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The Book Review Literary Trust is a charitable, non-profit Trust, set up in 1989. One of its chief ongoing projects is the publishing of the review journal The Book Review which will complete its 45th year in December 2021. The Book Review was the first review journal in the English language in India and has been in continuous publication for the last 45 years. In this time, it has promoted scholarly debate, Indian writing in all languages, south Asia studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and many other aspects of writing and publishing, becoming the benchmark, across the world, for critical reviews of works published in south Asia. globally, leading experts in fields as diverse as international relations, gandhian studies, and Indian history, regularly contribute to the journal. Covering a very broad array of subjects, this pioneering venture has rendered a unique service to the literary and academic community and the reading public.

The Book Review is brought out in a print edition, as well as a digital edition accessible on its website: http://thebookreviewindia.org. The journal’s primary revenue for ongoing operations is from advertising revenue and subscriptions.

As the journal completes the 45th year of publication, and The Book Review Literary Trust has completed 32 years, the Trustees have put in place an agenda for the continuance of its activities in the coming decades. The Trust now seeks large grants/endowment/goodwill advertisements/subscriptions to enable the Trust to undertake infrastructure development, to widen the scope of its activities on the digital platform, and gain greater visibility for its activities including The Book Review.

The Trustees of The Book Review Literary Trust therefore appeal to individuals and organizations to support this venture and help fulfil their aspirations for the Trust.

The Book Review Literary Trust thanks the Shivalik Hills Foundation Trust for sponsorship of this special issue of The Book Review on the Valley of Words: International Literature and Arts Festival, 2021.
Cultivating the Word across India
Sanjeev Chopra

Almost all literature festivals are rooted to a city, and it certainly makes a lot of sense to ground a festival in a particular locale: it lends continuity and a cultural connect besides affording an opportunity to the citizens to actively engage with writers, poets, thespians and artists of multiple genres. Over the years, it becomes an annual calendar event in the life of a city and brings to the fore a new cultural space and imagination for the creative minds.

Thus, we have the Jaipur Literature Festival based out of Jaipur, the Khushwant Singh Litfest from Kasauli, the Tata Litfest at Bombay, the Bengaluru Lit Festival, Chandigarh Military History Festival as well as the AKLF at Kolkata, to name a few. In recent years, smaller towns—or Tier II/III cities like Hoshiarpur and Kolhapur have also tried their hands at organizing events around literature and art in their cities. This not only augurs well for the publishing industry—it also encourages many young authors, readers and critics to ‘demystify’ the world of books and literature. Contrary to what the electronic media and WhatsApp aficionados would like us to believe, the world of books and authors is growing from strength to strength. True, many bookshops now have less space for books, and more for coffee mugs and accessories, but then there is the entire world of online and web publishing which is offering an alternate zone for writers, readers and critics to connect.

Till the turn of the century, ‘a published author was held in awe’, but over the last decade, one has seen a very positive trend of teenagers and even younger children publishing their books and participating in festivals and events. Valley of Words (VoW) has been a witness to this change, and two years ago, the youngest writer was all of five years, and the senior-most poet was nine decades elder to him.

Meanwhile, last year, thanks to the challenge of the pandemic, VoW had to bring about a major change in the format of the festival. As social and physical distancing made it virtually impossible to organize physical events especially with the possibility of last-minute cancellation of flights and restrictions on the number of attendees, we moved on to what is described as a ‘phygital event’. Although phygital has not made it as formal term in the lexicon, it means an event in which there is ‘limited physical interaction, but the online presence makes the world a stage’, and it is possible to get panelists and participants from across the world cutting the spatial and temporal limitations. The ‘phygital’ also ensures that everything is archived forever!

This year, while making preparations for the fifth edition, it struck us that we must leverage the new opportunities which technology has opened up. If one has to go phygital—then why not move the festival across the country in multiple cities so that the experience can be shared in the ‘physical format’ by many more people. VoW is thus attempting a first of its kind experiment in which the ten knowledge verticals of the festival are held in different cities for even when the festival is held in a single city, there are multiple venues and participants have to juggle between venues and sessions. So, we reached out to institutions to seek their support in helping organize the festival in different locales. We started by reaching out to the United Services Institution which has been collaborating with us from the very first year. Thus, the fifth edition starts with the Military History and Strategy session at United Services Institution, New Delhi on October 9-10. This year the focus is on the Fifty years of the 1971 War with Pakistan which led to the liberation of Bangladesh. This has been one of the most decisive wars in India’s history. In addition to what is normally discussed, this year we are also looking at the representation of the Fauj on celluloid, with special focus on movies like Border, Paltan and LoC. We are also covering the role of the Mukti Bahini and the BSF in this epochal event. Officers from the armed forces and members of the diplomatic corps from Bangladesh are expected to join as well.

The National Railways Staff College at Vadodara has agreed to host sessions related to Hindi fiction and non-fiction on October 23-24. As a city Vadodara has always been a patron of the arts, and the best paintings of Ravi Verma were not only made in this city but are also displayed in the ‘Baroda’ Museum. A dialogue between poets and authors of Gujarati and Hindi is also envisaged.

On 6-7 November, we celebrate the finest writings in English fiction and non-fiction at Kolkata, where the logistics is being managed by the Indian Chambers of Commerce and the venue has been offered by Westin Hotel. These are interesting partnerships, which help different organizations to contribute their resources for this festival. We then move to MCHRDI at Hyderabad, which will play host to authors shortlisted under the English Translation and Young Writing for Adults vertical on the 13-14 November. A children’s film festival and an exhibition on cartoons is also planned to coincide with the event.

And finally, Dehradun, the city of VoW. We will pay our tribute to Padma Bhushan Sunderlal Bahuguna, the environmentalist known for having steered the Chipko and the movement against large dams in his native village in Tehri Garhwal. Earlier this year, the doyen of Hindi literature Narendra Kohli whose ten volume Maha Samar is a contemporary transcreation of the Mahabharat and explains the context in which the literal text has to be read, passed away on account of CoVID. VoW paid tributes to him through a session in our Webinar series.

This year, we are also planning a knowledge vertical on the history of science in India. Unlike the West, where they looked at science, material, commercial and spiritual worlds in different silos, the Indian tradition is different: the spiritual, the temporal, the material and the ethical are intertwined. The Uttarakhand Council for Science and Technology will curate sessions on the history of science in India and pay tribute to Indian scientists who took a holistic view of human life in the larger eco-system of the universe.

This issue will have reviews of two books by Keswani—whose Mughal-e-Azam was shortlisted for Hindi Non-fiction, and Bagair Unwan Ke, a translation from the Urdu was shortlisted in the translations (Urdu to Hindi) category. It is extremely rare for an individual to be shortlisted in two separate award categories in the same year. Unfortunately, he too lost the battle to CoVID just a week before the announcement of the shortlists. But as Raj Kumar Keswani said in one of his interviews, his favourite lines were those of the protagonist in Raj Kapoor’s Mera Naam Joker, ‘the show must go on’.

Sanjeev Chopra is Director, Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoori. www.valleyofwords.org
Sakoon Singh’s debut novel has a huge canvas; indeed there are many novels waiting to be released and realized from this work. It is a novel about Punjab as much as it is a family saga as it is about love as about the corruption rife in academics and indeed in contemporary civil society as about a number of characters and the pressures on their lives. It is a story of faith, of keeping faith, of courage, and ultimately a cheerful optimistic story of triumph.

The protagonist is Nanaki, who is brought up by her maternal grandparents in Chandigarh, having lost her parents in a car accident when she was very young. She is aware that she has had a very different upbringing from her age-mates who had their parents, obviously much younger people than her grandparents, raising them. This had not only to do with a certain deprivation, but also because the grandparents were not aware of the latest trends and obsessions among the next two generations.

The grandparents are survivors of Partition and their frugal outlook—‘waste not want not’, the grandmother, Beeji, repurposes everything—characteristic of their generation making a new life in a new place, is quite out of sync with that of a new generation of Punjabis who want to make it big and show it to the world. Further, Nanaki’s grandfather, Nanaji, had retired as a Brigadier in the army, having worked his way up from the ranks. He had joined the army during the British Raj and had served in World War II. This meant that a sense of discipline as also courage to chart her own path are inculcated in Nanaki. Her story is thus one of growth from a vulnerable girl into a confident woman, an academic who had the passion, was embroidery, a love that he had picked up from his mother. Joginder Singh plays an important role in the story since it is for him that Nanaki takes a stand later in the story—recognize the absurdity, the tragedy, the hurried engagement with Partition its absurdity, its tragedy, its hurried illogicality, its utter disregard for people whose lives it affected, and its meaninglessness. You cross the border, your dignity in tatters, your idea of selfhood, of belonging, of rootedness, your sense of home, indeed your family, all torn asunder, arrive with festering mental and physical wounds, and find people celebrating Independence, freedom to live their lives away from the foreign yoke! It is their own people who have ultimately let them down. As they rebuild their lives, stitch together their fabric of connectedness with new embroidery of hopes and aspirations, 1984 and the anti-Sikh atrocities happen. The horrors of Partition are never to leave them, they are always fighting a sense of precarity—but always going ahead, always looking to the future with hope. This is the Punjab of lovers, for love always has a central place in the land of hope.

If you were to see the chronology of events in the novel, you have first pre-Partition West Punjab, the ancestral land of Arjan Singh, Nanaji, and Beeji, and of Joginder Singh—the embroiderer extraordinary, mentor of the new recruit Arjan Singh in the jungles of Burma. Then we have the murder of Beeji’s father and her escape along with her mother and the long trudge to Amritsar and their reuniting with Nanaji, a story told of many such families over time, each re-telling equally heart-rending. The grief of Beeji’s mother, her sense of loss and her longing for her home, is visceral. This story is juxtaposed with that of Joginder Singh, who remained in the ranks while his friend Arjan Singh rose up to be an officer; the brave Sikh whose hobby, whose passion, was embroidery, a love that he had picked up from his mother. Joginder Singh plays an important role in the story since it is for him that Nanaki takes a stand later in the story—to recognize the worth of his art. Nanaki’s childhood, adolescence, and her adulthood are delineated in the next phase, and we have her job in Government College, and the delineation of her colleagues and of the campus, including that of the college dhaba owner Karmo and her son, and then her collaboration with the architect Himmat who himself had a troubled and troubling childhood, her victory in college politics, and their love that ends the novel with hope for the future. While the novel complicates our idea of Punjab, breaking down stereotypes, every part of the novel is clearly Punjabi, it is a novel of Punjab.

Finally, I have to say that this is a blockbuster of a novel—one that rewards careful reading.

GJV Prasad is a writer and translator. He was till recently Professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University.
A Granary of Food-for-thought

Kiran Doshi

It takes a world to raise a book’, says the author in his ‘Acknowledgments’. That is entirely believable of this book, The Wall. For it is an awesome piece of work, vast, intricate, part novel, part commentary on the human condition, part treatise on politics, part allegory—a huge tapestry. Only someone with an extraordinary erudition, imagination, stamina and skill could have woven it—someone like Gautam Bhatia, thinker, writer, master of intriguing words. Surprisingly, The Wall is his first venture in the world of serious fiction.

The story line of the book is simple: a group of young revolutionaries led by a firebrand called Mithila wants to change the old order of their city, Sumer, which is encircled by a high wall. The leaders of the city want to preserve the order. In 2000 years of its existence nobody from Sumer has ever gone to the other side of the wall, and no living being from the other side has come to it, except garudas, those magnificent birds that can fly high and far. The place is more completely isolated—and self-sufficient—than any city-state in history. The leaders claim that the wall gives the citizens of Sumer security and certainty. The revolutionaries charge that security is not all. They want freedom—from the wall itself, and a chance to leap into the unknown.

When read for its story, the novel is easy to follow, and highly entertaining, with clear battle lines, obvious heroes and villains and plenty of action, especially in the second half of the book. Most of the action features the young heroine, but there are several other important characters, and scores of extras, women as well as men, in fact women more than men, for Sumer’s is a matriarchal society. It is also a society that encourages (for population control reasons) same sex unions and requires prior permission of the state for marriages (between men and women). Interestingly, the place also has a class system (with shades of a caste system). The young revolutionaries are therefore not the only people that want change. Resentment against the old order simmers in many other hearts as well. And yes, the story has a breath-taking ending. In short, the book is the sort of stuff that successful sci-fi films—or, better still, Netflix serials—are made of.

For the Indian reader, the novel has an additional attraction: the names of the people and places have the flavour of ancient India (mandala, Meenakshi, Hansa, Ananta, Rastogi, garuda, maidan, …). Then there is the filmic quality of the locale of the place, the city of Sumer. A perfect circle (globe?), the city is intricately structured, as if by a master architect, divided neatly into two perfect halves by a river (equator?) and then into living quarters in its southern half by the tributaries of the river. Fantastic principal buildings, described lovingly—and architecturally—by the author, dot the city. (Don’t miss the delightful two-page map of the place before ‘Contents’.) And, incredibly, there is a living city beneath the city.

The novel too is similarly structured. It is divided in four parts of more or less equal length, each part consisting of exactly five chapters, every part separated from the next by an intriguing pause, named ‘A Voice in the Dark’, or ‘Interlude’, and designed to help the reader learn a little more of the mystery that is Sumer, or to step into yet another mystery, or just to recover his breath. Forays into the past appear at regular intervals throughout the book, as do reflections, sometimes in the form of songs. A Prologue and an Epilogue begin and end the narrative. Incidentally, the book does not end with the Epilogue. It ends with ‘A Voice in the Dark-IV’, a real teaser, that, straight out of Alice in Wonderland, more on which anon.

But once you have raced through the book and learnt what happens in the end, you will want to read the book all over again, to focus on all those words, phrases and sentences that you had gone through too rapidly the first time. (Examples? ‘Can you have two loves—and not betray at least one of them?’ ‘Meaning is not exhausted by words.’ ‘I have seen enough in my life to doubt my own senses, let alone what is written in a book.’) Read, above all, the four pages of an interview with the first president of Sumer on pages 182-185. Purportedly something that took place in a distant past of Sumer, the interview reads like something from this morning’s newspaper anywhere in the world. That—in its contemporariness as well as universality—is indeed the main, and overwhelming strength of the book. The book is a granary of food-for-thought for those who worry about how societies are and should be governed.

And now to ‘A Voice in the Dark-IV’, with which the book ends: ‘Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. I must confess, I did not foresee this. This…changes everything.’

What does it mean? That the author is planning to write a sequel to The Wall? He certainly owes it to us after an ending that leads straight to the question: Then what happened?

Kiran Doshi, a retired diplomat, writes—mostly fiction.
Pakistan’s Penal Code or Section 295-C, commonly known as the ‘Blasphemy Law’, is a colonial legacy. In British India blasphemy laws were applicable to persons of any religion. They aimed to define rights, point at duties and ensure protection of all religions. In the 1920s, owing to communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims over the publication of a book denigrating the Prophet, the laws were amended to include offence to founders of any religious faith as a criminal offence. In Pakistan, through the 1980s blasphemy laws were weaponized under the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq as part of his project to Islamicize civic and political codes. Amendments were made to include within their perspective derogatory remarks against the Prophet or the Quran and defilement of the Quran. Punishment for a supposed blasphemous crime could range from a fine to life imprisonment and death penalty. A number of blasphemy cases are presented in law courts across Pakistan and though they may not always conclude in judicial judgments decreeing execution of the accused, they pose serious threats to their lives and to the lives of their families. Accusations may be motivated by vested personal or political interests and dogmatic, tyrannical and even absurd laws that go against the spirit of the Islamic faith come handy. Blasphemy Laws intimidate and harass the accused. Cases are long drawn, discriminatory and abusive. Over and above, litigants tend to take the law in their hands and ensure violent closures by assassinating the accused during or before trial. The laws reveal a supercilious, bigoted and intolerant political system targeting minority religious communities, intent upon stymieing the fundamental right to freedom of expression and instilling fear.

Osman Haneef was born in Pakistan. As the child of a diplomat he grew up in cities in Asia, Australia, Europe and the Middle East. He studied creative writing at Yale, Stanford, Colby, Curtis Brown Creative and the Faber Academy. He was awarded the Frank Allen Bullock Prize for creative writing by the University of Oxford. He has worked as a tech entrepreneur, a television anchor, strategy consultant and a diplomatic adviser. His father is a principled but insecure man and his mother knows about Pir Piya’s meteoric rise to power.

Osman Haneef’s novel Blasphemy: The Trial of Danesh Masih was released in Pakistan bearing the title The Verdict. The main plot centres Danesh Masih’s trial and the sub-plot unravels the sudden and unexplained disappearance of Sanah from Boston and from Sikandar Ghaznavi’s life. Ghaznavi’s return to his hometown Quetta is occasioned by his sense of gratitude for his recently deceased childhood nurse. At the centre is Sikandar’s need to make amends and redeem himself of his guilt for staying away for a protracted period and his compelling need to know what drove Sanah away from him.

The plot implicating Danesh Masih is dense and murky. It involves the larger community of Quetta professing the majoritarian faith. At the centre is a God man Pir Piya, a compulsive paedophile, a clairvoyant religious fanatic. He and his cronies are active agents in or facilitators of crime. A handful of people belonging to the minority Christian community become scapegoats. The laypeople of Quetta, by and large uneducated, blind followers of the Pir, are either accomplices to or mute spectators of crimes against Danesh and his sister Mena, and very likely, against many more vulnerable people as indicated by the Pir’s liaison with the child Hakim. Danesh is a thirteen year old, illiterate Christian child accused of writing inflammatory statements on the wall of a mosque. Sanah defends him in court at the behest of Sikandar and encourages him to do so too. As a young, Boston-returned lawyer Sikandar is perceived as the smart-aleck outsider who deserves to be punished for taking up the case of the underdog.

The sub-plot dealing with the love story of Sikandar and Sanah offers glimpses into the lives of the two protagonists. It provides relief from the larger public plot involving the trial. Sanah is a human rights lawyer who always wanted to practice in Pakistan. Back in Boston she was Sikandar’s girlfriend. Married to an army officer Fazeel, she lives in Quetta now. As Sikandar tries to get over his feelings for her, unexpected truths come to light. Sikandar recognizes that he is an outsider in their circle of two. Woven into these two plots is the story of Sikandar’s parents which provides perspective to the entire narrative. His father is a principled but insecure man and his mother knows about Pir Piya’s meteoric rise to power.

