, there were strong exceptions and the Punjab of the times announced itself in several voices.

There are two collections of poems I would like to write about, samples that I have selected to show how in the last two years poetry in Punjabi has started to project somewhat different concerns from the earlier times. Asi the Punjabi poet of some repute died a few years ago but his collection of poems *Nirdeshek* was published posthumously in the year 2002. He was a child when polio struck him and his body, deformed and distorted, became a point of great psychological issue for him. Writing poetry seems to have become a strategy to cope with the gruesome reality of his body so that he can face the world courageously.

Asi's earlier four collections of poems gave expression to the affliction of his body in a direct and transparent style and located words to give shape to the experience of his damnation. The analogies he gave for his body were: "a demolished home", "a ruined castle", "a scattered nest" or "a sunken ship". His verses reveal his sense of insult, humiliation and deprivation he suffered from his near and dear ones and indeed God himself. The malevolence of the world, of the society and community around was no less than that of God himself, or else his fate would have been better. It was through his poetry that he was able to demolish and exorcise himself of all bitterness against the world and God. He could then reconstitute his identity and renegotiate his relation with everyone once he was able to free himself of the feeling of inferiority.

It is in *Nirdeshak* that we see evidence of Asi's reconstructed self, renewed and ready to struggle and move on. The poem from which the title of the collection is drawn, begins on this note: " Lost trust is nowhere to be sought / Neither is lost the urge to seek it." In another poem, entitled "Rachnakar", the poet expresses his fond urge to compose a poem that will hold his consort's attention all through her life. The reader gets alarmed with the richness of meanings of the verses of Asi. His insights are delicate and informed by experience. That is what gives intensity to his words.

In this collection, the focus of the poet's attention is no longer the malevolence of God or the world. The beauty of nature takes over and the inner and outer landscape is dominated by the wondrous variety of its loveliness. Men and women situated in this nature are marked by innocence and add to the charm of creation. There is a spiritual dimension awakened by the poet's realization of the power of nature. There is a marked transfiguration of the poet's sensibility: from the heightened consciousness of his debility and affliction, he moves to a different level, where he is no longer at anyone's mercy. The wheel chair is not his destiny any more. Rather than pity, the reader may envy the spirit of the protagonist of Asi's poetry in this volume. The strength and conviction with which Asi is ready to redefine his place in this universe brings out a poet whose poems touch one with an extremely positive energy. This is in a way a typical Punjabi spirit!

The other poet I wish to write about in this review is Manjit Pal Kaur, a professor in the Punjab. She is acclaimed as a playwright of exceptional talent. Besides her plays, she has produced five collections of poems in Punjabi. *Ahsaas* is the latest, published in 2002. This is a poignant presentation of, in a way, the story of the growth of a girl under the alert eyes of the father and the mother. The poet takes images and motifs from the folklore and builds them into her verses and tells the tale of a teenage girl growing into maidenhood.

The parental home of the girl is no paradise and it is here itself that her dreams and desires are either smothered or totally repressed. She fights against all odds to keep her dreams intact and takes that invaluable treasure into the home of her husband once she is married. The new set of responsibilities and duties overpower her and here too there is no room left for her feelings and desires. Manjit Pal Kaur's poems articulate the pain of the girl in poems that touch one's heart. The life of a girl, as is the life of the polio-stricken man, is a challenge that has to be confronted squarely, and the poems in *Ahsaas* tell the story of how the challenge is met. The crux of the matter is that she has to claim, albeit create, her own space, an independent space though not isolated. It is a space within the family and in a society. Only then will there be recognition and a redefinition.

In this volume, Manjit Pal Kaur endeavours to ensure space for the girl by using all her inner and outer resources. She engages with the primary idea of overcoming the constrictions drawn over the identity of a girl. Poems such as 'Kavita' (Poem), 'Aj de Din Kavita' (Poem for Today), and 'Maang' (Demand), sensitively reveal the very reason for their creation. These poems may be seen as "diary writing" by some but they go far beyond private musings. They are not a mere recording of a girl's life. They become poems because they relate to the "other", the reader—male or female—who will identify with them. The intellectual and emotional horizons expand with such poetry and the experience of such verse is ultimately empowering.

Manjit Pal Kaur's persistent struggle with all odds of life, be they physical, marital, social or cultural, matches the spirit of the earlier poet reviewed in this piece, Asi.

With these two volumes of impressive verses, Punjabi poetry acquires new strength to triumph over life.■

Tejwant Singh Gill is a senior academic and journalist, living in Chandigarh.

Changing Conditions in Rural Punjab

Hina Nandrajog

ANNADATA
By Baldev Singh
Arsi Publishers, 2002, pp. 351, Rs. 295.00

Punjab the granary of India. Land of prosperity. Green revolution. Progressive. This façade crumbles as one goes through the pages of Baldev Singh's latest novel *Annadata*. It is a novel about the crisis that the peasantry faces in Punjab. Like Munshi Premchand's *Godan*, it depicts the grim reality that the Indian peasant lives day in and day out. Baldev Singh is a prolific writer of stories, plays, novels and essays, and is renowned for his skill in presenting hitherto unexplored areas of human pain and suffering. Here he reflects the changing conditions of rural, agrarian Punjab.

Baldev Singh dedicates the book to the farmers of the Punjab who proudly declared 'Farming is the best, trade second rate; and service is little better than beggary'. Then he ironically re-dedicates the book to those circumstances that have subverted the meaning of this proverb and formulated a new mantra—'Service is best, trade second rate, and farming is little better than beggary'.

The novel is an elegy to the shrinking lands and dwindling incomes of the agrarian Jat. By tracing the events in the life of the family of Sardar Vazir Singh, a resident of Chak Bood Singh, Baldev Singh illustrates the ups and downs in the lives and fortunes of the Jat Sikh farming community in modern times. The unrelenting fight for survival throws the three sons, Bhagatoo, Rajpal and Gura on different paths. Bhagatoo seeks legitimacy through the route of militancy, Gura craves the glitter of the entertainment industry; and it is only Rajpal who struggles to uphold the nobility of farming, and finds himself compromising it at every step. The novel illustrates the causes for the erosion of this dignity—short-sighted government policy, fuelled by vested interests, and unscrupulous, self-serving men within the community, concerned only with their own expanding wealth and influence. The lack of vision that the Jats exhibit themselves, their inability to sense the winds of change and mould themselves accordingly is also recorded, if not with criticism, at least with regret.