Blasphemy: The Trial of Danesh Masih
By Osman Haneef
Readomania, 2020, pp. 287, ₹350.00

The Epilogue takes up the high profile case of Asia Noreen or Asia Bibi, falsely accused of blaspheming against the Prophet in 2009 while picking falsa berries in a field with co-farmhands in Sheikhupura district of Punjab. She lived in solitary confinement under threat of execution till her acquittal by the Supreme Court in
Outsmarting Patriarchal Forces

Gitanjali Chawla

Khaleeji’s landscape reverberates in this Taliban-esque cartography, a racy narrative of two young women who set out to change their destiny and the nation’s too as it sits smugly in patriarchal hegemony and control. Sometimes Ivory, Sometimes Sand by debutante novelist, Mahek Jangda, is a racy thriller which could very well be the next formulaic Bollywood flick with all elements that set cash registers ringing. Laila Jagir and Jasmine Mir inhabit two apparently different worlds with the same bottom-line of women being persona non grata. A familiar territory where girls are starved to feed the boys, a woman’s destiny is governed by fathers and husbands and where marriage is the ultimate saving grace.

Laila comes from the more cosmopolitan Rahat, the hotbed of councils and state politics where women may be indulged at the home front if they toe the line and perform their womanly duties of appeasing male egos and needs but also where female births are all things catastrophic. Women in the lower orders enjoy relatively greater freedom as they cross over to financial autonomy, though out of need and not choice and the ensuing freedom it entails. That Laila is a Jagir is heavily underlined and Thakur, her grandfather, the overpowering uber macho patriarch rules the roost, belying the wings that her indulgent father Ahmed gives her. In a naïve bid to outsmart patriarchal forces by trying to garner the necessary votes in the council for inclusion of women in the decision-making process, Laila finds herself in the abusive marital clutches of Raymond Tony and it is her pursuit from him and the subsequent twists and turns that lead to fervent flipping of pages. In her escape, not only does she puncture his machismo but also takes along Jai, his illegitimate but acceptable male child from a previous affair, adding further salt to his wounded pride. ‘Courage takes one a long way’ and it is her impetuous naiveté that fuels her journey into self-discovery and empowerment.

Jasmine on the other hand inhabits the rural dusty Mahlah, enmeshed between a runaway father, an abusive brother who assuages his wounded ego with whiplashes and a silent mother figure in Nina whose suffering is her only salvation. Jasmine’s flight to

Rishika by Dipavali Sen describes a journey that Ila, a working woman in the NCR, takes in her lonely flat by reading ancient Indian texts about the lives of Rishikas or women sages mentioned in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Puranas. She re-lives as well as re-creates those stories with her own contemporary approach. Based on original material in Sanskrit, this book provides, through Ila, a fresh look at an essentially male-dominated world. Interspersed with the lives of Gargi, Apala and the like, there are snippets of Ila’s own life. This is what makes the book a blend of the present and the past.

Bluerose Publishers, 2021, pp.232, ₹248.00

Sometimes Ivory, Sometimes Sand

By Mahek Jangda

Hachette India, 2020, pp. 272, ₹450.00

Mahek Jangda has a bachelor’s degree in business administration from NMIMS, Mumbai, a diploma in Persian from Mumbai University and is currently pursuing a postgraduate diploma in the liberal arts from Ashoka University under the Young India Fellowship programme. Her poetry has been featured by The Hindu Business Line (Blink), Hyderabad Literary Festival, UnErase, Kommune, Habitat Studios, Filtercopy and the Poetry Club (Mumbai).
“Khaled Hosseini’s landscape reverberates in this Talibanesque cartography, a racy narrative of two young women who set out to change their destiny...”

Rahat gives her the anonymity and the freedom she needs to search for the missing puzzling pieces in her life. The avuncular Mr. Ruff takes her under his wing and his diner and its employees become home and family for her. She finds companionship in Amer, an erstwhile marital prospect who becomes a friend and guide away from normative societal forces embodied in his parents. The novel though is surprisingly silent about the harassment and abuse that Jasmine must have faced in the diner, be it from the customers or other employees considering the oppressive era it builds for its women. Nevertheless, it is Laila’s dramatic encounter with Jasmine and their collective efforts to find their own spaces and carve a different destiny for women which holds ground in this fast-paced narrative.

The grim and heavy beginning plods its way to a racy finish, interlaced with suspense, thrill and a bit of humour as well. ‘I prefer kulcha to human beings’ asserts Jasmine in a novel where food is found in abundance, be it in Nina’s lip-smacking biryani or in newspaper-wrapped samosas or surreptitious treats for Jai in cakes and ice cream; metaphorically, embodying both the normative and the subversive. The villains in this fictional world though are not always male. The ‘articulate, elegant and smart’ Naya Roben, the wife of an ex-head of the Rahat police, is not the liberating force that Laila had imagined. Her organization which teaches women skills such as writing, sewing, and nursing and offers lucrative placement opportunities is just a front for other nefarious activities. With Raymond Tony and money power by her side, she is a formidable opponent whom Laila and Jasmine, take on headlong along with Ruff Junior, a young lawyer. There are several weak links, improbable, and farfetched, marring an otherwise interesting potboiler. Jasmine, the illiciter runaway impersonates as a journalist to expose Roben but naturally captured and molested by the latter’s thugs but saved in the nick of time by the note that she had left behind for Amer who gets it fortuitously on time. Furthermore, towards the end, the novel remembers the primary reason why Jasmine came to Rahat—to find her errant and presumed dead father, Kaiza Mir. The narrative rushes to tie this loose end in a series of bizarre incidents which seem forced and formulaic. The elusive Fern Tree, the murder of Rustom Seljel, the nurse at Terese hospital and the final piece in this maze, Dr Richard’s disclosure of Kaiza’s note on his death bed redeeming his escape from the oppressive confines of familial responsibilities, all straight out of a Bollywood film script.

‘We stood up for ourselves, Laila, when no one would... That’s a victory.’ Ultimately, both Laila and Jasmine fulfill the purposes they had set for themselves, though one is left wondering about the pitfalls ahead, the battles to be fought, the hurdles to be crossed as they will have to deal with the dystopic elements in the utopia they both envision. This debut offering by Jangda evocatively titled Sometimes Ivory, Sometimes Sand taken from Akhil Katyal’s poem ‘Udaipur (Early Morning)’ is full of promise, and one looks forward to her next foray in fiction.

Gitanjali Chawla is Professor of English at Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi, India. She is also a folklorist, editor and materials producer. She is the co-editor of five anthologies, Cultures of the Indigenous: India and Beyond (2014), De-territorialising Diversities: Literatures of the Indigenous and Marginalised (2014), Re-storying the Indigenous and the Popular Imaginary (2017), Knowledge Organisations: Aspirations and Experiences (2020) and Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon (2021).

Glimpse into a Virtual World

Jennifer Monteiro

Analog/Virtual is one of the few books in the genre of speculative fiction with a futuristic Indian context that oscillates between the styles of dystopia and social satire. It has also won Lavanya Lakshminarayan the AuthHer Award 2021 for the Best Debut Book. The format of the book is an experimental one too, which is a narrative of interconnected short stories that moves forward in different frequencies to reach the denouement in the book. The work can also be interpreted as a novel as the congruence of time, place and action weaves it together from differing perspectives. There is a constant and relative linear progression as one moves forward towards the titling point in the story. The narrative technique represents multiple points of view in small episodes. The perspectives cut across age, gender, class and more in order to knit the larger narrative and critique the metaphoric representation of the contemporary reality of a technology-driven India.

The author has not followed the conventional binary of representing the hero and the villain in a monolithic character or notion but instead has presented a plural possibility of both drawn from the hermeneutics of opposing points of view. The futurist conglomerate presented as the Bell Foundation is at the crux of the narration. It has formed the Apex City, formerly known as Bangalore in a previous world order, and is an emblem of a postmodern and post-human civilization. This corporation is not only in control of the business, finances, governance of the city but is also monitoring the climate, people’s thought process, their emotions, their relationships as well as their anatomy. They start young, as is evident in the chapter ‘Etudes’ in which Nina Anand is an Analog orphan adopted by Virtual parents who also happen to be the twenty percenters. The sign board of the adoption home reads, ‘Adopt at your own risk. No guarantees, no returns’ (p. 157). It reveals how kids too are treated as commodity and perceived as potential agents of evolution who would add more value to the growing curve of society’s concept of progress and advancement.

In the book, Apex City is depicted as a technarchy which functions on the principle of meritocracy. The technarch Bell Corporation declares its governing principle in the Preamble to the Bell Charter on Human Rights stating, ‘Bell Corp declares that civilization is free from discrimination. A universal system of merit determines an individual’s worth to society. We are a Meritocratic

Glimpse into a Virtual World

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Technarchy. We are the future of the human race’ (p. 7). This new world order prioritizes productivity over everything else, thus, re-imaging a world free from social discriminations. However, the people are still divided and autocracy has shifted from the reins of a few privileged people to a technology-dominated tyrannical authority. Here humanism has taken a back seat and one form of oppression has replaced the other in this new world order. The broad segregation is between the ‘Virtuals’ and the ‘Analogs’. The former inhabit the privileged part of the city and avail the benefits of technological and scientific advances, the latter form the bottom ten percent of the population and are kept outside the borders of the tech city. The ‘Carnatic Meridien’ is a physical, geographical border that demarcates the two; also used as a satire on the contested ideas of nation and nationality in the present milieu. Anyone who illegally tries to cross this Meridien is electrocuted depicting borders as oppressive and anti-humanitarian. The social divide portrayed is much deeper and more horrific although more permeable than the intersections and compartments born out of caste, creed, gender, sexuality and class. The Virtuals perceive the ten percenters as scum as they form the lowest class of this society, describing them as lazy and unproductive which can be interpreted as a metaphor of the caste and class untouchability that plagues the social matrix of an otherwise contemporary and progressive India. The Virtuals are further divided and rewarded based on the assessment of their performance and productivity which uses the metaphor of interpreting the human being as a machine and being subsumed into the invisible web of a consumerist technarchy. The top twenty percenters are the only ones who are privileged to experience anything as real as a real vacation, referred to as an on-site vacation as opposed to a seventy percentner who gets access to only a virtual experience of a vacation. The pressures of performing well at all times is unreal as the failure to do so results in deportation to the world of Analogs and the fear of this is unsurmountable. In this futurist world, technology is a double-edged sword, as she represents it as an equalizer. It enables women to be at par with men in terms of presenting equal opportunities at work, however, it diminishes the biological difference of a female anatomy. Surrogacy too has been transferred to the robotic pods, such as ‘PregaPod’ (p. 113) that act as artificial wombs or ‘nanny-bod’ (p. 286) that act as artificial nannies, thus infiltrating the world of humans with overpowering artificial intelligence. The author presents an ironically situation for the women of this world who despite the technological progress are still prisoners of the technarchy, which can also be construed as patriarchal. The exercise of freedom and progress is illusory as the technarchy prohibits real independence of choice to men and women alike. World orders might change but biases remain. Lakshminarayan has indeed painted the figures of heroic women in the Analog world instead in the figures of Nyaka, Ro, Suzein who persist courageously in a depraved world and are able to turn the tables around.

The end of the novel is symbolic in which the old father from the Analog world re-unites with John, his ambitious son from the Virtual world. It symbolizes the breakdown of borders and divisions that segregate people and turn them against humanity. Apex City is engulfed in darkness in the end of the novel representing chaos and it is from this chaos and darkness that the promise of a new world order must emerge. The darkness does not distinguish between the old father and the young son and their representative territories are signified as fragile and temporary, like the world around us.

Jennifer Monteiro is Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, Delhi. Her areas of interest are Masculinities and Gender Studies, Women’s Studies, Popular and speculative fiction, Indian Literature, Culture Studies and Theory.
Art of Memorializing Gandhi

Rajesh Sharma

Sumathi Ramaswamy has long engaged with visual studies of Indian art and culture. A Professor of History and International Comparative Studies in Duke University, Durham, USA, she is also the co-founder of Tasveerghar, a digital network of South Asian visual popular culture. Her Gandhi in the Gallery: The Art of Disobedience is a narrative history of the art of memorializing Gandhi. An appropriate style is the most essential demand of such a narrative, which Ramaswamy meets by forging a style that can be called Gandhian. It is spare and muscular, fast-paced and steady, precise but resonant, accessible yet capable of profundities, and clear in the face of ambiguity and paradox. This alone should make the book a reviewer’s feast. But there is more.

The limpid flow of the narrative has—to recast for cultural studies a vintage word—an ‘epic’ sweep that melds art history, biography, popular culture, high art, political history, anecdote, art criticism, cultural theory, and more. The narrative looks forward and backward, weaving references to produce temporal three-dimensionality so characteristic of rich literary narratives. Yet the literary part is not overwrought, except in the alliterative titles oddly crowning the chapters. Generally, a certain Gandhian restraint, even austerity, invites the reader to a gentle immersion. Beginning with Mukul Dey’s 1919 portrait of Gandhi in pencil, you virtually accompany the author walking through the art gallery over a century’s distance. Throughout, she maintains a seasoned scholar’s poise, becoming neither reverential nor irreverent toward her subject.

In Ramaswamy’s hands, theory is not a bunch of clichéd jumlas, though she loves a smartly turned-out phrase. Her critical consciousness has assimilated theory so that she sees with it but also through it, terms which a lesser academic would use for self-preening, serve to just rightly illuminate an object. Guy Debord, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Rancière and Žižek are invisibly preening, serve to just rightly illuminate an object. guy Debord, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Rancière and Žižek are invisibly present, not sticking out like plastic corpses from some infirm syrupy cake.

Visual arts are all about attentive seeing, which has to be cultivated (as the modern masters and theorists of the visual from John Berger to Hal Foster tell us). Culture, of which these arts are a part, is the fruit as well as the tree of sensuous consciousness. In Mathias Enard’s novel Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants, Michelangelo says that a mere hand studied carefully can teach you all the secrets of sculpture. Cezanne’s wife recounts how the great painter on his death bed was staining his age-dimmed eyes to better see some objects in the room. From their astonishing ways of seeing, Rembrandt and Caravaggio created their miracles of light and shade. Ananda Coomaraswamy notes that the ancient Hindu and Buddhist iconography was rooted in a method of seeing with the faculty of imagination: a work of art would be virtually completed in the artist’s imagination before the hand began to actually work. In Tantra, the world, like that in art, is said to be a vikalpa—another ‘making’ (kalpa means, among other things, making). Aristotle called a poet a maker, for the poet perceives, like the Divine Maker, ‘the first principles’—the ability earning him a status equal to the philosopher’s and the scientist’s. Aristotle wanted the aspiring poets to practice visualization if they wished to enter reality. Kafka, his posthumous literary guru Flaubert, Nabokov, Robert Walser—none has heeded the advice.

Ramaswamy’s ‘short’ study, based on extensive documentation, is intended to fill a gap in historical scholarship on Gandhi by bringing to light the visual artists’ contribution to his emergence as a ‘bio-icon’. The study is structured in five parts. Part 1 deals with Gandhi’s enigmatic relation with art; parts two to four treat of his body, mobility and dying respectively; part five articulates the ironic thesis that the visual artists have not only disobeyed ‘the paradigmatic artist of disobedience’ who expressly disapproved of any attempts to memorialise him but have done it rather ‘obediently’, that is unquestioningly.

EM Forster cannily saw that Gandhi was an artist ‘though art was not his medium’. Gandhi claimed to ‘know nothing about art’, yet he practiced the most difficult of the arts—the art of self-fashioning, to use Foucault’s phrase in translation. This art has ancient provenances; the Stoics practiced it, as did the Indian ascetics. But Gandhi augmented its scope by giving it a political and ethical dimension, even turning it into an instrument of mass awakening and mobilization. So he is rightly received by the artists as ‘a fellow artist’ though of a different order. His cultivated habit of attentive seeing perhaps made him grasp, as early as 1903 in South Africa, the nefarious potential of ‘photo passes’ for bio-political control through surveillance. His premonitory insight into the technologies of power foreshadows Foucault’s studies in more than one instance. His written statement to the court, when he was accused of spreading disaffection against the government, memorably evokes the British rulers’ use of the spectacle to emasculate and erase the Indian people.

This most photographed person of the century who had a love-hate relation with the camera did imagine his own corpse when he was shown a photograph of himself asleep. And strangely, when he was shot dead there was no camera around. So art had to fill in for that absence. MF Husain’s canvases, thus, gloriously and bloodlessly portray the assassination, making Gandhi at once human and mythical. Outside high art, popular culture has depicted the moment,
but rather melodramatically.

In discarding the normative bourgeois clothing and adopting partial nakedness, Gandhi staged an act of sartorial decolonization and turned his thin brown Indian body into a corporeal spectacle which spoke for his people brutalized and impoverished by the Empire. In terms of cultural history, this also meant reconnecting with the long traditions of asceticism, particularly among the Jains in India. The figure of Christ and of the emaciated Buddha deepened the resonance of his image for a universal spectatorship. The author wonders, in an aside, why there is reticence with regard to the half-naked male body.

The mobile Mahatma occupies the longest section of Ramaswamy’s book. For the artists the greatest challenge was capturing the marching Mahatma’s dynamism; not everyone succeeded, obviously. Philosophically speaking, as Ramachandra Gandhi remarked, the walking meant a nomadic way of being in the world. It was an act of radical self-dispossession and freedom, and a refusal of the ways of capitalist industrial imperialism. The Dandi March invested the small with immense greatness, alchemizing a symbol into substance. Some of the finest sculptures and canvases have sprung from the moment Gandhi bent down to make salt and break the law. His dying has also inspired some extraordinary art. While popular art has inclined towards images of ascension (mixing Hindu and Christian iconography), modernist art has tried to confront it without the solace of immortality—but even it has not been able to shed an attitude of piety.

Ramaswamy points out that the visual artists, unlike the writers, have by and large failed to critique the Mahatma; only some artists from the oppressed sections have challenged his dominant stereotype. Some recent art, Debanjan Roy’s for instance, has employed the shock of incongruity to spotlight the lapses from Gandhi’s moral vision to which the neoliberal order has made us blind. It is by thus reinventing Gandhi as a moral touchstone that the artists have kept his moral compass ticking after him.

The assassination did not finish Gandhi; it only enhanced his afterlife in representations. And yet his excessive memorializing might also mean a disavowal of his actual absence from our lives.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah was an extraordinary, exceptional leader. He will remain an abiding presence in the Indian subcontinent. So will be the question whether he has served the cause of Islam and the Muslims of the subcontinent well by his insistence on the Partition of India."