The turbulent, terror-stricken years of militancy in the Punjab are interwoven dexterously. Baldev Singh illustrates how the social malaise is deeply entrenched in the economic and political structures of society. He shows how the disenchanted youth takes to militancy, yet he deliberately deromanticizes the separatist movement. Kesari turbans and kirpans become fashionable and the sudden piety of Bhagtoo is unnatural. It is not fitting for a farmer to wear white clothes. The situation is further exacerbated due to police excesses and corruption. This is an inevitable, daily reality in the lives of the people. There are faint echoes of an earlier period of violence and grief at the time of Partition of the country, enhancing the scope of the novel much beyond the here and now.

The novel opens with Vazir Singh sitting on the mound of his harvested rice crop, awaiting the pleasure of the capricious government policy regarding the buying of the grain. An even more unpredictable weather god threatens to ruin the crop with dark clouds looming large in the sky. His son, Rajpal, has gone to Chandigarh as one of the leaders of the Kisan Sabha to agitate against the callous attitude of the authorities. This not-so-clean mode of bargaining seems to be the rule rather than the exception and this ritual is played out at each harvest. The farmers are inured to suffering this insensitivity, and they can only hope that it can be resolved before rains undermine their bargaining position.

The community is well integrated, but subtle, almost invisible faultlines, are breathed in. Inconsequential rivalries and circumscribed curiosities that fill the lives of these people show the author's deep understanding of the human psyche. The vicarious needs of the community are satiated with petty intrigues—a major one being to speculate about the mystery around the missing daughter of Vazir Singh.

The daughter, Bhupinder Kaur, 'but everyone calls her Bhupi' is a shadowy presence that hovers all over the book. As in every age and every society, the woman is the repository of family honour, and her family would rather have her dead than immoral. The usual double standards operate here as well. Gura's disappearance for days on end doesn't reflect on the family's honour, but Bhupi carries the burden of it on her shoulders.

She is seen only through flashback, and is a robust girl, who takes little interest in studies and considerable interest in the male sex. She would have been married off early, had the family been in a position to meet the dowry demand. Yet she spends her time embroidering bed-sheets and pillowcases for her trousseau. Her silence is the language of frustration, of lost hopes and of stifled longings that the family has no means of fulfilling. She quietly disappears one day, and there is no indication that she went under duress.

A weak link is Bhupi's total unconcern at her family's plight at her disappearance, but somehow it reinforces the eerie impact that her disappearance has.

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The author's familiarity with the milieu that he depicts is undeniable. The canvas is broad, but the delicate strokes create a detailed picture. However, the realism is not obtrusive. Moreover, his skill lies in creating more than just a specific topographical space. Chak Bood Singh is not just an agrarian village in Punjab, nor its residents simple stereotypes of Punjabi farmers, it might well be any small village in the country with its daily grind for survival draining the people of their strength but not their vitality.

There is little experimentation with the form of the novel, as Baldev Singh usually prefers the well-trodden path. However, the narrative is fast moving, and the interest does not lag. The third person narrative is presented from the perspectives of different characters and that adds depth and complexity to the fabric. Flashbacks to the past are liberally interspersed. The language is richly spiced with abuses and imparts the flavour of the Punjab.

There is an evocative echo of one of Baldev Singh's earlier short stories in the novel. Vazir Singh's father's neighbour, Fatima flees at the time of the partition of Punjab in 1947 and hands over her beloved spinning wheel to Vazir Singh's mother for safekeeping. The short story, 'Come, sister Fatima' traces the nostalgia that the mother (known only as Bebe in the story) feels when her son almost throws out the dilapidated spinning wheel after many, many years on the rubbish heap. She gets it repainted and begins to spin some yarn on it, weeping and calling her 'sister Fatima' to come and join her.

All in all, the book is a must to understand the travails of the farming community, their strengths and also their weaknesses. It is a sombre presentation and offers little hope, but perhaps the author felt that to present readymade solutions might be facile. He prefers to compel the reader to face the harsh reality as to why a prosperous Punjab should be headed towards a dead end.■

Hina Nandrajog teaches English at Vivekananda College, Delhi University. She takes keen interest in translating fiction from Punjabi to English. She has been awarded the 'Katha Award for Translation' twice. She is currently translating a collection of Punjabi stories into English for the Punjabi Academy as well as for the Sahitya Academi.

Vortex of "Truths"

Madhuri Chawla

FARANGIAN DI NOOH
By Veena Verma
Arcee publications, 2002, pp. 295, Rs. 225.00

A heartrending yet breathtaking account of the bitter truths of a society in which the lietmotif, *"Loki kee kehange"* (what will the people say) is the driving force for every action which overrides all other aspirations and desires. The reader is sucked into the vortex of 'truths' that usually lie buried under the rubble of daily life and conventional socio-ethical mores.

Farangian di Nooh, which literally means 'The daughter in law of the foreigners', is a pathbreaking collection of fifteen short stories in Punjabi by Veena Verma. Inspired by the phenomenal success of her very first collection of short stories *Mul di Teevi* she has ventured on to this second collection. The book sensitively portrays the abuse and exploitation of women not only socially, which has been the trend so far in Punjabi fiction, but also psychologically and sexually.

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The first story 'Razai' renders a riveting account of the hue of friendship which a destitute woman, packed off to England by her in-laws, bereft and impoverished, learns to admire and appreciate that which cannot be bracketed into the straitjacket of a man-woman relationship.

Traversing hitherto unexplored territory, we have here and in some other stories women in a defiant mode, braving odds, deciding to live life on their own terms and at other times even in a strange 'sister- bonding' with the rival woman as in 'Khund Khadisni' and 'Sati', accepting this other woman in their husband's life, empathizing with the equally helpless predicament of her rival. Mrs Kaur's psychological state in 'Khund Khadisni' is a touching examination of the conflict of such a woman torn asunder by the juxtaposition of contradictory emotions.

Veena Verma is a resident of England who has retained her touch with the world and nuances of her childhood. Born and brought up in Buladha in Bhatinda district of Punjab Veena now works as a care manager in a social service department in London. She not only evokes, in the reader's mind, a vivid picture of the social mileu of Punjab, the upwardly mobile Punjabi society, which has propelled people to foreign shores lured by the lucre and the glamour of the West, but also satirizes the same society especially the diaspora for having become a generation of flotsam, "the nowhere men" in their new world. The glitz, permissiveness and 'freedom' of this brave new world sucks them into the mires of depravity and lasciviousness so as to satisfy their own base impulses, bypassing the more positive aspects of its ethos and value system.