(1956) noted that there was no agreed definition among the ulama of who was a Muslim. The controversy over Jinnah’s own sectarian affiliations is further confirmation.

Jinnah consistently advocated the concept of Indian Muslims not as a large minority but ‘a discrete and distinct nation’; as a ‘political nation entitled to self-determination’. In his speech on 23 November 1940, he was unambiguous: Pakistan was the goal; ‘not a counter for bargaining’. He insistently rejected alternatives to keep India united. He imparted finality in his first Presidential Address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947: ‘in my judgement there was no other solution’; ‘that was the only solution of India’s constitutional problem’; ‘any idea of a united India could never have worked, and in my judgement it would have led us to terrific disaster.’

Jinnah’s advocacy started with seeking a homeland for the Indian Muslims; it shifted to safeguarding Islam (‘Islam in danger’). This appeal to religion was essential as the focus changed from protecting Muslim minorities in Hindu majority areas to creating Pakistan in Muslim majority provinces in the north-west and the north-east. The regional parties held sway there; Jinnah’s Muslim League was weak politically and organizationally; it held little appeal in these territories as the 1937 elections showed. The appeal to religion ensured a sea-change over the following decade.

The irony was that he was using the Muslim minority card to create a nation in Muslim majority areas. He was content with seeking constitutional safeguards for ‘just and fair’ treatment for the Muslim minorities in Hindu majority areas in return for offering the same to the non-Muslim minorities in Pakistan. Each, in his view, would become hostage to good treatment of the other by each country. He even asked the Muslim minority populations to sacrifice their own interests for those of their brethren in majority areas and not ‘obstruct at least sixty of the ninety million Muslims’ from having their own nation; ‘he was willing …to let the two crores of Muslims (in Hindu majority provinces) be smashed’ (p. 232, p. 248).

It is a tribute to Jinnah’s charisma and powers of persuasion that the majority of the speakers (eight out of fourteen) at the Muslim League session in Lahore in March 1940 who endorsed the demand for Pakistan were from Muslim minority areas. They stood to gain nothing, Jinnah, in his Eid message of 18 August 1947, credited Muslim minority provinces as ‘pioneers’ in attainment of ‘our cherished goal’; in a press interview on 25 October 1947, he said they had played a ‘magnificent part in achievement and establishment of Pakistan.’

Jinnah’s was by no means unchallenged. Theologians, ideologues, sectarian organizations, regional nationalists all opposed Partition. Within weeks of the Pakistan Resolution at the Muslim League session (Lahore, 22-24 March 1940), his two-nation theory as well as territorial nationalism were questioned and rejected at a well-attended conclave at the Azad Maidan in Delhi (27 April 1940), described by the British-owned Statesman as the most representative gathering of Muslims, politics and fate played their part. Many opponents were isolated, side-lined or expelled from the League; others compromised; deaths and assassinations intervened.

Jinnah was only too mindful that it was the British who held the power to grant Pakistan. His resolute refrain was Partition and leave; the Congress position was leave and let the Indians decide. Indeed, in 1944, Gandhi, with a united India in mind, had suggested that since he was opposed to the Congress, he might lead an alternative formation including others of similar persuasion e.g., the Dalits, Dravidians etc. Jinnah summarily rejected it. Gandhi pleaded for an opportunity to place this case before the Muslim League Council and General Body. Jinnah refused saying only the League member—only Muslims could be members—had that right (pp.286-87).

The scales were tilted in favour of Jinnah by the British. Pursuing their own interests, the British gave weightage, through the war, to Jinnah who supported their war effort. The Congress was shunned for withholding support failing British commitment to Indian Independence. Yet, they were pragmatic. Post-War, the British assessment favoured a united, friendly India with a defence alliance: it would better serve strategic and economic interests i.e., manpower for the armed forces; air and naval bases; trade. ‘Pakistan’ was considered unviable. But if ‘Pakistan’ served that goal better, so be it.

When the British made public their preference for a united India in July 1946, Jinnah decided to give up constitutionalism and launch Direct Action. If Pakistan could not be had by peaceful means, it would have to be realized through force. Within days, bloody communal riots provoked by the Muslim League ensued in Calcutta (August 16-19, 1946), followed by riots in several other places including Bombay, Bihar, western UP, Noakhali and even as far away as in Punjab and the NWFP. Thousands from both communities were killed, injured and rendered homeless. Even a joint appeal by Gandhi and Jinnah to maintain communal peace and against violence had little effect.

Widespread attacks on non-Muslims in Muslim majority areas of western Punjab started in March 1947; by July 1947, Muslims faced retaliation in Sikh, Hindu majority eastern Punjab. The author, based on his Punjab Partition studies, says the Partition entailed displacement of 4.5 million Hindus and Sikhs from the Pakistani Punjab and six million Muslims from the Indian Punjab; 500,000 Muslims and 300,000 Hindus and Sikhs perished.

Jinnah, as Governor-General, condemned the violence and called for peace. He persisted, in the ensuing months, in accusing the Congress and Hindus of a conspiracy to pull out Hindus from, and drive out Muslims to, Pakistan. Contradictorily, he appealed to the conscience of those very leaders and masses whom he castigated for being anti-Muslim, to be civilized. But at no point did he return to that pre-Partition phase when he had envisaged exchange of populations. He preferred, instead, for Muslims left behind in India to make what best they could; Pakistan was not on offer as a safe haven.

Jinnah had envisioned and advocated a Pakistan with the six provinces of NWFP, Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan in the West and Bengal and Assam in the East: with Punjab and Bengal in their entirety. He denied the Sikhs and other non-Muslim groups in these areas the status of a nation and asked them to reconcile themselves to being a minority in a Muslim majority state with guarantees of constitutional safeguards. He refused to entertain the thought that in much the same logic as his own in demanding self-determination for the Muslims, there would be similar demands from these minority groups. As Wavell contemporaneously noted, Jinnah’s demand was unrealistic; he couldn’t seek Partition of India and yet demand all of the Punjab and Bengal against the will of the minorities of those provinces. In the event, what he got was a ‘husk’, ‘moth eaten’ Pakistan with both the Punjab and Bengal partitioned. Within weeks, during Jinnah’s own lifetime, Chaudhry Khaliqzaman, his own
As we enter the 75th year of our Independence and Partition, Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed’s book is a timely refresher as memories begin to regress into the recesses of history. It examines Jinnah’s personality and role in the contemporary and historical contexts.

Professionally, Jinnah was highly successful. His rich clients in Bombay and, later when he was practising at the Privy Council in London, were generous paymasters. Personally, he maintained a lavish lifestyle; dressed as an Englishman, enjoyed his drinks, had tall Pathans as bodyguards. ‘What I am inside, I am the same outside.’ He longed to return to his Malabar Hills residence saying, ‘I love Bombay’. He made no donations to charitable causes. But his May 1939 will—unchanged post-Partition—included bequests to the Bombay University, Anjuma-e-Islamia school on Hornby Road in Boribundar and the Arabic College in Delhi. Aligarh Muslim University was also a beneficiary. But the money didn’t actually come through after his death on 11th September 1948.

Jinnah has remained controversial. He was a ‘completely self-made man of obscure origin’, noted the Punjab Governor Henry Craick in March 1940. MC Chagla did not consider him a particularly good lawyer, just a skilled advocate. Mountbatten saw him as ‘cold, haughty, impenetrable, dictatorial, a psychopath’. Other varied assessments abound.

Ironically, Jinnah’s original vision for India in the phase when he was the ‘Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity’ and a proponent of inclusive nationalism encompassing all communities, was unexceptionable, remains relevant to this day, and merits recall. He then spoke not of communal or collective rights but rights of all individuals as citizens. Defending the Lucknow Pact, Jinnah had warned the Muslims against ‘enemies’ propagating the bogey of a ‘Hindu Government’ and asked them to join in ‘cooperation and unity’ with the Hindus. India will not be governed by ‘the Hindus… nor the Mussalmans’ but by the ‘people of the country’. He asked the Muslims to ‘join hands with your Hindu brethren’ and the Hindus to ‘lift your backward brother up’.

The book under review has a Delhi connection. The author acknowledges being a long-standing customer of Bahri Sons bookshop in Khan Market. The suggestion that he write a book was mooted by the sion, Anuj Bahri, while his daughter Ms Anchal Malhotra suggested a Partition-related book which led to the author’s choice of subject. Dilliwallahs, thus, have an additional reason to read this densely documented, richly referenced book about a leader who was, and will remain, an inextricable part of the subcontinent’s history.

TCA Rangachari is a former diplomat and former Director of the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi.

Four Strokes of Luck translated from the Tamil by Nandini Krishnan is a collection that will delight every admirer of Perumal Murugan, and introduce new readers to his hallmark empathy, humanity and humour. These stories of lives on the margins, of loners and outcasts seeking meaning and happiness, are tender, heartbreaking and always surprising.

Juggernaut, 2021, pp. 232, ₹499.00

Elusive Non-violence: The Making and Unmaking of Gandhi’s Religion of Ahimsa by Jyotirmaya Sharma maintains that past attempts to understand Gandhian non-violence remain inadequate because of the tendency to measure it on the yardstick of efficacy, in specific situations, in Gandhi’s own lifetime. More significantly, and perhaps controversially, he suggests that Gandhi’s formulation of ahimsa falls both as concept and practice, largely because of its location within the religious realm. An unintended consequence of this is that it has left the liberal-constitutional space in India bereft of the legitimate use of a powerful and desirable language of dissent in the shape of nonviolence.

Westland Publications, 2021, ₹699.00
An Unremarked but Remarkable Life*

IP Khosla

A mid the forest of debates about the relations between history and biography one line of disputation stands out, that between the promoters and detractors of the Great Man Theory. Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Scottish historian was its most well-known promoter; he famously said that the history of the world is but the biography of great men. There were, however, arrays of well-known historians opposed to this who maintained that social and political forces made men great, that all men were only products of their environment. The Marxists as well as social philosophers like Herbert Spencer in the same century thus became the main detractors of the great man theory. Closely linked to this is the argument about the link between the private and the public, an argument that every would-be biographer has to consider: is the public persona of the subject a reflection of the private or is the public one dominant to the extent that it supervenes the private? And in fact, there is ample evidence that people who wish to acquire a public presence do consciously project a well thought-out private presence.

In this biography author Vinodh does not promote the great man theory, but he does show how a well-born and talented individual can and does adjust his persona to reflect a public image.

Syud Hossain belonged to an aristocratic and distinguished family which could trace its lineage back to ancient Persia; in later life he was often described as a descendant of the Prophet.

Born in 1888 and brought up in a large family house in Calcutta where traditional family values reigned supreme, despite the somewhat straitened financial circumstances of the family, he imbued the code under which family honour was thought supreme, and retained those values throughout life. However, his career development was uneven. In 1908, at the age of twenty he entered government service but, within a few months, resigned in order to go to London for further studies, enrolled in Lincoln’s Inn, with the evident intention of pursuing a legal career. At this stage of his life he got to know Asif Ali, who later distinguished himself in India’s freedom struggle and was appointed India’s Ambassador to the USA, as also Sarojini Naidu, the poetess and activist. The three of them spent much time together, going to poetry readings, dinners and organizing literary gatherings. By this time Syud was speaking and often described as a descendant of the Prophet.

In 1916 he returned to India and joined the Bombay Chronicle, where he stayed two years, establishing in that time a reputation as a journalist of substance who was able to portray the nationalist sentiment. As such he came to the notice of the Nehru family, by then fully launched into national politics and looking for someone to edit a new daily, The Independent. In 1919 Syud became its editor and moved to Allahabad, where of course he came to know the Nehrus well, including Jawaharlal’s sister Sarup, also known later as Nan. Indeed they became so close that it appears they even got married according to Muslim rites. The father, Motilal, was furious. And so, interestingly enough, and for all his secular protestations, was Mahatma Gandhi, who not only made his views clear to Sarup but also wrote in Young India in February 1920 that it would ‘seriously interfere with the growing unity between Hindus and Mohammedans if, for example, Mohammedan youths consider it lawful to court Hindu girls…I hold it to be utterly impossible for Hindus and Mohammedans to intermarry...’ Syud had to resign from The Independent, which he did in December 1919, having been there less than a year.

There was a postscript to this (though Vinodh does not go into details): the marriage was dissolved; Sarup was sent off for several months to live in Gandhi’s ashram, presumably to purify herself, which was done successfully since she married a Saraswat Brahmin at the end of that incarceration, and emerged as Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Syud was told in no uncertain terms that he should remove himself from India and such was the hold of the Nehrus and of Gandhi that he did so, while continuing to sing praises of the Gandhian view of life.

So in 1921 Syud travelled to the USA where the Indian National Congress had by then decided that it was important to propagate correct news about India. Syud became its interim unofficial spokesman there. Here, since the USA became Syud’s most important political and journalistic stage of life, Vinodh pauses to describe in some detail the extent and range of political activity by the Indian community there, devoting five chapters to this. The genesis of the Indian community there is described; then going on to the pioneers, the case of the Komagata Maru, the Gadar Party as well as the rise of racialism.

Syud spent 25 years in the USA, travelling the length and breadth of the country, lecturing, writing, meeting the glitterati of American society and becoming quite the well-known and well-loved face of Indian nationalism. His first major talk was to the National Popular Government League, in New York, a talk detailing the oppressions of British rule in India that was widely covered in the national press, including the New York Times. As the years passed, he continued to give talks on this subject and gradually expanded the scope to cover other subjects, such as eastern and western ideals, Buddha and Gandhi, Imperialism in general; his audience became more diverse,
Fundamental Rights and the Constitution

Santosh Kumar

Tripurdaman Singh can certainly tell a story. And he has a hell of a story to tell—the introduction of the First Amendment to the Constitution of India soon after its adoption.

Immediately after the adoption of the constitution, the Superior Courts started striking down sedition and other laws enacted by our erstwhile foreign rulers related to curbs on the freedom of speech and personal freedoms, as well as those made by Congress-controlled legislatures, relating to reservation and zamindari abolition, because they were found to be violative of various fundamental rights, given to us under the new Constitution.

According to the author, Nehru responded, too soon, by introducing the First Amendment to the constitution of India, which would restrict Fundamental Rights that the Constituent Assembly had given to us only months earlier. This Amendment, inter alia, introduced new grounds to restrict freedom of speech such as ‘interests of the security of the state’, ‘friendly relations with foreign states’ and ‘public order’.

Singh argues that these new restrictions on fundamental rights would allow laws like sedition to continue, which would have otherwise become unconstitutional, being violative of the wide and robust Fundamental Rights guaranteed under the originally formulated Constitution. These colonial-era laws, especially sedition, are now being used with impunity against liberal thinkers, journalists, activists, and students. The same Amendment would also introduce reservation for backward classes in educational institutions, give protection to zamindari abolition/land reform legislation and give us the Ninth Schedule that has become the shield for a number of laws, which would have been unconstitutional otherwise.

Patel, Nehru, Prasad and Ambedkar played major roles in the framing of the Constitution of India. As the first Prime Minister, Nehru was to be the paadal of the Constitution. But according to the author he turned his back on important parts of the Constitution, too soon and too severely.

The book narrates this crucial chapter in our history and
The book narrates this crucial chapter in our history and is worth a read. While Nehru is widely seen as the liberal icon of 21st century India, the author explores his totalitarian side.

is worth a read. While Nehru is widely seen as the liberal icon of 21st century India, the author explores his totalitarian side. The author argues that Nehru did not want anything to come in the way of his policies and views, not even the Constitution. He weakened the most crucial part of the Constitution, Fundamental Rights, by an ill-conceived Amendment rushed through because of impending general elections. The author further argues that posterity has paid a hefty price for Nehru's unconstitutional haste.

The story is engrossing. The chapters capture attention. As each comes to a close the reader wants to know what happened thereafter, with the following chapter leading him to the next episode. The book has the pace of a Hindi potboiler. However, its depth is also just as much.

The author conveniently forgets that the Amendment was not Nehru's work alone. The Parliament which passed the Amendment was nothing but the entire Constituent Assembly.

The author's excessive reliance on newspaper reports on a serious subject of constitutional-political history deprives him of the gravitas needed for a work of this kind. Delving deeper would have led Singh to explore the intense socialist moorings of Nehru and his fascinating ideological battle for the importance of Directive Principles in the Constituent Assembly, and he would not have been so eager to burn Nehru at the stake for being a Fundamental Rights heretic.

Fundamental Rights put a premium on the rights of the individual and restricted the interference of the state in his/her life. Directive Principles created a stronger Mai-baap state, restricting Fundamental Rights and individual freedoms and casting many more obligations on the state with regard to economic well-being of the people. To put it simply, stronger Fundamental Rights created the structure for a capitalist state while primacy to Directive Principles could create a socialist state.

The author does not trace this prequel to his story—the deep ideological divisions within the Constituent Assembly where the Left-leaning members led by Nehru were pushing for the importance of Directive Principles of state policy and centrist members were pressing for the primacy of Fundamental Rights, and the latter prevailed. May be his desire to paint Nehru with a black brush kept him away from the complexities of deep ideological conflicts, within and without.

Possibly, it is this desire to whip Nehru with every possible, or even impossible, stick that takes him to the conclusion that the government’s panic (to introduce the First Amendment in a hurry) was motivated by its fear of having to delay land reform legislation and face the electorate with its promise (of zamindari abolition) unfulfilled. After the new Constitution, freshly minted land reform legislations were being declared ultra-vires of the Constitution. According to the author, to win the next election, Nehru introduced Article 31A and 31B. Article 31A gave protection to laws related to acquisition of estate and Article 31B gave immunity to any law which was put in the Ninth Schedule from being scrutinized by courts for being violative of Fundamental Rights.

No significant material is provided by the author to establish that there was any genuine fear within the Congress Party in facing the electorate in the coming first General Elections. It had won the victory of the millennium, Indian Independence, and no other organization had its reach, leadership or organizational strength. One would be hard pressed to argue that the Congress Party was afraid of losing the first General Elections.

In fact, Nehru’s biggest opponent, the Socialist Party, got only 10 percent votes in that election. Nehru sent mangoes to firebrand socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia in jail when he was arrested by his government for some protests. The author fails to delve into this duality, this contradiction. There is sufficient material to show that Nehru pushed for his view too strongly. But he also let the Opposition create and fight for its place in a democratic space.