Veena Verma's deep insight into the human psyche, sharpened perhaps by the nature of her job and her experiences in life, is strongly reflected in her work. Divorced and choosing to stay single and independent, she once revealed in an interview that most of her stories are an expression of her own agony as also of several other women around her.

The author's expertise at portraying a woman's psyche in her struggles to carve out a niche for herself, with its attendant dilemmas and challenges can be savoured in the character of the bold and rebellious Shanti Devi in the story 'Farangian Di Nooh' in which, while on one hand, Shanti has her husband jailed for infidelity and domestic violence, she also cleverly manipulates the hypocritical rules of the society to her advantage.

A woman's sexuality, its open acknowledgement and the immediacy to satisfy it is brought out very boldly in 'Chaar Raatan' in a lucid and forthright manner.

Her open and honest handling of female sexuality has made Veena controversial in Punjabi literature. She is dubiously but erroneously referred to as the 'Shobha De' of Punjabi literature. Veena however does not mind the description because as she puts it, "Whether one calls it sleaze or explicit relations of life, these are facts".

In 'Band Bua' and 'Gale Kabutar' she however questions the limits to which sexual satiety and urges of the libido can fulfill the void of life. Sexually explicit images, liberally sprinkled in the stories, are however inherent to every story . They are not intended to merely shock or titilate, but are rather used to depict the abuse of woman, to advance the reader's understanding of the theme and character. The characters are true to life and well rounded and she has taken care to retain the colloquial touch in order to reflect their background and personality.

In an unpredictable twist, though apparently unpalatable, the author has also forced us to recognize the perimeters within which even the radicals operate in the character of the libertine Sally in 'Sukhi Khui'. This perhaps is a recoginition of what Colette Dowling terms as the 'Cinderella complex', a woman's hidden fear of independence. Every story contributes in it's own way to this gripping, stirring, moving and at times hair raising journey through the myriad shades of human experiences.

Every story talks about the marginalized members of the society; be they women, eunuchs, or even at times men. We also have glimpses of racial discrimination as also the self-aggrandizing hypocritical patriarchal mores, enforced under the garb of respectability, laid down for these peripheral members of society. Her vision is all encompassing, her portrayal realistic. Most of the stories are in the third person narrative and begin in the present but her characters frequently slip into the past.

A compelling book yet impossible to go through in one sitting, as there are no interspersed lighter moments. It is fraught with black satire and the mood is somber. This perhaps is unavoidable since it has to be in consonance with the subject matter and the intent of the book—the depiction of harsh realities—which can scarcely be achieved otherwise.

A thought- provoking book in its chilling portrayal of the claustrophobic and destructive hold of the society on the individuals and the resultant destruction of the self.■

Madhuri Chawla teaches English in Shyam Lal College, Shahdara, Delhi University. She has translated stories published in the Sahitya Akademi's bi-monthly journal *Indian Literature*. Currently she is translating from Punjabi into English for the Punjabi Academy as well as for the Sahitya Akademi.

Translating the Punjab for Little White Readers

Sukrita Paul Kumar

TALES OF THE PUNJAB: TOLD BY THE PEOPLE
By Flora Annie Steel
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2002, pp. 320, Rs. 750.00

"Once upon a time..." This is how Flora Annie Steel invites her "little readers" to the tales she collected with so much effort, love and patience. But there is a big story behind this simple invitation.

Born and brought up in Scotland and London, she married an Indian civil servant in 1867 and sailed to India in 1868, to be drawn into Indian life and society for the rest of her life. She learnt the local language and travelled extensively, collecting tales and fables to be recorded, translated and published by her as *Wide-Awake Stories* in Bombay first (in1884), and later as *Tales of the Punjab: Told by the People* in 1894. Much later in 2002, there was this welcome reprint by Oxford University Press of the same volume.

One does not fail to notice the subtitle *Told by the People*, and through this, the fact of oral transmission of the tales gets an appropriate emphasis, even though the significant interventions of Flora Annie Steel in recording, translating and adapting the original, stare at the reader squarely. Her target readership is clearly the English in England. The folk tales, if translated literally, and as told in the original language replete with colloquialisms, would obviously not have worked. Nor would the dignified literary style of the *Arabian Nights* have appealed. The sensitive remarks of Flora Annie Steel and R.C. Temple in the Preface to the earlier edition draw attention to this point: " It would be manifestly unfair to compare their literary standard with such tales as the *Arabian Nights* or *Tales of the Parrot...*" Steel consciously avoids manipulating the style of the tales just to give, what she calls, "the conventional Eastern flavour" to it.

However, the author does want to create a suitable readability for her "little readers". And for that, while she retains the essence of the tale, she adapts the context and changes the names of characters to create a sense of familiarity. The tales are collected not just as cultural artifacts for preservation or as ethnographic data but they need to serve the live purpose of engaging children's attention, just as fairy tales do. This is made amply clear in the note "To the Little Readers" with which Flora Annie Steel starts her narration. She takes the hand of the child, as it were, and "Hey presto! Abracadabra!" leads her magically to a Punjabi village. "Do not be afraid" says she, for Prince Hassan's carpet is beneath your feet.

There is magic for the children, a sense of wonder and adventure, and indeed there's a feeling of security because the voice of the teller of the tales is saturated with experience, firsthand knowledge and age. She carries the listeners/readers to a village far away in the Punjab. The long distance makes the tale all the more attractive and strange. If the folk tale being told is born from amongst its own folk it is familiar and realistic, but if told to aliens it would become a fairy tale. Steel sets the stage for the tales by laying out at the outset the social context from which they were picked with reference to the popular convention of storytelling in the village. Storytelling which can only happen from sunset to sunrise, otherwise going by the popular belief, the "travelers lose their way".

Professor Tariq Rahman's erudite Introduction to the reprint of *Tales of the Punjab* richly contributes to the understanding of both, the creation of such a book and its historical context. He describes how modernity brought memory into the domain of the tangible, creating works hardened into cold print. It was indeed during the British period, he points out, that the Indian folk tales appeared in print form as though in testimony to modernity. Whether it is the repetitive verse of 'Death and Burial of Poor Hen-Sparrow' or the repetition of events in 'The Rat's Wedding', there are some distinct features of oral literature that are retained in the written tales. The oral tradition of folk tales is after all dependent on mnemonic devices.