Therefore, the author is, perhaps, a bit too harsh on Nehru in using expressions like ‘Constitution really was the only potential obstacle in his path’, ‘government efforts to evade and stymie the Constitution’ and ‘The Prime Minister and the Constitution were now on opposite sides.’

Lack of responsible scholarship is also reflected in the way the author deals with caste-based reservations, which have a complex history in this country. Political decisions to give reservations to socially backward classes and not to economically backward classes can be right or wrong, but the author has no basis to describe it as a ‘sleight of hand’. Similarly, he flippantly dismisses Ministers supporting caste-based reservations as ‘wet behind the ears’ while eulogizing a commentator as ‘prescient’ who described Ministers pushing for reservations as ‘ignorant’. Other than his own bias, perhaps, the author provides no material to justify his description of leaders opposing the amendment as ‘conscientious’ and those supporting it as ‘sympathisers’. Those who supported the Amendment may have been genuinely in its favour. They could be wrong, if the author so believes, but not necessarily Nehru’s chamchais.

All in all, the author has a story to tell, and he tells it well. But to do justice to history, there was a need for deeper scholarship and a more detached narration.

Santosh Kumar is an Advocate in the Supreme Court of India.
Remapping India’s Indigenous Political Traditions

Siddhartha Mukerji

The book under review offers a nuanced conceptualization of India’s social and political philosophy by remapping its rich indigenous ideological traditions. It reconstructs the idea of India by shutting between its different phases of history. In this process of philosophical churning, many misconceptions regarding ideology, modernity, politics and state are cleared. The lens offered to look at India is its rich historical heritage, ideas being rooted in its ancient traditions. The Indian state and nation remains at the heart of the analysis.

The initial part of the book redefines India as a civilizational republic with strong democratic ethos. These chapters navigate through a multitude of subjects including religion, state, nation, politics and economics while defining India. To begin with, Hinduism itself is shown in its plural character and as all-encompassing. Referring to the philosophy of VD Savarakar, Hinduism is indeed a dharma that doesn’t signify any creed or religion in the theocratic sense but a conduct of life that is meant to enhance the individual good as central to human existence. Moving from religion to state and public policy, the fault lines of the Nehruvian model of development have also been highlighted in the first chapter, ‘India, that is Bharat’. This model is primarily rooted in the understanding of India as a postcolonial state missing the long process of state formation that dates back to the ancient period. While taking a critical view of Nehru’s politics and policies, an appreciation for his successful intervention in linguistic reorganization, affirmative action policies and steps towards institution building is also made.

India is defined as a civilization transforming into a nation through instrumentality of the state which embodies a pluralistic society forming the basis of a democratic state. It is seen to have four levels of political consciousness of which the psychological level where one is given to think about one’s position in a larger global context is intriguing. The point goes well with the observation of India’s superpower status in global politics enhanced by the audacity of the present-day foreign policy. The notion of soft power has assumed special attention in the discussion on the transformed foreign policy of the state. Going to and fro in revisiting the Indian state since Independence, the author claims that adoption of parliamentary democracy was easy unlike in other British colonies because the democratic ethos were rooted in our ancient culture. It was a kind of path renewal in the sense of going back to the distant past. But, truly the democratic ethos and the richness of Indian tradition comes live with the revival of ancient glories of Yoga, Ayurveda etc., in the present governance that is not just reconstructing India but also torch-bearing for the world.

The book highlights the shortcomings of socialism from the standpoint of freedom. Socialist thinking allows relentless intervention by the state in redistribution which may itself be a threat to individual rights. The author also questions the statist philosophy of Amartya Sen that emphasizes the state’s intervention in promoting social and economic equality. It may however be noted that in his book Development as Freedom Sen does not negate the utility of markets. He undoubtedly looks at market as an arena of individual freedom and hails it for its contractual system. Nevertheless, he suggests that markets need to be regulated for their egalitarian responses to people’s concerns (Sen, 1999). Even the most sophisticated liberals cannot deny the need for state regulation and redistribution. The book exaggerates the utility of privatization for safeguarding individual rights and progress. Private schools, for instance, are reported to be performing far better than government schools. Amidst such claims, the author misses the success of Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya schools that are outperforming even some of the best private schools in the country. Also, the Delhi model of government schools and mohalla clinics for health care are exemplary and worth imitable. The real issue therefore is not private versus government schools but the scale of innovative pedagogy with sound leadership that can be found anywhere. Conversely, the need for autonomy in higher education institutions like in the USA seems reasonably convincing. Intellectualism requires innovation and innovation requires autonomy from state interference. The New Education Policy is a welcome move in this direction. It largely draws upon the American model mixed with indigenous traditions and sets in a new tone for institutional autonomy. In this way, the author says, India will be able to offer the best human capital in the world. In the argument favouring privatization, the author undermines the role of PSUs and makes a case for speedy disinvestment. The ideological overtones is therefore clearly in tune with neo-liberalism.

“Downsizing the concurrent list with more devolution of power to the States comes as yet another solution for better institutionalization of policy making. The prescription is fully in tune with the federal spirit of the Constitution.”
The author’s approach to political and administrative institutions is prescriptive. To begin with he identifies the fault lines in the institutional arrangements for governance and policy execution. This leaves very little scope for public sector in a primarily market-driven economy.

The author’s approach to political and administrative institutions is prescriptive. To begin with he identifies the fault lines in the institutional arrangements for governance and policy execution. The earlier arrangement of multiplicity of ministries represented in the Cabinet is found to be complicated and was made to accommodate powerful politicians. In this regard, it is suggested that the Cabinet must be restricted to a few ministries so that the government could be made as lean as possible. This is recommended purely from the standpoint of efficacy in public delivery and policy execution.

Downsizing the concurrent list with more devolution of power to the States comes as yet another solution for better institutionalization of policy making. The prescription is fully in tune with the federal spirit of the Constitution. The author also finds limitations in judicial capacities mainly in the lower courts which are prone to indefinite delays in case delivery mainly because of their preoccupation into petty administrative matters.

The book doesn’t follow any definite methodology for analysis. It only goes through the historical pages to bring out the facts more visibly. The book is a relevant text for those who want to navigate through the history of India and understand both the glories of the ancient past and the burdens of the immediate past.

References:

Siddharta Mukerji is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow.
Travails of Immigrants
Anita Singh

H

jab was first published in Kannada in 2017 and was awarded the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award in the same year. The novel, a medical drama, is a powerful story that speaks about identity politics, racial prejudices, cultural threats, taboos, and immigration. The story is narrated through the perspective of Dr. Guru (who shares his name with the author and he may be the author himself), an Indian immigrant doctor. The three doctors that the novel tracks are Guru, Radhika, and Srikantha, all from Karnataka and serving their mandatory five years on J1 visas (a statutory requirement to get a green card) in the small town of Amoka in Minnesota. The town has recently had a surge of immigrants from Africa, a group collectively referred to as Sanghaali immigrants. The prologue forewarns the readers, ‘don’t go looking for Sanghaala on Google maps’ and that Sanghaala may perhaps be ‘any country in Africa—like Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, or Uganda. It should not matter much when all the immigrants from these countries look the same, eat alike and speak alike’, states the voice of the narrator lumping these diverse communities into a homogenous mass.

The calm of the small-town existence is abruptly disturbed by an unexpected series of events which places the doctors in the middle of a storm of identity politics. A Sanghaali refugee woman Fadhuma Hasan declines to deliver her baby with a Caesarean section on the ground that the ‘cutting open’ procedure is inimical to their women having more children. Dr. Mohammad Mohammad who is a doctor himself and a kind of godfather to all the Sanghaalis, is incensed by what he terms the ‘cultural imperialism’ of American healthcare. ‘It’s not just the current pregnancy that is important to the Sanghaalis…they care for their next ten pregnancies’, he shouts at the doctors in a meeting held in the hospital. ‘They value the land more than its harvest.’

When Radhika operates on a Sanghaali pregnant woman with a breech baby to save the mother and the baby, it sets off a series of dramatic events beyond anybody’s comprehension. The media carries reports of the death of the Sanghaali mothers who gave birth by C-section. Series of deaths of Sanghaali women, Rukhiya and Fadhuma in Amoka and Asha Ali in Columbus, Ohio are brought to light and follow the incident of a young Sanghaali woman’s suicide in Chapel town. Streaming headlines flash on the television screen adding to the frenzy. Radhika, the doctor responsible for the deliveries, sticks to her stand on the ethics of her medical profession and declares, ‘it is not Haram. Once a C-section, always a C-section is a myth.’ The incident triggers a chain of speculations: ‘were these suicides or murders?, ‘was this a religious war of clashing faith’, were these young women with infants who committed suicide really ‘Jhadi moms’ as Duniya, the Sanghaali interpreter’s theory stated? These deaths draw the doctors into the vortex of questions of ‘we and them’, their own prejudices and understanding of religion, identity, and self. Americans are infuriated by the seeming regressive behaviour of the Sanghaalis, a response inflected by their sweeping Islamophobia and xenophobia. A group of feminist activists vociferously direct their anger towards the state for purportedly depriving Sanghaali women of their bodily autonomy. A faction of maverick Sanghaali women also allude to the practice of female genital mutilation in the community. As the clamour reaches a crescendo, two Sanghaali women come forward to have C-sections done live on a national television channel with the purpose of reassuring other women from their community about the safety of the medical practice and to send out an affirmative idea about Sanghaalis in the US. The intrusion of social media and the ingenious exhibitionism of reality television are symptomatic of the voyeuristic age we inhabit. Rick Jackson, the president of the hospital board succinctly expresses it as ‘F*** the media. Let’s make the news that we want.’

The novel in effect engages with the demographics of migration. While all immigrants face uncomfortable questions on identity and assimilation, the challenges experienced by each group of immigrants is different. One set of privileged immigrants such as doctors and IT professionals from India, Pakistan, and so on have come to America to fulfill their dream. There is another group of immigrants which does not have such privileges, coming to America as refugees to escape political persecution or war in their homeland. We are then introduced to Assad Delmar Abdhikarim aka Kuki, a Sanghaali immigrant, once an American soldier in Afghanistan and then a drug peddler and also associated with Al Tewagi, a notorious terror organization of Sanghaala. Kuki tells the narrator, Dr. Guru: ‘Back home if you are poor you are hungry. Here it is poverty without hunger. America gives us food stamps, but no decent jobs’. According to Kuki’s logic America ‘starts internal strife and civil war in Sanghaala, gets the survivors here on a visa and puts them on menial jobs like slaves for its own benefits’.

In the second part, the novel proceeds to document the realities of not only Guru and his team of doctors but also other immigrant groups and traces how systemic racism in America entangles their lives. Mohammad Igal aka Black Eagle, on the FBI’s most-wanted list and registered with terrorist organizations based out of Iraq and Syria, has been arrested several times on charges of theft and drug peddling. The police on the lookout for the terrorist Igal mistakenly kill a character named Martin Luther King. Nusrat Igal’s mother who runs a restaurant is attacked. She becomes a founder of ‘moms against terror recruitment’, a voluntary organization of Sanghaali mothers fighting against recruitment by terror organizations. It is in this backdrop that the movement advocating racial justice Black Lives Matter amplifies.
The novel in effect engages with the demographics of migration. While all immigrants face uncomfortable questions on identity and assimilation, the challenges experienced by each group of immigrants is different.

The melting pot theory is an illusion as the novel highlights how, despite living in America, immigrant life is either secluded or repressed to native congregations of ecosystems. Guru reflects on his own existence in the US: ‘I lived in a bubble. Not once had I ever gone to a co-worker’s house… Beyond an odd comment about family, pastime, and politics, our social life in America is dotted by our own rituals,… Our awareness of Amoka is limited to the outer layer of its outer skin.’

By compelling the reader to ponder on these questions and perhaps check their subtle biases, the novel achieves an amazing philosophical vigour. Guru is also often, by the turn of events, obligated to self-reflect on his indiscriminate racial and cultural predispositions towards other coloured people. There is an instance in the book when a patient, a sophomore at Minnesota business school, Fadhuma Hassan, shouts at Guru for being bigoted for doing a pregnancy test on her (while she was not pregnant). Guru is shaken at the thought of his own complicity in harbouring racial prejudices. By doing so Kaginele intends not to allow the readers to ally their empathies with any one person or community. When the narrative dwells on the incongruous cultural logic of the Sanghaliis, the author juxtaposes it with a gruesome scene where a white American Catholic doctor in conformity with his religious prescriptions holds back from carrying out an abortion on his pregnant minor daughter and does a C-section instead. Although the foetus is stillborn, the family feels vindicated in its faith.

_Hijab_ is a story drawing on the Indian diaspora living in America as a trope to make sense of what immigration implies. Characters are finely drawn and each of them is caught in a net of relationships, partly of their own making and partly one that is made for them, a fascinating mix of themes and ideas. With staid, languid, elliptical, and unembellished prose the novel recounts the most significant events and characters especially as we move to the second part of the novel creating an emotional distance between the character and the reader.

However, _Hijab_ is able to effectively raises several questions: Why is the coming together of diverse cultures so challenging? How can we overcome the challenges we experience with someone from another culture? Do our identities reside in the colour of our skin, or is it something that is more than skin deep? What could be our strategies for disturbing these hierarchies of knowledge? _Hijab_ shows how cultural groups express their emotions, approach problems, or conduct their lives in a way that is vastly different from another group and how our milieu often responds to traits like our skin colour, tradition, or cultural customs and these can either fortify or diminish our sense of self-esteem. And finally, it questions the process by which immigrants become accepted and integrated into the host society both as individuals and as groups. Teeming with moral, ethical, philosophical, psychological, and political questions, _Hijab_ becomes a mechanism to negotiate such fissures of identity.

Anita Singh is Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India.

**Evoking Vanished Splendour**

Grace Mariam Raju

**Manipur** writer Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi’s historical novel _The Princess and the Political Agent_ chronicles the love story of her aunt Princess Sanatombi and the British colonel Henry St Patrick Maxwell set in the backdrop of the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 and the subsequent annexation of the Tibeto-Burmese Kingdom of Manipur by the English colonial regime. The Sahitya Akademi Award-winning book originally published as _Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi_ has been translated into English by the writer’s son L. Somi Roy. The novel uses a series of flashbacks as its narrative technique through which the readers get to see contending princes and wise queens who are endowed with beauty and courtly etiquette. Binodini’s book evokes the vanished splendour and lost sovereignty of Manipur’s glorious kingdom as the royal family, during the colonial regime, finds a vivid portrayal in the text. By delineating the story of her aunt, Binodini resurrects the character of Princess Sanatombi as a strong-willed woman who chose to love the enemy of the kingdom, the British political agent of Manipur.

The novel begins with an ailing Princess Sanatombi, the daughter of the deposed king of Manipur, and subsequently, the story follows a non-linear trajectory of recollection of her past by Sanatombi while she lies on her deathbed. The narrator portrays the vanquished yet feisty princess as someone who always occupied a significant position in the palace and was nurtured to become an empowered woman by the Grand Queen Mother. And it is through Sanatombi’s extraordinary experiences that Binodini writes about Manipur’s political turmoil throughout the Anglo-Manipur War. While she portrays Sanatombi as an intelligent woman who is passionate and transgressive in a patriarchal society, we also see many other powerful and empowered women who contribute significantly to the social and political affairs of the kingdom. Characters such as the Grand Queen Mother, Maharani Kumudini, the powerful Queen of Maharaja Gambhirsingh, and the mother of Maharaja Chandrakriti, Maharani Premayi, and Lady Ngangbam are prominent women in the text who are seen as constantly breaking gender stereotypes. These spirited women can be seen as the predecessors of strong revolutionary spirited Manipuri women. This novel, therefore, becomes an important text in understanding the role of gender in the Meitei community. It captures only a part of Manipur’s long history of the Anglo-Manipur War and the subsequent era after the war, which was characterized by strong currents of Hinduism.

Roy’s translation of the iconic Manipuri text would enrich the canon of the Anglophone literary world where literary voices from the North Eastern States of India remain under-represented. Besides, this book marks a diversion from public memory of historical events to a more nuanced and private aspect of historical events in Manipur.

“The translation eventually becomes excessively descriptive. Consequently, at certain places, it would appear as literal translations of the original words. The lack of a glossary also makes it difficult for non-Manipuri readers to understand words that have been retained from the original.”

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It is interesting to see that Binodini projects Sanatombi’s act of marrying a British agent as a complex expression of her desire as well as her agency. Sanatombi is not merely driven by passion but attempts to revive her lost self as the central conflict of the novel is premised upon the agency of a woman in a conservative society. The narrative greatly engages with the material aspects of the Princely State with a deep emphasis on the description of opulence that is associated with royal families. Binodini carefully weaves the elements of beauty and art within her narrative to portray Manipuri aesthetics. Her sense of imagination also stems from an urgency to archive the lost glory of her kingdom. In her elaborate description of clothes, jewellery, and flowers adorning by the characters, Binodini tries to bridge the two worlds of ancient royalty and contemporary readers. The book also offers a commentary on the politics of royal matrimony in Manipur. Binodini’s writing revives the long-forgotten customs of the Meitei kingdom as well as some important characters who otherwise would have remained hidden in personal stories.

A critical reading of the English translation of Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi reveals certain problematic aspects in the translated text. Firstly, in his translator’s note Roy writes that through a ritual called loukhatpa, women are allowed to remarry without a formal marriage. However, such women are recognized as ‘fully wives’. This is a problematic understanding of the social practice of loukhatpa because it is a valedictory function organized by the bride’s family for a married couple in situations where the marriage ceremony has not been solemnized at the bride’s house. Further to this, loukhatpa as practised by certain communities in Manipur does not involve the remarriage of women specifically. Such an understanding of local customs puts the translator at a critical juncture. For readers who are unfamiliar with Manipur’s history and socio-cultural milieu, this translated novel with prosaic language may find a lack of coherence in the narrative style. The translation eventually becomes excessively descriptive. Consequently, at certain places, it would appear as literal translations of the original words. The lack of a glossary also makes it difficult for non-manipuri readers to understand words that have been retained from the original. The description of Manipuri dress, rituals, and other cultural aspects are vividly lost in translation as the text fails to retain the linguistic flavours of the original.

Grace Mariam Raju is a doctoral student at the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on the writings of the Catholic fisherfolk community in Kerala.