Talking about Rahman's Introduction, it is significant that he refers to the historicity of the production of the book and also makes a pertinent remark regarding the Victorian identities of the translator and the editor. The exclusion of the ribald humour expected in these tales may be attributed to Victorian censorship exercised by the writer. The stories are clearly meant for children, the children of the late nineteenth century English ladies and gentlemen. There is a moral order but there is also magic, spells, invocations and *deus ex machina*.

Major R.C. Temple's annotations and appendices on Analysis and Survey of Incidents prepared so painstakingly and included in this volume cannot be ignored. They serve a very vital purpose from the point of view of the western reader who need not go outside the book looking for the endless number of references.

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While I read this book, whenever I wished to access Punjab from the tales, I looked at the annotations and was able to switch the tale back to its Punjabi ambience. But, for the western reader, I imagine, the tales recorded by Flora Annie Steel do offer a strange world, though quite human and down-to-earth, a world not difficult to enter at all. In fact, stories such as "Sir Buzz" may be perceived by the Punjabi child as an English tale with a little smattering of Indianism. So thin is the line between translation and re-creation in these tales and so imaginative and skillful is the new rendering, that the stories throb wonderfully on the no-man's land, innocently situated in the child's mindscape! For critics, sociologists and historians the book offers a fund of material for research, to be examined through colonial and postcolonial perspectives, and modern and postmodern lenses.■

Sukrita Paul Kumar is a poet and critic, and she teaches literature at a Delhi University college.

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Ray's Philosophical Valedictory

Indra Nath Choudhuri

SATYAJIT RAY: AGANTUK (THE STRANGER)
Translated by Antara Dev Sen
Edited by Pratik Kanjilal
The Little Magazine, Delhi, 2002, pp. 139, Rs. 195.00

Agantuk is an unknown visitor whose visit takes place all of a sudden without any announcement. The film is not Ray's best (However, Dennis Schwartz thought that it was much better than some of his last films that went out of favour with the public. John Hartl of *Seattle Times* has said that it was one of Satyajit Ray's best) but the script reveals an unique aspect of Ray, his anti-self, his disenchantment with modern civilization, with westernization, with development and also his concern more for magic, for tribals and their tradition, for primitive cave paintings and for humanity and hence to receive an authoritative English translation of the Bengali script done by Antara Dev Sen is extremely heartening as it proves to be of great help to understand this aspect of Ray's creative mind and the making of a great thinker, writer and film maker.

Ray had forthrightly said in one of the interviews after he made *Agantuk* in 1991 that he could not have made it thirty-five years ago, in the days of *Pather Panchali*, and in the years that followed. One can find a possible reason that those were the days when he packed his films with layers of meaning and created frames after frames of great intensity to reveal the stratum of meanings that too obliquely because he always disagreed with any notion of overtness. This process continued upto 1983 when he had two massive heart attacks within a short span of five months. He came back to film making after a gap of five years and made three films in quick succession, *Ganashatru* (1989), *Shakha Prashakha* (1990), and *Agantuk* (1991).

The gap of five years was very crucial for him. He must have had a premonition about his death and therefore became keen to project himself through his characters to give his personal views and to talk about his private faith and a philosophy of his own as if he would not have any other occasion to do so. The last films, particularly *Agantuk*, are used to give his discourse about the modern civilization and urban values. The proving lawyer friend of Sudhindranath Bose asks the protagonist Manmohan Mitra, '"What about cannibalism? Have you yourself had human flesh? Is this not the most barbaric, savage, uncivilized practice?" Manmohan Mitra's reply is "Yes, cannibalism is barbaric. But do you know what is even more barbaric and uncivilized? The sight of homeless people and drug addicts in a city like New York. The ability of one civilization to vanquish others by the mere push of a button. That is a hundred times more barbaric!"

It is the antiself of Ray who is like Gora of Tagore or Tim of Kipling or Gandhi of '*Hind Swaraj*' is more concerned for the preservation of humanity and cultural legacy rather than the westernized modern and impersonal world and therefore the lady of the house following traditional Indian hospitality does not sit with her uncle to have her lunch; their friend Ranjan does not smoke in front of an elderly man and Sudhindra is ready to touch the feet of his wife's uncle as he is on his way back to a land in search of the real qualities of civilization and human nature and which are free from the tyranny of modern civilization.

This is Satyajit Ray's philosophical valedictory in which he amusingly assesses the contribution of modern civilization through the creation of the longest word in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, floccinaucinihilipilification consisting of 29 letters – a teasing word meaning to render something of little or no value. It is a reflection on the modern civilization which is found to be complex and complicated. Compared to this the tribal society for the protagonist is refined and gracious and full of human values. He is free from any trappings of modern civilization and when he finds his niece rushing and linking her arm to the free arm of the woman at one end of the semicircle of the dancing tribal women and losing herself in the primitive folk dance numbers he tells Sudhindra that he had his doubts about whether she was her real niece – but not any more...

The Bengali film *Athiti* (guest) based on a story by Tagore, and directed by Tapan Sinha is also a story of a perpetual wayfarer who refuses to be achored to one particular place for a long time. It is the story of a small boy, who, because of his intense desire to gain new experiences of life, and his quest for beauty in nature and man, could not be kept bound to his family. He always runs away from home. At last, he feels temporarily sheltered in a landlord's house, and is emotionally inclined towards his daughter. But then, one day, he sees a horseman (a very powerful literary image) who is going to attend a carnival, and then, by the riverside, he sees boats after boats filled with dancers, singers and musicians, all going to the carnival. It is an astounding scene for the boy, as if lives were floating by in the river of time. He runs after them to become a part of the flowing time. On the contrary, the man in *Agantuk*, who calls himself Nemo, meaning no one is also a guest but more a stranger, a wanderlust, whose main concern is how to preserve humanity and cultural inheritance in an increasingly modern and impersonal world. Tapan Sinha creates an imagery of a flowing river and we are all in it moving towards an unknown destination. Satyajit Ray, on the contrary, creates an imagery of a world which is the destination of persons like Nemo, a world where the qualities of "civilization" and human nature are different than what we have in the world in which we live.■

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Communication

I continue to marvel at the wonderful Book Review which retains its very high standards of writing and editing. I also want to tell you that through the efforts of some friends, we get a large number of copies sent to us from India which are then passed on to readers here. You have a growing fan club, and readership.

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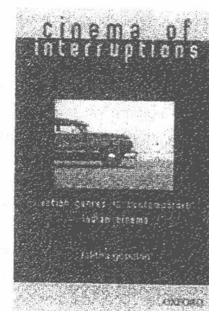
With best wishes and great admiration.

Akbar Zaidi, Karachi

Playing with the Interruptive Logic of Popular Indian Cinema

Ranjani Mazumdar



CINEMA OF INTERRUPTIONS
By Lalitha Gopalan
Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 224, Rs. 495.00

Lalitha Gopalan's recent book, *Cinema of Interruptions* looks at the uniqueness of the film form in South Asian cinema. Journeying through both Tamil and Bombay cinema, the author's attempt is to present us with a selection of film narratives through which issues of genre and classification can be complicated in a non-Hollywood context. Lucidly written and displaying a passion and love for the form itself, Gopalan's book is a very useful contribution that will no doubt add to the body of theoretical writings emerging on Indian cinema.

Gopalan's strong argument against generalized readings of popular cinema where the exploration and uncovering of hegemonic ideology is offered as the only possibility is refreshing. Using the category of pleasure and cinephilia to trace specifically cinematic techniques of narration, Gopalan suggests that popular Indian cinema is a cinema of interruptions. Identifying these interruptions as song and dance sequences, the interval, and censorship codes, the book attempts to explore the different ways in which these cinematic interruptions are playfully and creatively negotiated by directors to weave in their own storytelling style. Through discussions of well known films like *Nayakan, Parinda, Hathyar, Batwara, Ghulami, Hey Ram* and several others, Gopalan seeks to focus on the detailed organization of popular Indian film narratives.

In the opening chapter Gopalan suggests that the three central forces of interruption identified in the book, serve to create a cinephiliac's unique understanding and love of Indian cinema. With this logic, she proceeds to delineate specific cinematic conventions of narration deployed in the action genre. While Gopalan's specific readings of films have a lot to offer, her desire to locate these readings within a framework of interruptions seems somewhat overstretched. Popular forms always work through conventions of repetition and difference, but they work through a layered cultural process that goes beyond the three interruptive nodes identified in the book.

In chapter three J.P Dutta is situated as an *auteuer* whose focus on masculinity and violence is explored through detailed readings of some of his films like *Batwara* and *Hathyar*. Gopalan argues that Dutta's use of landscapes, and trains structured around the interval marks him as a director with a distinct style. Inspired by both Hollywood Westerns and Gangster films, Dutta's inventiveness lies in his use of these international genres within a distinctly Indian context. The deserts of Rajasthan and the feudal society it symbolizes is placed not just as a discrete space but as one marked by its connectivity to the city and urban modernity. Gopalan argues that the use of trains symbolize change, modern notions of justice and a civilizing impulse while at the same time also conveying despair in the city. The use of the train in *Hathyar* for instance allows Dutta to move between the Western and Gangster genre "by playing on the idea of the frontier in two distinct landscapes, a feudal province in Rajasthan and the underworld in Mumbai" This is an interesting reading of the *mise-en-scene* but the discussion on the use of the trains before and after the interval seems rather forced, a problem that is evident in many of the other chapters.

For instance in chapter four and five, Gopalan suggests that the gangster genre's obsessions with the past is narrativized in a way that make these films "analogous to biographies of the post-colonial state" She suggests that the spatio-temporal deconstruction of the gangster film can enable rich insights into the ways in which memory and history work within these popular narratives.

Through detailed analysis of Mani Ratnam's *Nayakan* and Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Parinda*, Gopalan draws on the specific cinematic conventions that work to articulate themes of nostalgia, memory and history. The discussion of the use of cars in Mani Ratnam's *Nayakan*, to establish the relationship between time and the commodity is one of the most engaging sections of the book.

Developing a powerful argument Gopalan suggests that the presence of different cars in the *mise-en-scene* not only signal the passage of time but through their collage like presence as cars from different times, they also "perform the ambivalence of writing post-colonial history that cannot escape its own investment in nostalgia". This chapter displays the author's love for the cinema and her careful deconstruction of the *mise-en-scene* to present a philosophical argument on memory and time is skillfully rendered to the reader. However, once again, Gopalan's reading of the use of cars has little to do with her theoretical insistence on a "cinema of interruptions" which seems extraneous to some of her important insights in the individual chapters.

The chapter on *Parinda* highlights a different approach to memory, one that is characterized not by the coherent linear logic of *Nayakan*, but by temporal discontinuities. This suggests Gopalan, makes *Parinda* a film whose temporal organization can serve as a "model for writing the history of the modern nation that is less developmental and progressive". Unlike the pre-production focus on the performative space of the *mise-en-scene* in *Nayakan*, *Parinda*, suggests the author, organizes the past through uses of the flashback and other innovative techniques of editing. Again like the previous chapter there is a skillful exploration of the film's narrative universe.

The richness of the readings are seductive and many interesting themes emerge in these two chapters which to my mind are the best in the book. But the desire to either locate these films within the logic of interruptions or as emblematic of post-colonial writings of history seems bizarre and overdetermined. Clearly recent films like Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* and Sudhir Mishra's *Is Raat Ki Subah Nahin*, challenge some of the assumptions made about the narrativization of the past in gangster films. *Satya's* desire to move away from a causal link between the past and present made it a significantly different kind of film, just as *Is Raat* plays with one night in the city of Bombay where urban space, chance encounters and the crowd form the core thematic of the film.

Given the fact that genre as a concept is born at the intersection of audience, industry and distribution, the book does not seem to dwell enough on the contextual framework necessary for a full fledged discussion of genre cinema in India. Challenging the myth of Hollywood's domination across the world by tracing a distinctively unique style that relies overwhelmingly on a logic of interruptions is not enough. The context of India, the different ways in which cultural and social transactions find their way into the formation of genres needs more attention. This problem is most evident in the chapter on avenging women. Here Gopalan moves between journalistic and sociological perceptions of cinematic violence

and psychoanalytic feminism. Censorship codes are traced to delineate a distinct style in the genre of avenging women. But the role of the avenging woman as a force that enters the scheme of Indian cinema via popular folk forms, mythology, religious iconography is completely ignored. The reinvention of the action heroine within a context of new technology, masculinity and violence must also be nuanced enough to weave in a density of influences on film narrative. One reason for this omission could be that she is trying to move away from culturally specific accounts that do not make any effort to understand the filmic and narrative dimensions of genre. But to completely ignore one for the other is to fall into a limited framework.

The theoretical framework of interruptions seems the most stretched in the chapter on *Hey Ram*. To say that narrative cinema's commitment to realism and indexicality is threatened by the arrival of digital technology is sweeping, for clearly popular Indian cinema has consistently flouted the norms of indexicality much before the arrival of digital technology. Gopalan follows this by suggesting that the logic of interruptions prevalent in Indian cinema makes it well suited for experiments with digital technology. These are contradictory statements. The relationship of digital technology to Indian cinema is a complicated one and requires a different kind of engagement with the 'real', 'realism' and new technology. These concerns do not seem to fit in with the larger design flow of the book.