The novel beautifully captures Princess Sanatombi’s life against the backdrop of transition and change in Manipur. The companionship between Sanatombi and Maxwell has not been sensationalized but contextual placed within the socio-political setting of the time. It is interesting to see that Binodini projects Sanatombi’s act of marrying a British agent as a complex expression of her desire as well as her agency. Sanatombi is not merely driven by passion but attempts to revive her lost self as the central conflict of the novel is premised upon the agency of a woman in a conservative society. The narrative greatly engages with the material aspects of the Princely State with a deep emphasis on the description of opulence that is associated with royal families. Binodini carefully weaves the elements of beauty and art within her narrative to portray Manipuri aesthetics. Her sense of imagination also stems from an urgency to archive the lost glory of her kingdom. In her elaborate description of clothes, jewellery, and flowers adorning by the characters, Binodini tries to bridge the two worlds of ancient royalty and contemporary readers. The book also offers a commentary on the politics of royal matrimony in Manipur. Binodini’s writing revives the long-forgotten customs of the Meitei kingdom as well as some important characters who otherwise would have remained hidden in personal stories.

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**The Book Review**

The Book Review, India’s first review journal in English, was started in 1976 by Chitra Narayan, Uma Iyengar and Chandra Chari.

The Development of the Journal: A Brief Time Line

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A collection of short stories by Gaurishankar Govardhanram Joshi, popularly known by his pseudonym ‘Dhumketu’, one of the most significant and prolific writers in the history of Gujarati literature, translated into English is certainly a cause for celebration. It is important because without such an initiative, the works of Dhumketu, who traversed genres with more than 30 novels, essays, a literary criticism, plays, memoirs, travelogues, and more than 500 short stories in 24 volumes, would be lost to a generation that cannot read Gujarati. But the importance of this volume stands out in a context of severe paucity, if not absence, of translations of literary texts from Gujarati into English. While writings from other Indian languages have entered the mainstream of Gujarati literature and have gone on to influence many writers, Gujarati writers are not adequately represented to the reading population outside the State. While a substantial body of Gandhi’s political writing has always been of constant interest to the world outside Gujarat and the efforts in recent years by leading scholars and translators like Tridip Suhrud and Rita Kothari have brought Gujarati fiction on to the national/international stage, a lot remains to be done. The vacuum created by non-availability of literary works in translation of historical or social merit has often led many to see Gujar at as dominated by a certain uni-dimensional and mercantile imagination. Jenny Bhatt’s Ratno Dholi, a volume of selected stories from Dhumketu, is an attempt to reach out to the roots of Gujarat’s literary imagination and present something of its wealth in its most condensed form.

The name of Dhumketu rarely figures alongside stalwarts such as Premchand, RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Rabindranath Tagore, when one talks about the shaping and development of this amorphous phenomenon called the Indian short story, and yet he is one of the pioneering figures active in shaping the style and techniques of the modern short story in twentieth-century Gujarati. Born into a Brahmin family in Saurashtra’s Virpur village in 1892, in the same year as two other prominent short story writers of Gujarati Ramanlala Desai and Kanchanal Vasudev Mehta (Malayanil), Dhumketu left his indelible mark on the form. If ‘Malayanil’ was the first one to bring this modern form to Gujarati, it was Dhumketu who gave it the desired complexity, stylistic edge, and emotional intensity.

An avid reader and listener of stories from childhood with easy access to books, Dhumketu had an exposure to the world of the arts—books, music, drama, sculpture and poetry—from an early age. The study of English literature and Sanskrit during college days had come to shape the inner world and sensibilities of this young writer who experimented with various literary forms, the most popular, productive, and successful of which were his short stories. To the literary world that was populated by large-scale translations and adaptations of western short-stories, Dhumketu brought his original and creative spirit. Ratno Dholi presents a bouquet of painstakingly culled 26 representative stories of Dhumketu from his 24 volumes—at least one story per volume, not only bringing to life the varied universe within the stories but also displaying the evolution of the writer as a craftsman with an ever-widening range of tools and skills.

Short story for Dhumketu meant two things—perspective and presentation. By perspective he meant the ability of a writer to cut through the layers of cultural and social understandings to reveal the inherent truth of a situation. He says in the introduction to his first volume of collected stories Tanakha (included in Ratno Dholi), ‘The novel says whatever it wants. The short story, by rousing the imagination and emotions, only alludes to or provides a spark of whatever it wants to say.’

Dhumketu’s own perspective came from his wide reading of literature both western and Indian, from the prevailing Gandhian ideologies of his times, and the social and political currents that had swept the world in his lifetime. He lived in the times of Gandhi and, like many other writers, he had enormous respect for him and his work. Though the entry of characters from the lower strata of life in his stories was revolutionary, as was his sensitivity towards the life circumstances of the poor and the oppressed, these had less to do with his Gandhian idealism and more to do with his subconscious identification with the life in rural Saurashtra and his developing understanding of an unjust social world around him. At a time when literature performed either moralistic or nationalistic functions, he was interested in making it portray social realism, in telling stories of ordinary people as he experienced them through his extensive travels across India.

The collection opens with Dhumketu’s earliest and most popular story ‘The Post Office’ and ends with a story from his later volumes, ‘Old Customs, New Approach’. In between what the translator gives us is a rare visual graph of Dhumketu’s own development as a writer. One cannot fail to notice the evolution of a sensibility from one entrenched in cultural, social biases to one that is ready to examine them closely without blinds. In ‘Tears and the Soul’, one of the earlier stories, we meet the historical nagarvadhu of Vaishali, Amrapali. Dhumketu does not allow his creative imagination to play with history but depicts in the most evocative manner the trials and tribulations of Amrapali, who is made to surrender her youth, her womanhood, her child, and her independent spirit in the service of the state of Vaishali. But the same Dhumketu weaves a very complex story of Chandan in ‘Light and Shade’. In presenting the kind of

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Dhumketu was the pen name of Gaurishankar Govardhanram Joshi (1892-1965), one of the foremost writers in Gujarati and a pioneer of the short-story form. He published twenty-four short-story collections and thirty-two novels on social and historical subjects, as well as plays, biographies, memoirs, translations, travelogues and literary criticism. He was a contemporary of Rabindranath Tagore, Munshi Premchand and Saadat Hasan Manto.

Jenny Bhatt is a writer, translator, and podcaster. Her short-story collection, Each of Us Killers, was critically received.

**RATNO DHOLI: THE BEST STORIES OF DHUMKETU**
Translated from the original Gujarati by Jenny Bhatt
HarperCollins, 2020, pp. 324, ₹399.00

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“Dhumketu’s own perspective came from his wide reading of literature both western and Indian, from the prevailing Gandhian ideologies of his times, and the social and political currents that had swept the world in his lifetime.”

dilemmas that draw this twelve- or thirteen-year old, living in abject poverty, to earn a little extra by letting the Bhangi boy Bhikhudo take advantage of her youth, in the half hidden suggestions of this dramatic life-altering experience and its implications, Dhumketu has moved beyond his time. This journey from Amrapali to Chandan, from Ali to Lakshman, is a journey in the craft of short story writing as well as an unfolding of his evolving thought process, where Dhumketu is becoming more and more astute and adept.

The movement that strikes one here is from a romantic delineation of human emotions within given socio-historical frameworks to a more complex rendition of life criss-crossed by oppressive, systemic restraints, especially for those not privileged. It is a movement from the grand narratives of history towards little stories of a lifetime of labour as depicted in ‘Happy Delusions’, the one that charts the development of Dhumketu as a human being and as a story teller.

Literary historiography and criticism are in a woefully inadequate state in Gujarat, and have found it convenient to shelve Dhumketu as a pioneering figure to be brought in for an occasional ritualistic invocation. He is regarded as one whose work has remained dominated by emotions and romantic idealism rather than by any realistic appraisal of the world as he saw it. A thorough understanding of this amazing writer and an evaluation of all his works and how they connect with each other, his contribution to his time and beyond, a chronological study of his works and what they signify about his understanding of his world—all are yet to be attempted. This particular translation does us a great service by drawing our attention, quite subliminally, towards this space of exploration.

The collection scores well on the two fronts of readability and its ability to spark the interest of the reader. It succeeds in doing this by maintaining a fine balance between the familiar and the foreign. Even though translation as an activity is an indispensable experience in a multilingual country like India, every act of literary translation especially from an Indian language into English, a language separated in time, place, and implicated in colonial history, invariably places the translator face to face with questions of translatability, both political and artistic. A discussion around this is what I found missing in the otherwise comprehensive introduction of this much-needed volume.

Dhumketu himself was a translator who brought Kahlil Gibran, Rabindranath Tagore and western writers to Gujarati. It is only right and just that his works should now be available to the world outside Gujarat through such translations. It is through these translations, the versions of our different cultures, that we are saved from the danger of a monolithic narrative. I would conclude with the translator’s own words from an interview, ‘translation isn’t simply about bringing old stories to new audiences. It’s also about preserving, elevating, and celebrating our literary diversity and our languages. Doing so can only help us understand, appreciate, and be more tolerant of our cultural differences.’

Pratishtha Pandya, an Ahmedabad-based poet and translator largely working across Gujarati and English, is the author of... (lalala... Naveen Samprat). She works with People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI). She writes, edits, and works on the culture section of PARI, and also coordinates their team of Gujarati translators. She has taught at the undergraduate level for more than 10 years.

Where Reality Explains the Myth

Moggallan Bharti

Des Raj Kali’s novella Shanti Parav, inspired as it is by the twelfth book of Mahabharata, doesn’t look—unlike the mythical treaty—for the justifications of the war period. It draws from the mythical account only to the extent that it is a work to ruminate on in ‘peace time’. And this rumination does happen on the recent political past stretching from India’s Independence till now. In this process, the work exposes its readers to the layers of sedimentation that has manifested itself as the state of India after a good seven decades since 1947. In a way, Shanti Parav seamlessly pens a critical commentary on what postcolonial writing should be, rather than indulging in what it has been. It is postcolonial only in the sense that the work covers the period after India’s Independence, and then skilfully bares the stratagems that Indian politics is—ever working to maintain the status quo, otherwise known as Brahmanism. The obvious centrality of caste in India’s recent past runs right through the text which is also uniquely conceived in its style.

Shanti Parav also stands out in the very make of its textual body. It is singularly unique. The book is rendered into two simultaneous, but distinctly different texts running parallel on the same page—an upper text and a lower text—which contrarily shares a deep connection. One may find it a bit disconcerting perhaps to read two distinct texts on a single page running with their parallel narrative. For some this might be a bit jarring even, but let me assure you that this style bordering on the absurd is the distinctiveness of this novella. The author wants to unsettle and unnerve its readers with the absurdity of the time that the novella talks about. The upper texts of the work unpack the characters and their everyday being in their immediate social climate, which in turn is intertwined with the
“Shanti Parav also stands out in the very make of its textual body. It is singularly unique. The book is rendered into two simultaneous, but distinctly different texts running parallel on the same page—an upper text and a lower text—which contrarily shares a deep connection.”

political churning in the country discussed in the lower text. Des Raj Kali’s prose here thrives on the absurd and abstraction which becomes all the more discerning, if one has an acute sense of how India’s social actually functions. Shanti Parav successfully brings forth the tumultuous world of this social inhabited by the world view which draws from the spirituality of Sufi and Bhakti traditions along with the political statesmanship of Ambedkar.

While weaving all this together, the novella remains attached to its Punjabi roots and lays bare the rusticy certainty of the socio-economic realities which took me back to the haunting realism of ‘Ashley Ghorhey Da Daan’—a powerful Punjabi movie depicting the fate and fortitude of Mazzabi Punj. But that is another story. Shanti Parav locates Dalit reality in the very furrow of the social that it comes from. In his MA seminar paper, ‘Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,’ Ambedkar wrote that caste always exists as Castes, as in through the caste system, in plural in relation with other castes, and not as a stand-alone category. Des Raj Kali demonstrates this aspect of caste rather very neatly, and deftly places Dalit angst and the destruction of the promised equality and the postcolonial republic which is always at the mercy of the Indian state, that in turn remains within the hold of Brahmanical hegemony always.

Another significant aspect of Shanti Parav is in underlining the importance of Poona Pact—signed between Gandhi and Ambedkar on providing representation to the then untouchables in the legislature—in shaping Indian politics. ‘In the Poona Pact, they killed Babasaheb Ambedkar,’ writes Kali while stressing the watershed significance of the Pact. The author lament the intrigues of politics always at work to maintain the hold of upper castes on political power, and rues that even Ambedkar eventually couldn’t accomplish for the marginalized what he set out to achieve in the first place. That a figure like Ambedkar would turn bitter by the end is a commentary that most tellingly exposes the underbelly of the nation in the making; a nation which was, and continues to be marred by several fault lines, among which caste remains the most dominating, ever influencing the everyday political in India.

The novella can be summed up as a seething account of the tumultuous period of the peaceful independent modern nation made up of compromised liberty. That we are an independent country after a long-fought battle—both with colonialism and with the caste colonialism within—is still far from the creation of a modern and inclusive republic away and decoupled from the state of fear which it currently resides in. That the agony and suffering of the marginalized in India is strapped to remain on the margins of history, and subsequently on the margins of politics is something that also gives colour and character to our collective nationality—something that has been made quite pronounced in this novella.

Shanti Parav adds to the ever-growing account of Dalit articulation that remains true to the spirit and mandate of the anti-caste movement, and rather shines brightly while articulating the voices of the oppressed in India.

Moggallan Bharti teaches at Ambedkar University (AUD), Delhi.

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An Eponymous State*

Aniridita Saikia

Throughout the arts, the human state of loneliness has been a theme that has been explored, analysed and taken refuge in, recurring throughout cinema, fiction and art. In Arupa Patangia Kalita’s collection of fifteen short stories, which is the English translation of her 2014 Sahitya Akademi winning text originally titled Mariam Austin Othoba Hira Barua in Assamese, the eponymous state of loneliness is the kind of loneliness that confines many of her protagonists to a restrained, almost complacent suffering. Written primarily about, but not confined to women, The Loneliness of Hira Barua: Stories explores how women navigate through the fractures of grief, pain, alienation, unfamiliarity and ailments while being cocooned in varying stretches of isolation, often against the backdrop of militancy.

The ‘Girl With Long Hair’ is a sensitive portrayal of living under the Bodoland Movement through a young Bodo girl in a village, whose fate gets sealed in a tragic encounter when she is charged with trespassing against social norms dictated by student leaders. Student politics in the state has had an invigorating and complex history, with the Assam Agitation and the Bodoland Movement launched by local student unions. The synonymy and representation of the State as a patriarchal model developed a cultural chauvinism which sought to pedestalize the Bodo woman as the upholder of the community, bringing a new shift in the power dynamics in many tribal structures, which have been sociologically exemplified for their relatively egalitarian nature. In ‘Surabhi Barua and the Rhythm of Hooves’, set in the heyday of the Assam Agitation, the protagonist, Surabhi, is ostracized by her community for holding deviating views against the movement. Surrounded by bloodied streets and singed air, her departure from the region seems to reflect the ounce of reason and calm dissipating from the Agitation which was now curbing any opposition that arose, beating professors and killing people—a rancid

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Reviewer: Ranjita Biswas

THE LONELINESS OF HIRA BARUA: STORIES

By Arupa Patangia Kalita. Translated from the original Odia by Ranjita Biswas. Pan Macmillan, 2020, pp. 240, ₹450.00

Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Katha Award, author Arupa Patangia Kalita is one of the most prominent voices of regional Assamese literature today. Having recently retired as a teacher from Tangla College, Assam, she has published more than 25 novels and short story collections. Translator Ranjita Biswas is a travel writer and journalist, having previously translated Kalita’s short story collection Written in Tears.
sign of idealism succumbing to narrow and jingoistic chauvinism. With a judgement based on reason and rationality rather than blind emotion, Surabhi’s response echoes that of the author herself who faced a similar ordeal during the movement for voicing out against the intolerance of the Agitation.

The equating of the patriarchal, encroaching masculinity of the state is also found in ‘The House of Nibha Bou’ where a nurtured domesticity is moulded with love and caution, even as the household falls prey to living under the shadow of insurgency which ultimately infiltrates the house and shatters all semblance of normalcy. This callous encroaching of the domestic space, a terrain of accustomed familiarity defined and habituated by women, by militants is a theme that is explored in ‘The Call Girls at the Shelter Home’, set in the Japanese invasion of China which is equivalent to how the personal space of rural women is infringed upon by these foreigners—the state here is masculine, even if it is the other; the Otherness is borne out more by the lack of compassion and brutality, and demonstrates how in different regions the experiences of women in conflict zones remain starkly similar. ‘Ayengla of the Blue Hills’ interwinds oral narratives of the Naga Hills around the harsh reality of an abducted woman and the trauma that she goes through to produce a pain that changes her for life. In both this story and ‘The Call Girls’, the trauma resulting from sexual violence generates a scarring grief borne out of living in a state of militancy. Local oral folklore is deftly incorporated in ‘Suagmoni’s Mother, The Storyteller’ as well, a moving tale of loss woven around the Dhemaji bomb blasts of 2004, that reads fittingly like a metaphor of the tenuous relationship between the Indian nation and the Assamese militancy. The sentence of living under political turbulence and in a world which increasingly turns despondent is evident in ‘The Half Burnt Bus at Midnight’ and ‘Scream’, which conveys how emotions of anger and resentment borne out of unavoidable realities shape quotidian life, which often place women at the peripheries of victimization.

Assamese short stories have prominently featured the themes of disease and sickness with writers like Jogesh Das (‘Prithibir Odbhut’) and Sheelabhadra (‘Benar’) tracing the cultural fabric of Assam through the trajectory of ailing health. Kalita, however, keenly aware of the operations of the household and the labour that it demands, places many of her characters in the vicinity of the home, where domesticity and ailments and ill-health intertwine. The poignant mundanity of ‘The Man who Planted Palm Trees’ is stirring and affectionate, even as the protagonist is riddled with ill health. In ‘A Warm Jacket for the Son’, a doting mother, nonchalant about her failing health till it almost paralyses her, continues to spoil her adult son rotten while the fractured household seems to run solely on the labour of its women. Such a determined labour and dismissal of pain is found in ‘Stream’ where the routine of an old woman is documented whose frail health does not stop her from cooking with passion, an act and duty approved by her upper caste in-laws who curbed her passion of music, and segregated her from the neighbouring tea tribes whom they did not deem respectable enough. The chief duties of the wife then is to look after the house, feed her husband and raise her children—the customary social expectations that are enforced upon a woman in marriage which has been sharply contrasted from her previous life and carefree childhood, a trope found in ‘The House of Nibha Bou’ and ‘The Loneliness of Hira Baru’ as well. In the latter, a widowed insomniac devoted to her cocker spaniel who spends much of her days cocooned in her house learns to break away from her isolated loneliness in a region inhabited by a different tribe.

Generational rift and unfamiliarity to one’s own kin is explored in ‘No Escape from Hell’ and ‘A Cup of Coffee for Aunt Brinda’, where children, now adults, choose paths defined by consumerist greed, materialism and selfishness leaving their parents frightened, helpless and alone. Their alien nature reads like a portrait of the changing world around them, where multi-storied buildings rise up taller than trees and shiny cars hardly fit into the narrow residential lanes, as the rise of a small nouveau rich section who owe their wealth to illicit means sparks off resentment to a generation which was brought up on the ideals of hard work and honesty. Class difference is also embroidered around ‘The Auspicious Day’, which delves into the expansive rift between the poor, who continue to remain so and the rich, who are only getting richer, and the unnecessarily excessive indulgences that they demand.

Translator Ranjita Biswas is no stranger to the works of Arupa Patangia Kalita, having previously translated the author’s stories in the Sahitya Akademi Award winning Written in Tears (Harper Perennial, 2015). Although her translation is steady and sensitive, the lack of a translator’s note is sorely amiss. At a time when the enterprise of translation is increasingly folded to the discourse of literature with works of translation being included with other works of fiction for prizes like the Man Booker and the JCB, the absence of the translator through her own words in a text invisibilizes the translator and blurs out the parameters of authorship, making it harder to distinguish which one is reading—the author or the translator. Biswas retains words of local tongues, and the astute incorporation of local folktales, poetry and songs give the stories a remembrance of being ingrained to the different local cultures. These are tales that are from worlds inhabited by the mundane and the quotidian, worlds that Kalita is experienced and attuned to, yet often which are bleak, anxious and painful—carrying aspirations and anticipations of a history through a time which is rapidly altering the worlds around us.

Anidrita Saikia is currently an MPhil research scholar at the Department of History, University of Delhi. Her research interests lie in colonial history and literature of the North-east.

“Biswas retains words of local tongues, and the astute incorporation of local folktales, poetry and songs give the stories a remembrance of being ingrained to the different local cultures.”
Lyrical Feminist Vision of the Shared Colonial Past of India and China

Kopal

Bisat Par Jugnu (Fireflies on the Checkerboard) is a dreamy narrative of the legacy of ordinary people in the early anti-colonial struggles in India and China and the often forgotten connection of the Opium trade between the two countries.

The novel is woven with two timelines. A linear chronology of events from 1840 to 1910 is punctuated with events from Patna in the year 2001. The narrative in the distant past is set in four locations connected to the opium trade between India and China—Patna, Chandpur, Calcutta and Canton. Chandpur is a small fictional princely state in North Bihar with opium fields and mica mines that exports its produce (of opium and mica) on a ship, Surya Darbar, bought from a distressed Dutch merchant who had moral qualms about trading in opium. The Raja of Chandpur Riyasat, Babu Diggijay Singh, has no such qualms. Nervous about the increasing political dominance of the British and aware of slowly losing economic ground, he decides to diversify his economic prospects through direct export to China. Towards this end, he invites Fateh Ali Khan, a cartographer from Patna, to work for him. A large part of the narrative in the novel is given to us through the diary entries and letters of Fateh Ali Khan. In Chandpur, we also have the undeniably most important character of the novel, Pargasso Dusadahan, a heroic woman from an untouchable caste who becomes the lover of Babu Sumer Singh, the opium addicted, sensitive Prince of the Chandpur Riyasat. She mobilizes the people of Chandpur Riyasat to participate in an armed rebellion against the British in concert with the other rebellions happening all over India in 1857.

Fateh Ali Khan is the link that joins all the different locations in the novel. He spends many years in Canton on account of the trading activities of Surya Darbar. In Canton, he meets the widow Yu Yan and her infant son, Chin. Yu Yan had participated in the Taiping Rebellion along with her husband, Chang who was the right hand man of the leader of the rebellion, Hong Xiuquan and had died saving Hong in the battle. A few years later when the impoverished Chinese fisherfolks were being hauled together to be taken to Hong in the battle. A few years later when the impoverished Chinese fisherfolks were being hauled together to be taken to China saving Hong in the battle. A few years later when the impoverished Chinese fisherfolks were being hauled together to be taken to China.

Yu Yan's sister, Mo Chan, visits Patna in search of a portrait of Chin made in the style of Patna Kalam. Li Na meets Samarth Lal, descendant of Shankar Lal and Khadeeja Begum, in order to unravel the mysterious ways in which stories of their ancestors were linked.

The dominance of the lyrical mode over the realist mode of writing makes this an unusual historical novel. It does not invest in the realist depiction of history through delineations of past manners, customs and causation of events. The mise en scène is bare and functional. The sensibility and mannerisms of the characters are uncharacteristically modern which further weaken the realism.

All the characters are benign and well meaning individuals who accept differences of class, caste, religion, gender and sexuality. The old follower of Confucius is horrified by Yu Yan's following Hong Christianity but accepts her and her child into shelter and respects her beliefs. Pargasso's caste status is respected by the residents of the gadhi Chandpur but far from becoming a point of conflict, it is never even articulated outside the minds of the characters. Her ascension to power is far too easy and effortless. Without any schooling, she is shown to read not just katha but also Urdu.

Khadeeja and Shankar Lal's son, Amar Lal marries a Brahmin priest's daughter. Another Brahmin priest at Chandpur works as a spy and has no qualms about caste pollution and accepts water from all castes. This dilution of caste realities instead of depicting an anti-caste understanding makes light of its iron grip. Similarly, Khadeeja Begum cross-dresses as a man to practice painting in the Musavirkhana but once Shankar Lal recognizes her as a woman, her being a woman is no obstacle to her visiting the Musavirkhana. Chowkidar Ramesar Mahato is stunned and hurt with the entry of a woman in a public space and finds it shameless but remains silent. It is as though all the social impediments of caste and gender were mental blocks with negligible existence outside of the mind.

All the major relationships in the novel are based on a sense of egalitarian friendship based on mutual respect and admiration whether it is the romantic relationships between Ruknuddin and William, Pargasso and Sumer Singh, Chang and Yu Yan, Shankar Lal and Khadeeja Begum, Samarth Lal and Sangeeta or friendship of Fateh Ali with Sumer Singh, Pargasso and Yu Yan as well as friendship between Li Na, Samarth Lal and Sangeeta. Everyone in...
"The dominance of the lyrical mode over the realist mode of writing makes this an unusual historical novel. It does not invest in the realist depiction of history through delineations of past manners, customs and causation of events."

Chandpur adores the feudal Raja and chhote malik Sumer Singh. All the characters are generally very nice to everybody. It is a wishful fantasy of a humane world projected into the past.

The primary conflict addressed in the novel is colonialism. It is a pervading suffocating presence, yet we do not see it functioning in its full complexity and depth of detail. For example, the colonial opium trade provides the setting for the novel but we are not given the particulars of the trade. In this sense, it is a novel very different in its approach from Amitav Ghosh’s Ibis Trilogy. The colonial aggressors are not individualized. The power of the British is so overwhelming that it adopts an uncanny supernatural character. The history is already overdetermined and there is a looming sense of defeat. The senior Raja is terrified of the approaching danger of the British for years until they engulf his business completely and annihilate him. Even when Pargasso, Chang, Yu Yan and other rebels are shown mobilizing for rebellion, there is a tragic fatal quality to the narration which heightens their heroism.

The lyrical mode of narration is presented through an interiorized subjectivity that refracts a world of compassionate and self-conscious colonized selves. We witness colonialism in its affectual domain. The novel has a cast of hypersensitive characters who carry the burden of a historic hurt. It is the dreamy nature of narrative that is the remarkable quality of the novel. It is a deliberate dream of a past with brave women and fragile men. It has a clear feminist agenda of reclaiming women’s narratives in history and re-inscribing in it the heroines who have been invisible. These marginalized women are written on a symbolic plane, especially Pargasso who does not seem human but is an idealized invocation of the resistant spirit of women. The women in the novel are the fireflies on the political checkerboard. The writing style is contemplative and poetic with a flair for the romantic.

Bisu pat jugna is an important novel that invokes the shared history of anti-colonial struggle of India and China at a time when the two neighbouring countries are kept in the same frame of reference only in the world of International Relations. It expands the horizons of Hindi literary imagination by including newer spaces into its fold. Its compassionate romanticizing gaze into the past is both its weakness and the strength.

Kopal is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Amebdkar University, Delhi.

Man-Woman Relationship

Ranu Uniyal

Reading Ravi Katha is like getting access to a very private nook, an extremely enchanting view of the two most loved writers who spent much of their life in Allahabad, a quiet mosfussil literary home for the avantgarde from the 70s and 80s. Every life is a story, but not every story is of love. Har kadam humne aashiqui ki hai—Faiz—is neatly inscribed on the cover page of the book.

Mamta Kalia, a prolific story writer, novelist, critic, editor, a poet and a teacher, is one of the most prominent bi-lingual writers from the North. As a winner of several awards, she continues to write with striking clarity. A book that can hold your attention in this sweltering heat and let you travel into the world of emotions and passion without any frills or fanfare, a book that leaves a lump in your throat is how I would describe this beautiful memoir of the two literary giants—Mamta Kalia and Ravindra Kalia. In telling his story, she is telling us much about herself. A young couple meets at a Seminar in Chandigarh and travel together by bus to Delhi. And the rest is unfolded through a narrative that is bold, bracing and bindass.

Memoirs not only register the trajectory of being and unfolding but break open the boundaries that resist the telling. In moments of raw emotions, we get to see what binds the self to the other. In tracing her journey from being a daddy’s girl to a woman who married for love, Mamta Kalia chooses to reflect on the various experiences of life that have led to the development of female subjectivity. And in doing so the memoir significantly looks at the socio-cultural norms, economic concerns, uneasy equations that are formed within family and the difficulties middle-class working women face in a restricting environment. Much of Mamta Kalia’s writing focuses on man-woman relationship. Not only does she speak of the struggle and anxiety of a working woman but she also brings out the inherent challenges and tensions in a world fraught with anxiety of assertion and the pain of rejection. The oppressive conventions do not let women come out of the traditional fold, but Kalia defends their right to be themselves with a quiet determination. And it is not surprising that her own life is one such example.

Married to a man who aspired to be a writer and refused to submit to authority, Ravindra Kalia was an unusual genius of his times. He never chased success, nor did he succumb to the changing ethos. After living in Mumbai, shifting jobs at a rapid pace both decide to make Allahabad their home. ‘Running a kitchen twice a day was a sign of prosperity in Allahabad. Wearing a newly stitched kurta would make headlines…Often Ravi would run the machine, read the proofs and pick the ink drums himself’ (p. 112) (my translation).

Timeless Tales from Marwar by Vijaydan Detha, translated from the Rajasthani by Vishes Kothari is a hand-picked compilation from the much-celebrated Batan ni Phulwari—Garden of Tales—a fourteen-volume collection written over a span of nearly fifty years. Retold in Detha’s magical narrative style complete with imagery, this selection offers some of the oldest and most popular fables from the Thar Desert region.

Puffin Books, 2020, pp. 208, ₹250.00

ANDAAZ-E-BAYAN URF RAVI KATHA
By Mamta Kalia
Vani Prakashan, New Delhi, 2020, pp. 196, ₹595.00

Mamta Kalia is a novelist, short story writer, memoirist and critic. Some of her major works are Beghar, Narah dar Narah, Dukkham Sukkham, Culture-Vultures, Bolney wali Aurat, Ek Adad Aurat, Mukhota, Kitney Shelvon Mein Kitnee Baar.
Mamta’s teaching career kept the home fires burning. Ravindra Kalia continued to run his publishing house, editing a magazine, inviting writers young and old to his evening soirées. Writing not only gave the two of them financial stability, but immense satisfaction and joy and renewed their faith in life. The world of Hindi language and literature became their priceless treasure. In Ravi Katha Mamta Kalia gathers separate strands of life and literature. There are sections on the growth and development of Hindi short story and the contribution of Premchand. He was the first one to write about the pain and deprivation of the lower middle class and the farmers. With an impeccable control over Hindi, Urdu and English, he translated the works of Maupassant, Pushkin, Galsworthy, Tolstoy and several other prominent writers from world literature into Hindi (p. 39). This is not just a personal outpouring of loss and longing, but somewhere along the line it traces the ties that are built in the literary world and are sometimes painfully snapped as was the case with Krishna Sobti and Ravindra Kalia (pp. 185-195).

Each chapter opens with a verse of Ghalib or Faiz. The memoir opens up space for women who have struggled to keep marriage, motherhood, writing and professional life in order. She is not the usual woman nor is he the usual man. Both have their dreams and aspirations to guide them. Both acknowledged the contribution of each other to their life. Their house was a literary hub for some of the prominent writers like Shrilal Shukla, Akhilesh, and Shailesh Matiyani. She fondly recalls the pantry of literary giants Jainendra Kumar, Bhisham Sahni, Krishna Sobti, Manu Bhandari, Mohan Rakesh, Namvar Singh and several others at her wedding. It is unfortunate that his drinking habits and a certain indifference to his health. In the last few years Ravindra Kalia suffered deeply but continued to read and write with sincerity. He was aware of his condition but did not surrender his wit or his pen. Mamta Kalia draws our attention to the way Ravindra became an essential part of her being and the years without him have now made days long and unbearable for her. The grief and emptiness at the loss of a soul mate is captured with a rhythmic intensity. To pour her anguish on the pages with such an abundance is indeed an act of courage. Hopefully writing this memoir has been a palliative and Mamta Kalia will continue to nourish our hearts with more stories. We look forward to stories of courage and confidence from a writer who is loved and literature and culture. The story is built around the justification of another partition of Pakistan leading to the birth of Bangladesh, another nation, though Muslim by religion, but Bengali speaking. The internal colonialism of this population living in East Pakistan, starting with the imposition of Urdu language, has been very well narrated. This imposition exacerbated the injustices suffered by the people of East Pakistan resulting in the confiscation and destruction of their properties, lives and businesses. The political narrative of resistance in this novel is woven around its principal protagonist, Kulbhushan, who belongs to a Marwari family and lives in Kushthia town of East Pakistan with his parents and siblings who later move to Kolkata for establishing their flourishing businesses. Uneducated and not so far, Kulbhushan’s story is quite similar to that of a casual labourer used by all in the family. It is basically a believable story given the racism that exists in South Asia. Kulbhushan has to change his name to acquire new identities and live a life of functional dignity. Often accused of thievery and what not, he feels more comfortable with people of low caste and mixes well with marginalized people. In fact, his best friend is Shyama, a dhobi with whom he is closer than with his own brothers and their families.

Shyama has a heart of gold and that is enough for both of them to become comrades; one is declassed by his family on account of his looks, the colour of the skin, the other by his caste. Kushthia is

**A Tale of the Birth of Bangladesh**

*Savita Singh*

The book under review is Alka Saraogi’s seventh novel. *Kulbhushan Ka Nam Darj Kijiye* is a historical novel, set in the background of India’s Partition in the aftermath of its struggle for freedom from British colonialism. It was the colonial legacy of divide and rule that allowed two distinct territories of the subcontinent to become one nation, Pakistan, by dint of inhabitation of Muslim population. However, people were still divided by language, literature and culture. The story is built around the justification of another partition of Pakistan leading to the birth of Bangladesh, another nation, though Muslim by religion, but Bengali speaking. The internal colonialism of this population living in East Pakistan, starting with the imposition of Urdu language, has been very well narrated. This imposition exacerbated the injustices suffered by the people of East Pakistan resulting in the confiscation and destruction of their properties, lives and businesses. The political narrative of resistance in this novel is woven around its principal protagonist, Kulbhushan, who belongs to a Marwari family and lives in Kushthia town of East Pakistan with his parents and siblings who later move to Kolkata for establishing their flourishing businesses. Uneducated and not so far, Kulbhushan’s story is quite similar to that of a casual labourer used by all in the family. It is basically a believable story given the racism that exists in South Asia. Kulbhushan has to change his name to acquire new identities and live a life of functional dignity. Often accused of thievery and what not, he feels more comfortable with people of low caste and mixes well with marginalized people. In fact, his best friend is Shyama, a dhobi with whom he is closer than with his own brothers and their families.

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**Kulbhushan Ka Nam Darj Kijiye**

*By Alka Saraogi*

Vani Prakashan, 2020, pp. 212, `199.00

Alka Saraogi has a PhD on Raghuvir Sahay’s poetry from Kolkata University. Her first novel, *Kalikatha Via Bypass* was given the Sahitya Akademi Award. It got translated into many languages including French, German, Spanish and Italian. Her other novels are: *Koi Baat Nahin, Ek Break Ke Baad, Jankidas Tejpal Mansion* and *Ek Sachhi Jhoothi Gaatha*. Her two collections of short stories are: *Kahani Ki Talash Mein* and *Dossri Kahani Hai*.

Ranu Uniyal is Professor and Head, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, Lucknow.
their town and also the cosmos of the story of the Partition of their lives and that of Pakistan; it’s a universe of the politics, history and language determining the destiny of its inhabitants. The friendship of these two persons is the elixir that runs the story till the very end. Strewed with moments of tragedy, separation, migration and numerous deaths, this novel tells the story of what happened to people who were compelled to separate from West Pakistan and form a new nation, Bangladesh.

Kulbhushan Jain alias Gopal Chandra Das known also Bhushan or Bhuhan Da becomes the primary witness of the movement of history in this part of the world. He stands to tell how nations are formed and what suffering they carry with them. The struggle for freedom from this situation, led by Mukti Bahini has been narrated through characters such as Dr. Quasim, Comrade Roshan Ali, Amal Sen and Brayan Biswas. Also, moments of disappointment have been registered in the novel by showing how even comrades in arms begin to flee the territory in the wake of increased repression unleashed by the military regime of Pakistan against political activists. Anil Mukherjee, who believes in the equality of human beings and addresses the dampered spirit of Kulbhushan Jain for the first time, raises his status in his own eyes, engaging him in discussions about politics and culture, leaves Kushtia for Kolkata. This angers Dr. Quasim for he stays back to fight for a new country. Here in Kushtia, Kartik Babu, the owner of the Jageshwari Mill, dies after being arrested by the Pakistani police as he is declared enemy of the state by Ayub Khan’s military regime. Kartik Babu’s son Lal Babu, the moving spirit behind the cultural life of Kushtia, escapes too and goes to India. This kind of forced migration has a communal angle too. Most Hindus are aided by Muslims to leave Kushtia as their properties are taken over by the local Muslim League politicians or its supporters.