Cinema of Interruptions is the first major effort to trace generic codes within the narrative universe of popular Indian cinema. It offers substantial readings of many landmark films, skillfully presented and marked by detail and pleasure that only a cinephiles eye can command. The book however needed to be embedded a little more in the political, historical contexts that shape the production and reception of popular culture in India. Gopalan seeks to resolve this by referring to concepts like the "nation" and "state". These categories which take on an increasingly abstract shape in the book often seem to stand in for an engagement with cultural history and politics. This is not to suggest that popular Indian cinema should be contextualized only as a culturally specific national cinema, for that would lead to a tired essentialism. But the idea of the popular needs to be broadened for our interest in the popular comes out of a strong desire to engage with history, politics and culture. These criticisms notwithstanding, *Cinema of Interruptions* is a timely intervention that will open up several new areas of debate and engagement as we gear up to make sense of the world's largest producer of popular films.■

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Is There A Pattern?

Shohini Ghosh

PARAMA AND OTHER OUTSIDERS: THE CINEMA OF APARNA SEN
By Shoma Chatterjee
Parumita Publications, 2002, pp. 283, Rs. 395.00

Aparna Sen, one of Bengal's best known actresses, is also one of India's leading filmmakers. Sen made her debut with *36 Chowringhee Lane* in 1981 followed by *Parama* (1985), *Sati* (1989), *Yuganta* (What the Sea Said/ 1996), *Paromitar Ek Din* (House of Memories/ 1999) and recently the national award winning *Mr and Mrs Iyer* (2002). In *Parama and Other Outsiders*, Shoma Chatterjee attempts to do a detailed study of five of Aparna Sen's films. The list represents almost all of Sen's major works except *Mr and Mrs Iyer* and her two telefilms.

The book has seven chapters which, in turn, are divided into many sections. Chapters 2 to 6 are devoted to the study of each of the five films starting with *36, Chowringhee Lane* and ending with *Paromitar Ek Din*. The first chapter titled "What is Auteur Theory?" discusses the impetus and theoretical framework for the book while the last chapter titled " Is There a Pattern?" attempts to conclude the book by looking at common threads in all the films.

Chatterjee says that she chose not to meet the filmmaker but instead spent four years "drafting and re-drafting" this book researching from "books, articles, clippings, archival interviews ", etc. She clarifies at the outset that the book has a "political bias" because Sen's films appealed her "first as films *per se*, then because they had something to say about women, then because I am a woman myself and finally, because the one who wrote and directed them is also a woman." In order to study the films, Chatterrjee proposes the deployment of "auteur theory" which she claims is " a basic principle and a method, no more no less: the idea of personal authorship in the cinema." Needless to say, with the current complexity in film studies such a conclusion can only be disconcerting.

This is followed by an even more alarming claim that "what sets the Indian director apart is that he simply cannot afford to create films in a social and environmental vacuum that wipes out his own social context and the social context of the films he makes." (Of course, the first question one might ask is why a pro-woman author would want to describe the generic filmmaker as "he"). This, she says, is the reason we don't have science fiction and special FX films or "anti-narrative" experiments like the films of Godard. One doesn't have to be a film scholar to know that such a formulation is a wild guess. Scholars devoted to the study of science fiction (or any other genre) will point out that no filmmaker is divorced from their social contexts no matter how fantasmatic their work. Moreover, no film is divorced from its social context no matter what genre it belongs to or where/when it happens to be made. Incidentally, Shekhar Kapur's *Mr. India* had sci-fi elements while Rakesh Roshan's *Koi Mil Gaya* could be called a full-fledged sci-fi film however poorly made. This formulation would also be hard pressed to explain why Satyajit Ray, deeply embedded in his social and cultural milieu, was not only a prolific sci-fi writer but went all the way to Hollywood to try and get support for his sci-fi script. Moreover, "anti-narrative" tropes in the form of song and dance sequences have long been deployed by Bombay cinema. Satyajit wrote eloquently, albeit ironically, about this in the seventies in his book *Our Films, Their Films*.

Another foundational problematic in the project is the author's conflating of sex and gender and the constructing of both as universal and homogenizing. Talking about the entry of women film directors in the 80's, Chatterjee writes that "their films reveal a feminine point of view, are expressive of a feminine voice, collectively presenting…a feminine sensibility, distanced from what might be called the masculine sensibility." I wish the author had met Aparna Sen after all because the latter has a far more complex view of gender identity than recourse to essentialism would allow. Early this year, Sen had been invited to the popular TV show *Rendezvous with Simi Grewal*. The admiring hostess commented that when she sees any sequence from Sen's films she knows that a woman has directed it because it has a `feminine sensibility'. Sen replied, that in her opinion, films are best made from an androgynous sensibility and that femininity alone is inimical to the exceution of films. In other words, what may have been constructed as a "masculine sensibility" is as much a part of her filmmaking as a "feminine sensibility".

The essays on individual films are beset with much the same problems. The essays are difficult to read because discussions on each film are interrupted by theoretical or sociological digressions that eventually throw little light on the film being discussed. For instance, a 35-page essay on *36, Chowringhee Lane* has 18 pages devoted to a sociological discussion of the Anglo-Indian community. Similarly, the essay on *Sati* is interrupted by a long discussion on the history of the practice. The essay on *Yuganta* similarly suffers from a long and basic introduction to post-modernism while the essay on *Paromitar Ek Din* has extraneous information on films that show female bonding. These undisciplined digressions prevent the essays from developing any cohesive argument. It is not surprising therefore that the last chapter is titled, "Is there a Pattern?"

Parumita Publications must take a large part of the blame for poor editorial intervention. The typeset and line spacing do not make reading easy. There are little inaccuracies that could easily have been avoided. For example, it was not Kunal but Karan Kapoor who played Davy, Violet Stoneham's fiancé in *36, Chowringhee Lane*. There is no reason why in today's age of 'mechanical and electonic reproduction', the text and photos should not be better presented.■

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A Novel Approach

Abhik Mazumdar

LIGHT OF THE UNIVERSE: ESSAYS ON HINDUSTANI FILM MUSIC
By Aijaz Ashraf
Three Essays Collective, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 126 + xxviii, Rs. 160.00

...film-making is a collective art, and especially lyricists and singers have to subordinate their creativity to the larger cinematic purpose.