In the novel, Kulbhushan is shown to be aiding Hindus migrate safely to the other side of Bengal. He knows that ultimately his own universe will also collapse. He too escapes leaving only his father behind who would not budge as he does not want to abandon his property. Ultimately the father also gives in but the worst is still not over. The migrants are not allowed to stay in Kolkata that easily. People here detest the desperate migrating masses. So they are pushed out of the city towards the jungles of Orissa. What awaits them is big dark buses taking them to Dandakaranya, a harsh uncultivated forest land where trees are being cut to make room for human habitation. Citizens of one country are now refugees in another with insecure lives and rights. Kulbhushan comes up to the camps of Malkangiri hoping to find his friend and mentor, Anil Mukherjee. But of no avail. On the contrary, all illusions of a good life for the Hindus of East Pakistan is shattered. The tough compromised lives of the migrants are in shambles. Kulbhushan takes an exit from this life by trying to find what happened to Anil da. But not without first looking for Anil Mukherji. This good man, though alive in one of the refugee camps, has lost his speech out of the shock of witnessing his daughter and niece being taken away and raped by the police and the rioters. Shyama and his family are also in disarray on account of the chaos of Partition and migration.

Kulbhushan wants these sordid tales to be written and that is why he tells the journalist who is writing a book on the subject, to record his name as name should be recorded not as Gopal Chand Das, but as Kulbhushan to establish and secure the authenticity of the tale of tragedy faced by the people of East Pakistan, ultimately resulting in the birth of a new nation. He wants people down the historical time to know why and how Bangladesh was formed and what it meant to people living there. Kushisia is no more intact; it’s not a universe in itself anymore, it’s a part of a larger reality, not to be understood by the distinctness of the language spoken and understood here, but by the harshness of politics.

Towards the end of the novel, I could not help but think that Alka Saraogi has given us a tale of a community which would have loved to live their lives without the interference of a harsh world. Kushisia after all was a universe unto itself with its own prejudices, heart-aches, loves, hates, cultural programmes, football teams, rivers and a bunch of good-hearted people.

Savita Singh is a political theorist and a feminist poet from Delhi. She writes in Hindi and English and has three collections to her name, Apne Jaise Jeevan (2001, Radhakrishna Prakashan), Neend Thi Aur Raat Thi (2005, Radhakrishna Prakashan), Swapna Samay (2013, Radhakrishna Prakashan). She has a collection of fifty poems, Nayi Sadki iye Pachas Kavitayen (2012, Vani Prakashan).

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"The story is built around the justification of another partition of Pakistan leading to the birth of Bangladesh, another nation, though Muslim by religion, but Bengali speaking. The internal colonialism of this population living in East Pakistan, starting with the imposition of Urdu language, has been very well narrated."

"The political narrative of resistance in this novel is woven around its principal protagonist, Kulbhushan, who belongs to a Marwari family and lives in Kushtia town of East Pakistan with his parents and siblings who later move to Kolkata for establishing their flourishing businesses."
Many A Fiery Tale

Aakriti Mandhwani

Sayani Divani, a collection of twenty-one short stories contained within a slim volume of 150 pages, tells many fiery tales. One of the most powerful stories in the collection is the unassumingly titled ‘Imā hā sāhī’ (‘This is Enough’). At its centre is a wife who has come to resent, and even be fearful of, her husband’s sexual desire of her. She tries to talk to her mother and sister about it, but they refuse to discuss this because, to them, sexual dissatisfaction is the wife’s lot. When she asks if she can talk about it to her husband directly, she is silenced again. She spends a lot of her time alone in her flat observing a pair of pigeons, regularly attacking the male whenever it approaches the female pigeon to mate: since she cannot do anything about her own condition, she decides to help with what she imagines is the female pigeon’s plight. The wife’s story of dissatisfaction takes a quick turn when her husband is travelling for a month and asks her to host his friend at their flat. At the end of a day enjoying each other’s company, the wife and the friend have a sexual liaison. For the first time in her life, a sexual exchange is pleasurable for her. She wakes up the next day and considers the possibility of him not being Hindu: she only knows him as ‘V’ from the story ‘Avirat’ or ‘Continuous’ is a story about a woman forced into the institution of marriage because of her social circumstances but ends with her own parody. The colleague’s voice appears at the very end, saying, ‘Sach much, kuch nahī bhadla’ (Truly, nothing has changed).

Indeed, Noor Zahir’s craft of writing very short fiction is masterful through its investigation of violence, always lurking and threatening in the background. ‘Dar-badar’ (‘From Door to Door’) for instance, tells the story of a Muslim family whose house has been looted and burnt in anti-Muslim riots. An auto driver, who is in love with their daughter, risks his life and rescues them. Because of his quick thinking, the family ends up at a safe Jamaat-e-Islami camp. Grateful, the parents disregard their stark class differences, and invite him to sing and dance anywhere…).

While the story is largely a critique of intracommunal relations within the camp, the writer also sketches the overall circumstances which led these camps to be built in the first place. At the very end of the story, while the family is waiting to transfer to another relief camp, soldiers waste of money destroying them, add to it the infamy. They should not worry about their future because, despite the curfew, their daughter will definitely find work: she can sing so well and ‘aārat bhi aachā hai, kabhī bhi nāch gā kar…’ (her face also looks good, she can sing and dance anywhere…). At times, however, in its framing of the indictment of social and political ills, some stories end up caricaturing its very protagonists. For instance, ‘Avirat’ or ‘Continuous’ is a story about a woman obsessed with getting married, despite having been married and divorced twice before. The story shows the extent of her despair and blind belief in superstitions, miracle cures by gurus and babas, and matching auspicious birth charts. In the course of the story, the woman gets married for a third time, moving away to Canada. However, she returns to work within the year since she has begun divorce proceedings for the third time. When her colleague asks if she perhaps should have trusted herself instead of trusting superstitions and fraudulent babas, the woman insists that she has found another baba who has promised to get her married within four months of being divorced. The story starts as a sensitive portrayal of a woman forced into the institution of marriage because of her social circumstances but ends with her own parody. The colleague’s voice appears at the very end, saying, ‘Sach much, kuch nahī bhadla’ (Truly, nothing has changed).

Noor Zahir, born in Lucknow, is an award-winning author writing in Hindi, Urdu and English. She has published several collections of short stories, novels, translations, biographies, travelogues, plays, literary criticism, works on research on Buddhist, tribal and oral traditions.

Aakriti Mandhwani is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University, Noida.

Noor Zahir

By Noor Zahir

Radhakrishna Paperbacks,
Delhi, 2020, pp. 150, ₹160.00

By Noor Zahir

Radhakrishna Paperbacks,
Delhi, 2020, pp. 150, ₹160.00

By Noor Zahir

Radhakrishna Paperbacks,
Testimony to the Seasons

Semeen Ali

Aangan ka Shajar or the The Tree in the Courtyard is a collection of ghazals written by Mamta Kiran. The title is an interesting one as it sets the tone for the book. The tree of verses branches out to include several thematic concerns that fill the pages of this book. And the courtyard turns into a witness to read the stories of the leaves that fall on it. What Mamta does with her verses is that she combines the elements from contemporary times—and its proponents into this format. From including words like Twitter and WhatsApp, to including idioms common to the Hindi language, Mamta defies the set parameters that one expects when reading or writing a ghazal.

The book opens with hard hitting verses questioning the concept of home from varied angles—from standing inside one’s home reminiscing about the past, to wanting someone to return home, to going away from home to carve out an identity for oneself on one’s own terms. The book further delves into this idea of what constitutes a safe haven for the self throughout the book. At times, it turns into a person or a memory that provides comfort and at times, it becomes an actual home that gives one a sense of well-being. From the familiarity of surroundings comes up the idea of identity—defining oneself through one’s environment and how at times stepping out from that habitus can cause one to get smothered. A ghazal by Mamta brings out the gravity of a situation when the poet addresses a girl child and how the world tries to suffocate her existence. The manner in which this has been portrayed makes this particular ghazal a compelling read. The ages/experiences that a person goes through and turns one into an attester of life experiences, run through this slim volume of poems. From enjoying one’s youth to the crisis that one goes through where one questions one’s identity and one’s existence to the retreat from the world into oneself and the loneliness that surrounds one as the end comes near; the book turns into a testimony of the varied seasons that an entity can endure.

“What Mamta has done is create a world that one can look at and relate with; the circumstances, the impressions that are created and a kaleidoscope of responses to the situations that life decides to hurl at a person come together powerfully in this collection.”

Nostalgia is one of the forms of retaining and recalling the various lost selves and Mamta uses them beautifully in her works. She recalls her mother, her father, their acts of kindness towards her and the strength that she derives from their memories; and has a special place in her works for the tree in their courtyard.

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Semeen Ali has four books of poetry to her credit. Her works have featured in several national and international journals as well as anthologies. Her new anthology on women’s writings will be published this year. Apart from reviewing books, she is also the Fiction and the Poetry editor for the literary journal Muse India.

“Aangan ka Shajar” by Mamta Kiran

**AANGAN KA SHAJAR**
By Mamta Kiran
Kitabghar Prakashan, 2020, pp. 96, ₹200.00

Mamta Kiran is an acclaimed poet, journalist and news reader.

“Brink” by S.L. Bhyrappa, translated by R. Ranganath Prasad is the English translation of the epic Kannada novel Anchu. It narrates the love saga between Somashhekar, a widower, and Amrita, an estranged woman. The novel deliberates on the moral, philosophical, and physical aspects of love between a man and a woman.

Nitogi Books, 2020, pp. 420, ₹595.00
Valley of Words (VoW), a not-for-profit initiative of the Valley of Words Foundation Trust based in Dehradun, is marking its fifth edition in a new Pan-Indian ‘phygital’ format across 5 weekends and 5 cities designed to overcome the obstacles created by COVID 19.

This year we begin the Festival on the 9th & 10th of October at New Delhi for the Military History and Strategy Vertical; followed by Vadodara for Hindi Fiction and Non-Fiction on the 23rd & 24th of October; then Kolkata for English Fiction and Non-Fiction on the 6th & 7th of November; Hyderabad from 13th-14th of November for Young Adult Literature and Translation; and the final segment in Dehradun where we conclude with Children’s Literature and Picture books (our new Award Category this year), Anuvaad, and the History of Science from the 19th to 21st of November. We hope you will join us for the Festival. This year, more than ever, we are taking the love of literature far beyond our own valley into every corner of the country.

The Power Finance Corporation and Valley of Words have joined hands again to acknowledge and platform the best of Indian literature, written in both English and Hindi, from the previous calendar year through the PFC-VoW Book Awards in eight categories – including the new category of Children’s Writings and Picture-books (bilingual) instituted from 2020 onwards. The Longlist of 10 books is decided by eminent Juries, and then brought down to the 5 shortlisted titles around which are designed the English Literature and Hindi sahitya verticals of the Festival. We are committed to supporting diversity and inclusion, and to facilitating conversations around Indian languages and literature – especially in translation. Increasingly, we also hope to engage with Indian writings for the young adults and children who will be the future of our country.

Nominations are invited for the next edition of the PFC-VoW Book Awards starting in January 2022

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Submissions are accepted from all established and registered publishing houses having offices within the territorial jurisdiction of India. There is no limitation on the number of submissions in each category. In other words, a publisher may send books by multiple authors across categories.

Individual nominations are accepted when submitted with due regard for the processes outlined on the Valley of Words website, including registration and other pertinent steps.

Nominations are accepted in the following categories:

- English Fiction
- English Non-Fiction
- Translations from Indian Languages to English
- Hindi Fiction
- Hindi Non-Fiction
- Translations from Indian Languages to Hindi
- Writings for Young Adults – Bilingual (11-16 years)
- Writings / Picture-books for Children – Bilingual (5-10 years)

Five identical hard copies of each book must be submitted by India Speed Post or Courier by the Publisher / Individual Applicant along with the nomination form (which can be accessed at Nominate a Book – Valley of Words) clearly stating the category the book(s) submitted are to be adjudicated in. After the adjudication process, the books will be shared through the ‘VoW Book Shelf’ which is placed in various cafes in Dehradun and Mussoorie from where readers can borrow books. The books are also maintained in the VoW Café’s own Library space, which is entirely open-access to all. Select books are also donated to other libraries in the country to ensure the widest possible reach of the nominated literature.

Eligible titles must have been published in print during the previous calendar year (2021). Each entry should be the author’s original work or an authorised translation into Hindi or English. Books will be received in good faith, and plagiarism checks should be done by the publisher before submitting a book or multiple books. The VoW Foundation Trust will not be responsible for any plagiarism issues which come to light at any point of time, even after the Awards have been given.

The following publications are not eligible for submission:

- Academic Books and Theses, Edited Volumes, Anthologies or Books written by more than one author, Reference Books, Text Books, Guide Books,
- Educational Materials including books made of open access Study-Materials online, Manuals, Reprints and Television, Radio and Film Tie-ins/Trivia and ghost-written books.

All books entered must have a registered ISBN number or equivalent indicator recognised by international book repositories.

Hardbacks and paperbacks may be submitted in five copies as mentioned above. Soft copies of any book will NOT be accepted for adjudication.
All entries must be submitted in five (5) identical hard copies to
Mr Bikram Singh
VoW Café Library Gallery
Near USHA, Sahastradhara Road, Dehradun 248013
UTTARAKHAND (+91 94129 20447)
Entries must be submitted along with the nomination form. (Accessed through the website.)

Books will be received till 23:59 hours on the 31st of March, 2022.
The VoW Foundation Trust reserves the right to extend the closing date of the competition.
Proof of posting a submission is not proof of receipt by the VoW Foundation Trust. The Trust will accept no responsibility for submissions
that are delayed, misdirected or otherwise lost prior to receipt.
A panel of judges, including at least one member who is independent of PFC-VoW, will select a Longlist and Shortlist from all valid entries
received in accordance with the evaluation criteria for good literature. Shortlisted entrants shall be sent notifications of their short-listing on or
before 30th June 2021 and the shortlisted titles will be posted on the VoW website.
The PFC-VoW team reserves the right to modify the leadership team or to add therein if there are unavoidable circumstances. Events of the
nature of the ‘Acts of God’ category may force PFC-VoW to alter its adjudication method/team/leadership structure.
A second panel of Judges, including at least one member who is independent of PFC-VoW, will select the 8 (eight) finalists from all valid
shortlisted entries on or before 30th September 2022.
All the finalists for the PFC-VoW Awards 2022 will be invited to attend Valley of Words International Literature and Arts Festival in
Dehradun in November 2022.
The organisers are not responsible for any reimbursements to any author or publisher who participates in the Valley of Words Festival or
related events.
The winners of the PFC-VoW Book Awards 2022 will be announced at Valley of Words International Literature and Arts Festival 2022 and
will be shared at www.valleyofwords.org after the actual Awards ceremony is over.

Payment of the individual prize of INR 1,00,000 each, along with a certificate and plaque will be presented to the Awardees during
VoW 2022.

All shortlisted books will be reviewed/ featured in a special issue of The Book Review, closer to the festival, in 2022.
While PFC-VoW and the VoW Foundation Trust believe in ethical transparency, we also believe in the need for confidentiality and fairness
in the process of adjudicating. No publisher or author will try to find out about the judges till after the actual physical awards of prizes in each
category. Judges, authors and/or publishers found unethical will be liable to prosecution in Indian courts of law. While certain criteria for
good judgement may be published, the names of judges and their identities will not be disclosed before the end of the Awards ceremony at the
Festival.
The judges’ decision is final and cannot be contested. No correspondence will be entertained by PFC-VoW and the VoW Foundation Trust
with the authors or publishers in this regard. When choosing the shortlisted books and the winners, the judges will select the entries which in
their combined wisdom are the best in terms of set standards followed globally. Ethical practices will be strictly adhered to from the moment
the nominated books are received.
The publisher must have the consent of the author to submit the title or titles to the PFC-VoW Awards 2021. In addition, the publisher
must secure the consent of the author to participate in promotional activity, including publication of the author’s name and image, in
connection with the PFC-VoW Book Awards 2022 on the reasonable request of PFC-VoW.
The PFC-VoW Book Awards 2022 are not open to employees of PFC or VoW or their family members, nor to anyone else connected with
the aforementioned Awards.
Entries that do not comply with these terms and conditions shall not be considered for the competition. By submitting a title to the PFC-
VoW Book Awards 2022, the publisher of the submitted title warrants and represents that it has complied with the protocol of the PFC-VoW
Book Awards 2022, including the terms and conditions mentioned here.
The VoW Foundation Trust reserves the right to not award a prize in any category whatsoever without disclosing the reasons thereof.
Indian laws shall govern the PFC-VoW Book Awards 2022 and any dispute arising in this regard will be subject only to Indian courts of law.
For further details or information, please visit our website or write in to us at celebrate@valleyofwords.org.
The programme schedules for each vertical will be updated on our website www.valleyofwords.org and all of the sessions can be viewed on
our YouTube channel (Valley of Words) and social media platforms (@vowlitfest).

Come, join us as we celebrate the word – and beyond…
Beyond Prejudice and Preconceptions

Mihir Vatsa

Near the end of first part of the book, writer-traveller Umesh Pant, having travelled for about twenty days in the North East, wonders what might be the purpose of his travel. He writes that often in a solo trip, there comes a time when both the sense of belonging as well as the sense of purpose are tested. His unease at the Guwahati bus stand, spurred by the sudden loneliness that he experiences, appears anti-climactic, considering that not much earlier, the title of chapter six had stated, ‘Poorvottar ab paraya nahi reh gaya’.

The subtitle of Pant’s travelogue is ‘Poorvagrahkon ke Paar Poorvottar ki Yatra’. With it, he already lays out the premise and tells the reader about the purpose of the book. It is to see and write about the North East beyond general assumptions. However, his profound realization that he is a solo traveller, sitting alone in the night at the bus stand, overcome with the pressing desire to belong, creates a philosophical division in the idea of purpose: there is the purpose of the book, and then, there is the purpose of any traveller who undertakes a journey.