Even though the Indian film industry is one of the oldest and definitely the most prolific in terms of output, only in recent times have we begun to give scholarly studies on cinema the prominence they have always merited. One result of this late blooming, so to speak, is that much academic output is devoted to the cinema of the past. Whether this is to fill a void in scholarship caused by the years of neglect, or out of nostalgia for a bygone "Golden Age of Cinema", or even in acknowledgement of the tumultuous times we went through is, of course, a matter of conjecture.

The present book is no exception. Indeed, the only common point of the five essays comprising the book is that their themes are all located in the 1930s to, say, the mid-1960s.

Predictably, the first essay is on Noor Jehan. While it does discuss her life and art in general, it primarily focuses on her as a metaphor for the tumultuous pre- and post-independence eras: "Even when not singing overtly political lyrics, her declaratory and articulate vocalization became a defiant cry for freedom . . .." *Bulbulo mat ro yahan* from the film *Zeenat* reflects the repeated incarceration suffered by freedom fighters. The all-female qawwali *Aahen na bhari* from the same film is construed as attacking a traditionally male bastion, both musical and social. *Umangen dil ki machleen* from *Jugnu* depicts the confusion and trauma of Partition. Still later, songs like *Mujh se meri pehli si muhabbat mere mehboob na mang* from *Qatil* convey her disillusionment in/with Pakistan.

The second one is a general discussion on the composer Sajjad Hussain. The author observes that Sajjad's uniqueness lay in that he did not see any dichotomy between the two, and treated the two together as a seamless whole. In the light of this, the author examines in turn Sajjad's "excruciating minimalism", his originality (using violins instead of the more conventional flutes to produce birdcalls), his styles and so on.

The essay on Shailendra, by far the longest in the book, mainly concentrates on his obsession with suicide. The author undertakes a comprehensive survey of Shailendra's songs, which he treats as evidence of the latter's morbid tendencies. He construes *More ang lag ja* (*Mera Naam Joker*), one of Shailendra's last songs, in this manner:

> It is a song of impending separation at two levels of meaning—it refers to the fate of the character singing it in the movie and, more to the point, the fate of the poet himself. This was the stratagem employed by Shailendra from the beginning to the end of his career . . . indeed his songs were his soliloquies on suicide.

In this manner, each of Shailendra's songs is interpreted as a portent of his eventual suicide. The author also dwells on certain features of his poetry, such as his limited vocabulary: "By restricting himself to a few key metaphors and by their continuous repetition he was able to intensify and focus on his suicidal proclivities."

The fourth essay examines the film *Baiju Bawra* as a social revolt, where the established imperial order (portrayed through Tansen/classical music) is successfully challenged by the masses (Baiju/folk music). The author interprets Akbar's ban on singing as a bid to stifle the people's right to speak. Similarly, *O duniya ke rakhwale* becomes an effort to "appropriate" Raga Darbari from its creator (Tansen) and bring it to the masses, thereby "freeing" it from the confines of the royal palace. As an aside, Meena Kumari's portrayal of a submissive, even "masochistic" Indian woman indicates that the film's revolutionary tenor stops short when it comes to women's issues.

The fifth essay examines the "startling reversal in the socio-political status of women" through contemporaneous changes in the way Hindustani cinema used the female voice. According to the author, singing symbolizes weakness and femininity; not for nothing does Lata Mangeshkar and not any male singer hold the Guinness record for the largest number of songs recorded. Moreover, in the 1930s and the 1940s, female voices were more robust, even more "militant". Only during the chaos following Independence and Partition did males reassert their domination. In *Watan ki raahon mein* (*Shaheed*) Mohammed Rafi covertly calls on males to "step ahead of the ladies". Moreover, Lata's soprano voice signalled the end of the threat posed by "militant" female vocalists.

One cannot deny the author's original thinking and involvement with his subject. At the same time, I feel his approach suffers from some serious lacunae. To begin with, he treats songs as virtually independent entities isolated from their backgrounds. Rarely does he discuss them in their intended settings. For example, he characterizes Shailendra's *Kahan ja raha hai* from *Seema* as "his quarrel with fate and revolt against it." Its cinematic context reveals something quite different. The rebellious child-woman Nutan is about to run away from her foster home (if I recall correctly) and Balraj Sahni, the director of the home, sings this song to pacify her and persuade her to return. In other words, it portrays anything but a revolt. Neither does it depict an internal struggle.

He also seems to credit singers, composers and lyricists with an unusually high degree of independence. After all, film-making is a collective art, and especially lyricists and singers have to subordinate their creativity to the larger cinematic purpose. Hence, treating their output purely in terms of personal expression is out of keeping with their roles as essentially interpreters of the director's intentions.

More seriously, many of his inferences seem rather far-fetched and unsubstantiated. Did Shailendra really use the words *ghari*, *dharak* and *tarap* "as if they were chimes of the clock of his life"? One wonders. Then again, the author's construction of the *Seema* song might have held water had it been either backed up by cogent reasoning or corroborated through other sources. Unfortunately, this is something the author repeatedly ignores.

The fourth essay has its own set of problems. His conjectures might be convincing *per se*, but he fails consistently in trying to extend them to classical music. For example, he characterizes Amir Khan and D.V. Paluskar as belonging to the traditional, princely and new, masses-oriented social orders respectively. Musically, nothing could be further from the truth. Paluskar's style, though sublime, was largely conventional and *gharana*-oriented. On the other hand, the largely self-taught Amir Khan revolutionized *khayal* singing precisely by disregarding *gharana* conventions.

Moreover, gratuitous comments about "silly-sounding *taans*" in *Madhuban mein Radhika* (*Kohinoor*) and so on not only make for distasteful reading but convey the impression of shallowness. (He even omits to mention the singer Faiyaz Ahmed Khan if my memory serves me right.)

All in all, the book does embody a novel approach to understanding film music. Had it been more rigorously reasoned and researched, it would have made a truly valuable contribution to this discipline. Sadly, here the author's efforts are simply not up to the mark. For the most part, his claims remain unsubstantiated conjectures and *non-sequiturs*, and fail to make the transition from hypothesis to theory. That, I feel, is the biggest drawback of the book.■

Abhik Majumdar is a lawyer by profession, and has written extensively on Indian classical music.

Of God And Godmen

Dipavali Debroy

A TOUCH OF DIVINE LOVE: LIFE OF SWAMI KRISHNANAND
By Nalini Verma in association with Kartikeya Sewa Sadan, Faizabad, U.P.
Khama Publishers, Delhi, 2001, pp. 208, Rs. 450.00

Books on swamijis usually make heavy reading. This one is an exception. The Introduction states candidly that Swami Krishnanandji did not have a very wide circle but he did have his followers, whom he preferred to call his 'friends'. One such is the author of this book, Ms Nalini Verma, a 'housewife' with thirty-six years of association with Swamiji. She was assigned the task of writing this book by Param Poojya Mata Kishoriji, Swamiji's guru and the head of the Kartikeya Sewa Sadan, the organization Swamiji had belonged to.

Nalini Verma's book takes us through the various phases of Swamiji's life. 'Poorvashram' (Chapter 2) describes the years before he had formally renounced the world. Mulackal Narayana Krishna Nair (affectionately called Unni Krishnan) had been born on 2 September 1922 at Thiruvalla in Travancore (now in Kerala).The family had education and social standing and was closely associated with the Ramakrishna Mission. A child who was not above an occasional prank, Unni Krishnan nevertheless displayed special sensitivities—went into trances, saw visions and exhibited mystical healing powers usual to 'Godmen'. In 1941, to help out his retired father, young Krishnan Nair joined the Army as a stenographer. After training in Jabalpur, he was posted at Banagalore.

As a worker, Nair was conscientious and colleagues and friends were generally fond of him. But he continued to have his visions and trances and the spiritual aspects of his personality were growing ever stronger. It was his job that in 1951 took him to Faizabad Cantonment where, in 1956, he came under the influence of the young and beautiful Poojaneeya Mata Shri Kishoriji. Her religious discourses churned up his emotions, often reducing him to tears and trances. His spiritual tendencies became so heightened that they began to interfere with his job and indeed even his everyday activities. He arrived at a stage where he could get by only with the cooperation of friends like R.S. Tiwariji and superiors like Colonel Bhatia. Finally he resigned his job, took Mataji as his guru and entered sannyas. The event attracted media attention because by then his elder brother Govindan Nair had become prominent in Kerala politics. His elder sister's letter (pp.37-38) on the occasion is touching. This chapter is indeed an absorbing account of various forces acting upon a young mind and exalting it to extraordinary heights.

'Love Divine'(Chapter 3)treats the second phase of Swamiji's life, spent in a state of intoxication with love—the love of a child for his mother whom he had found in his guru (in spite of Mataji's being four years his junior). 'Love Personified' (Chapter 4) narrates how, in the next phase, Swamiji reached out to people, matching his 'flexible' personality with theirs. He knew how to comfort a widow as well as cheer up a teenager who was scared that glasses would spoil her looks. His circle grew, he became better-known, but he never lost his innocence, humility or charm.

Together, Mataji, Swamiji, and other associates built up their organization at 19 Guptarghat Road, Faizabad Cantonment. 'The Ashram' (Chapter 5) is about life in that haven on the banks of the Sarayu.

'Mahasamadhi'(Chapter6) describes the peaceful end that came to Swamiji on 7 March 1999, within a year of his friend Tiwariji's death. As he had expressed a wish for 'Jal-samadhi', his grieving associates consigned his body to the Sarayu waters.

There were numerous incidents in Swamiji's life that bordered on the miraculous. The book has a healthy approach towards them and recounts them under the head of 'Some Imponderables' (Chapter 7), rather than thrusting them down the throats of readers as divine manifestations.

Swamiji observed *maun* or voluntary silence for forty-two years and communicated with people through articles, letters, 'new year greetings' and conversations in writing. The book performs valuable service in presenting at the end (Chapter 8) a collection of such writings. It also provides a simple glossary that should prove handy for foreigners or the NRI.

The photographs (black-and-white and colour) help build up impressions of people and places mentioned.

The English has an easy flow, with the Indian flavour that the theme demands. Readability is rather rare in biographies of 'Godmen'. It was a pleasant surprise to find it in this book.■

Dipavali Debroy is a critic.

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FICTION

If You Are Afraid of Heights: A Novel by Raj Kamal Jha draws the reader deep into the uncharted zone between fantasy and reality—an odyssey across the landscape of changing urban India.
Picador, Delhi, 2003, pp. 293, Rs. 395.00

A Model House: A Novel by Uttara Chauhan is the story of a young Indo-American in quest of her India roots.
Indialog Publications, Delhi, 2003, pp. 267, Rs. 195.00

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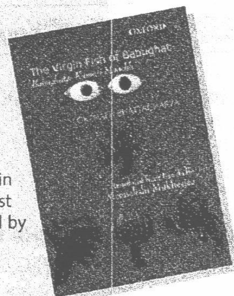

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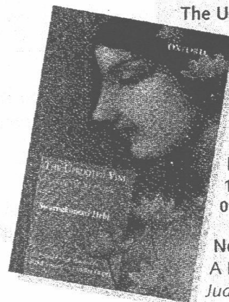

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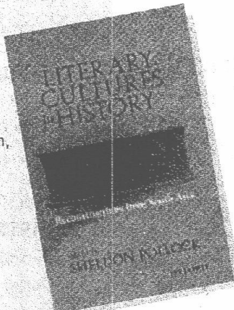

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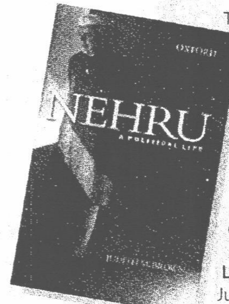

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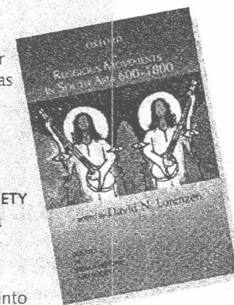

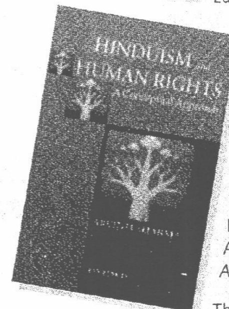

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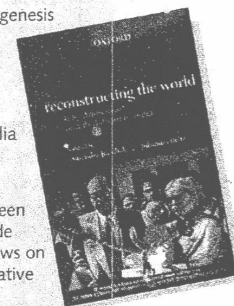

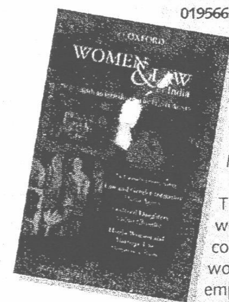

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