There are plenty of instances in the travelogue where people feel both a deep sense of belonging and alienation from the North East. The men from the army, who share Pant’s 3AC compartment on the journey to Guwahati, are loath to return to duty. On the way back to the first journey, an elderly woman returning to Delhi tells Pant, ‘Hamein toh badi bekaar jagah lagi, Phooloo me paiye poonok diye’. All because of difference in culinary culture. However, standing against such instances of alienation are people like Guwahati’s Mr. Ravishankar, who had come from eastern India to the North East for a few days and made the region his home forever. This twin theme of alienation and belonging runs throughout the book, asking the reader to re-evaluate their understanding of what is homely and inside and what is alien and outside.

Using two instances from the book as examples, we are able to understand how Pant creates awareness in the reader that what we think we know might not serve our expectations in the North East. In chapter eighteen, ‘Duniya Ke Sabse Bade Nadi Dwarp’, travelling from Guwahati to Majuli in a bus, Pant is joyous to see rain for the first time in his trip. ‘Sabse zyada baarish wali jagah Cherrapunji mein bhi jis baarish se madadgaat nahi ho paayi wo aaj yaahan akasmat mil gayi thi’, he writes. Earlier in chapter seven, ‘Writer, You are so Afraid of Death’, returning from the Living Roots Bridge at Nongriat after a long trek, Pant meets a foreigner and warns him of the trek’s length. ‘Yes, I know,’ the foreigner replies, and adds, “coming here fifth time.” The man goes on to tell Pant about his impressions of Manipur and Mizoram too, before doling out advice and tips. These are precisely the moments of recognition and revision which Pant’s travelogue offers in plenty.

‘Kii bhahen se wase baatcheet shuru bhi,’ mentions Pant about a person who was staying at the same place as him at Bomdila, Arunachal Pradesh. Conversation is a prominent activity that moves the book forward, leading Pant from one person to the other, one place to the other. The writer-traveller is gregarious and does not hesitate to initiate talks. Perhaps it is Pant’s prior experience as a journalist which makes him confident while approaching people. In turn, people too share their stories candidly with him. Pant is a millennial traveller, relying not only on the physical but also the virtual space. He meets friends from Facebook; he is aware of the new travel trend of ‘couchsurfing’, and often he meets people who have known him through his social media presence and writing. Pant’s sociality helps him connect with many individuals through his journey, forming immediate trust and companionship wherever he goes. He is also a thrifty traveller. From picking hotel rooms within the maximum budget of five-hundred rupees, staying at acquaintances’ places and helping with the housework, travelling always in shared taxis and sleeping in a dharmshala or a cold bare shanty, Pant is open to experiences. His journey is not of a cushioned traveller who visits convenient places in luxury. On the contrary, Pant is able to locate convenience in the most basic facilities available to him and works with it. That is, till both the reader and the writer meet another thrifty traveller in the book, Venkatesh, who is out on a much longer journey on a much lower budget. Suddenly, Pant appears to be the posher one.

A well-emphasized theme in the travelogue is women’s safety in the North East. It stands in contrast to the condition of women in Delhi and other metropolitan cities of India. In chapter eight, ‘Bhaagya ka Teer’, acting out of well-intentioned concern, Pant tells his Odisha-born, Shillong-residing friend Sheela at nine in the night to not worry about accompanying him and that he will find his way back to the place where he was staying.

He tells Sheela that it won’t be safe for her this late in the night. Sheela smiles and replies, ‘Main toh is se bhi der tak akele yahan ghoonti hoon. Shillong bahut safe jagah hai.’

This is a well-paced narration. The places shift quickly, people come and leave quickly too. Yet, the book does not come across as rushed. Pant pauses the speed at crucial intervals to offer interesting trivia and tells us about important cultural practices, several folk stories, and the many festivals of the region. The drive within him to see ‘dekhte ki jagah’ in all the places he visits is strong—at times uncomfortably strong—and one wonders what Pant might do in a place that demands to be seen for its ordinariness, without neatly marked tourist destinations. It also seems that it is Pant’s swift detachment from one place to the other that forces upon him the ‘mid-trip crisis’ at the end of the first part. It is one of the most vulnerable moments in a book which could have been explored deeper on a personal level. The second spell of the journey is shorter and undertaken in a similar yatagram fashion, animated and rich in its telling, if somewhat also exhibiting the previous rootlessness.

History through Fiction
Nehal Ahmed

N oakhali is a district in Chitagong division of Bangladesh. In 1946, it was part of undivided India where Hindu-Muslim riots took place and cost the lives of thousands of people, mainly Hindus. Mahatma Gandhi went to Noakhali to bring peace to that place. Noakhali: Ek Vyakti ki Vijayi Sena is a novel which tells the fictional history of Mahatma Gandhi and his efforts to bring peace to Noakhali and Bihar.

The author is the narrator and fictionalizes true events with the help of historical records and her own field visit. In the introduction, the author mentions why she wrote this fictional work. She believes that today Muslims and Hindus are sharing almost the same level of hatred which they faced in 1946. And we all know the consequences of that hatred. So, she wants people not to repeat the same mistakes. She talks about the sources of the novel and how she collected the stories and recreated in the book.

The major part of the book deals with Gandhi’s engagement with the Noakhali and Bihar riots, along with the negotiations of the Interim Government, the Congress, the Muslim league, Independence and Partition between October 1946 and August 15, 1947. It talks about how properties were looted, women were raped and forcibly converted, Hindus migrated. Also, how Gandhi helped to bring back normalcy to Noakhali through Ahimsa. There are heart-rending descriptions of the suffering that people went through, as Gandhi found on his visit to the riot-affected region. In one instance, the author mentions how a village dog came and took Gandhi’s team to a place and started digging and the skeleton of a human being came out.

The fictitious style of writing about historical events raises the credibility question about the vivid details of riots where author was herself not present. In many instances, she writes about the thinking process of characters, e.g., Shaheed Suhravardy thinking how he will say no to Gandhi. I believe this is over-fictionalization of history.

The author takes a very convenient ideological position. She praises Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and the Indian National Congress in every situation, and holds Jinnah and the Muslim League as the root of the problem. When it comes to anti-Muslim riots in Bihar, Chaudhary tries to balance with the example of Noakhali. Her narrative portrays the Congress as a Party of nationalists loving their country who wanted communal harmony and the Muslim League as an organization spreading riots to divide the country in the name of religion. The book projects the Congress version of Independence, Partition, harmony but the position of the Muslim League is completely missing. Chaudhary seems to essentialize the stereotypical identity of a community in her fictional account while making a plea for not repeating the mistakes of history.

The novel does not offer anything new about Noakhali, Bihar, Partition and Independence. However, the book brings alive the persona of Gandhi and his political, social, economic, cultural philosophy which may inspire the readers.

Nehal Ahmed is a PhD scholar at the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. His research area includes film studies and international relations.

Sujata Chaudhary is a poet and short story writer. She is the author of Sau Saal Pehle: Champaran Ka Gandhi, Mahatma Ka Adhyatam, Bapu aur Street, Gandhi ki Naiyata etc. She also runs a trust, a school and an ashram for education, women, Dalits and other marginalized people.

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Giligadu: The Lost Days by Chitra Mudgal, translated from the Hindi by Priyanka Sarkar is a multi-layered novelette, short in length yet deep in meaning and messages for urban India. It is unique in the subtle way it conveys, both to the aged (who chafe at the apparent loss of respect and control) and to the not-so-old (who deserve to live their life on their terms), through the pen of a creative genius, a dignified way out of this two-pronged dilemma—a bold break with traditions and setting new societal rules. Niyogi Books, 2021, pp. 168, ₹295.00

John Lang: Wanderer of Hindoostan, Slanderer in Hindostance, Lawyer for the Ranee by Amit Ranjan, relates the story of John Lang, an inebriated journalist, a lawyer who learnt Urdu; who loved India and despised England. He was a dogged underdog from Sydney; he spared no effort to hurt the John Company (East India Company). He fought some important cases for Indians against the Company, and even won some of them. The Rani of Jhansi invited him to be her lawyer. As a lawyer, John Lang learnt Persian and Urdu fast to be able to argue cases in lower courts. Paper Missile, an imprint of Niyogi Books, 2021, pp. 472, ₹795.00
Ram Vilas Paswan (1946-2020) was a dynamic politician who emerged from the rural areas of Bihar and made his mark in national politics. His politics symbolizes the assertion of a Dalit politician against politicians of dominant castes. The book under review presents the diverse aspects of the personal and political life of Ram Vilas Paswan. It depicts his journey from a small village of Bihar to Lutyens’s Delhi, where he played a dynamic role in many decisions that significantly impacted Indian politics and the lives of ordinary and marginalized people of India. The author of the book, Pradeep Srivastava, is a noted journalist who has used interviews, documents of organizations, and newspapers as primary sources for information regarding different episodes of the life of Paswan. The book is divided into sixteen chapters, covering important events from his childhood to his political journey from the Legislative Assembly of Bihar to the Lok Sabha, Emergency, Mandal Commission, and formation of a separate party (Lok Janshakti Party). Since the book was published before his death, that incident is absent from the book, but apart from that, it tells the story of all critical events of Paswan’s life.

Paswan was born in a place called Shaharbanni of the Khagaria District of Bihar in 1946. He held a Bachelor of Law and a Master of Law degree from Kosi University of Khagaria and Patna University. He became a DSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police) in the Bihar Police but decided to join politics after his selection. He started his political career with Ram Manohar Lohia’s Samyukta Socialist Party in the 1969 Bihar Legislative Assembly election (Lohia died in 1967). The Socialist Party gave him a ticket to the Atauli constituency, where the Congress had never lost any election, and this constituency was represented by a senior leader Mishri Sada. Paswan did not have enough money for campaigning by motor vehicles. So, he and some of his friends campaigned with bicycles in the whole constituency. Paswan was a good orator, and due to his rebellious speeches, he attracted the common people, particularly the marginalized sections of society. He won the election by a very narrow margin.

As an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly), he started to raise questions about the representation of Dalits and their control of resources. Pradeep Srivastava informs that after the election, when his Party convened a meeting of MLAs to elect the leader, Paswan raised the question of the representation of marginalized sections, particularly the Dalits. Due to the insistence of some leaders, he fought an election against the stalwart Ramanand Tiwary. Though only a few MLAs supported Paswan, he successfully made an important point that the Party claiming to fight for the interests of the downtrodden must give leadership to the marginalized sections (pp. 39-40). In this period, Paswan worked to implement the radical policies of his Party and tried to capture the land of big landlords and distribute it to the poor people. Once, he planned to capture the land of a senior party colleague and big landlord Kameshwar Singh and faced severe attacks from the latter’s goons (pp. 47-48). In this period, Paswan went to jail many times due to his radical stand on many marginalized sections of society. When Paswan was doing such radical politics, most of his later colleagues like Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar had not even started their political journey.

Though Paswan lost in the Bihar Legislative Assembly mid-term election in 1972, he successfully made his mark as a young and rebellious Dalit leader. He participated in the Jaya Prakash Narayan movement and also went to jail during the Emergency. In the 1977 Lok Sabha election, Paswan was elected as an MP on the Janta Party ticket. As a young parliamentarian, he raised many issues related to the rights of the masses, especially Dalits. Though in the 1980 election, the Congress Party led by Indira Gandhi returned to power, Paswan again won the Lok Sabha election.

In the 1980s, Paswan played a crucial role in mobilizing anti-Congress forces. In 1983, he formed the Dalit Sena to create awareness among the Dalits and struggle against discrimination with them in society. He gave voice to the grievances of the Dalits through the forum of Dalit Sena. Though he lost the 1984 Lok Sabha election, he was a pivotal force in forming the Janata Dal. After the 1989 election, VP Singh led the National Front Government, and Paswan became Minister of Labour and Welfare. Paswan strongly supported VP Singh’s decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report to give reservations to OBCs in government jobs. Indeed, he publicly took the stand that if upper caste youth were opposing the Mandal Commission Report, the OBC youth should also mobilize themselves to support its implementation.

In the 1990s, Paswan’s politics took many turns. In 1996, he became Leader of the Lok Sabha because Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda was a member of the Rajya Sabha. In the meantime, the Janata Dal faced many divisions. The faction led by Sharad Yadav (Ram Vilas was also part of it) started to support the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA Government. As a result, Paswan became Cabinet Minister in this Government. Here, it is noteworthy that due to his efficient work in various ministries (Railway, Communication and Information Technology, and Mines) during different Prime Ministers, Paswan developed the image of a progressive, strict, and development-oriented leader and administrator.

In 2000, Paswan disassociated himself from the Janata Dal and formed a separate party, the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), which has considerable support among one section of the Dalits (Dusadh caste) in Bihar. His Party became part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). However, after the 2002 Godhra riots, he resigned from the Vajpayee Government protesting the riots against Muslims. His Party fought the 2004 Lok Sabha election by allying with the Congress and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and won four Lok Sabha seats. Paswan became a Central Minister in the Mammanoh Singh-led United Progressive Alliance Government. By this time, Paswan...
Ram Vilas Paswan (1946–2020) was a dynamic politician who emerged from the rural areas of Bihar and made his mark in national politics. His politics symbolizes the assertion of a Dalit politician against politicians of dominant castes.

emerged as a leader who was serious about the development of Bihar. In March 2005 Bihar Legislative Assembly elections, he fought alone (but his Party did not put up candidates against the Congress), and his Party, LJP, won 27 seats. The NDA offered him the post of Chief Minister, but he refused saying that a Muslim should be Chief Minister of Bihar. One can argue that it was a grave political mistake on his part because a new election was held for Bihar Legislative Assembly due to a constitutional crisis in October 2005. In this election, his Party lost most of the seats it had won in the March 2005 elections. However, though Paswan remained a Minister in the UPA Government, his Party could perform well in the Lok Sabha election in 2009 and the Bihar Legislative Assembly election in 2010.

Paswan’s other crucial political turn came before the 2014 Lok Sabha election when he made an alliance with the BJP and became a part of the NDA. It was a very significant and contested change from his earlier stand regarding the politics of the BJP. As mentioned earlier, he left NDA in 2002 due to the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat and the non-performance of the Modi-led Gujarat Government. Paswan and his supporters have always defended this decision in the name of ‘political pragmatism’, but it has put a serious question mark on his earlier stand against the ‘communal’ and ‘majoritarian’ politics of the BJP. Paswan became a Cabinet Minister in the Narendra Modi Government till his death on 8th October 2020.

Though the book presents an impressive description of the many aspects of the life of Ram Vilas Paswan, it has many limitations. First, the style of the book is descriptive, and the author never tries to engage with many of the decisions of Paswan critically. Pradeep Srivastava has included a separate chapter on Paswan’s vision regarding Dalit-Muslim unity and describes his many works in this regard. However, he does not discuss Paswan’s alliance with the Narendra Modi-led NDA. Second, Paswan has promoted many family members into politics, and any book on him must discuss this crucial aspect of his politics. However, the book under review overlooks this aspect of his politics, which actually underlines the inherent limitations of the writing style of the author. Rather than writing as an objective person, he tries to abandon any issue which is likely to negatively impact the image of Paswan. Third, in some places, there are grave factual errors. For example, the author mentions that VV Giri was the President of India at the time of the imposition of Emergency in June 1975, which is incorrect (p. 63) (at that time, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed was the President of India).

Nevertheless, this book is crucial not just to understand the life and politics of one of the most dynamic politicians of India from the late 1960s to 2020. It also gives an understanding of the various political events of this period. The students of Indian politics would find it beneficial to understand the dynamics of local politics, which led to the emergence of the marginalized sections at the center of power politics in India. The language of the book is lucid, and the author has tried to present his descriptions in the form of a story, which makes the reading of the book easier and enjoyable for the readers.

Kamal Nayan Choubey is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi, Delhi.
stimulant under the name of ‘Halwa Mughal-e-Azami’ (p. 320), just to name a few. I see cinematic trivia as not just any historical fact centered around a film but rather a body of knowledge that comes into existence through the multiple tellings and re-tellings carried out by the cinephile community on various media platforms. Keswani has written this book with the passion of a cinephile by tapping into the affective memories of the community and not like a ‘distanced’ historian working with ‘objective’ sources. A rumination on the book’s title poses the question: what is the Mughal-e-Azam that this book claims to be a dastan of? The archival methodology leads me to answer that the film is inextricable from its memories which have been kept alive through a collective, cinephile efflorescence.

However, Keswani himself offers a different solution to the above question when he asserts that ‘For me, the meaning of Mughal-e-Azam is K. Asif’ (p. 388). Throughout the book, we are presented with anecdotes that cast Asif in the role of the maverick, romantic artist whose vision was to create paradise on screen. The expanse of his genius was not limited by any logic of capital—we are repeatedly told of Asif’s insistence on using real objects as props and his habit of offering a big bundle of notes in order to woo artists. Even though this image of the great director looms large over the book (especially in the introduction and the last few sections), I believe that there is a significant portion that allows for a reading not guided by auteurism. The chapter on Shapoorji can be read as a reminder of the industrial and commercial context which allowed for the production of the film. Thus, it becomes impossible to sever the history of the film from the larger history of urbanization and civic construction in Bombay. Moreover, there is enough in the book which situates filmmaking as a collaborative process rather than privileging the director. For instance, there are scattered references about how the sequence shot in the Sheesh Mahal came to fulfillment: the set designed by MK Syed was materialized by a team of traditional minakari artists using glass which was imported from Belgium (pp. 81-82), the challenge of shooting without the mirrors reflecting the camera and lights was solved by the cameraman R D Mathur by using headlights of trucks and large reflectors to indirectly light up the large hall (p. 85), the negative was processed at the Technicolor lab in London (p. 85), the music director Naushad added an introductory piece before the song which was sung by and picturized on the Agra Gharana maestros Niaz and Faiyaz Ahmad Khan (p. 206), the more virtuosic dance steps were performed by Lachchhu Maharaj’s student Lakshminarayan while donning a mask made by BR Khedkar (p. 299). It is a testimony to the relevance of this vast network of material and human actors that their stories seep into the interstices of a narrative which the author presents as the celebration of a singular figure.

What, then, explains Keswani’s fascination with the persona of Asif? His self-introduction offers a cue: ‘A soul wandering in search of the magical world of cinema flourishing behind the golden screen and gramophone record. In pursuit of this very world, who knows how many roles have I played—from a booking clerk in a theatre to film distribution, from writing letters to stars to failed attempts of penning down songs and dialogues for films!’ (p. 390). There is no doubt that he identifies himself as part of the cinephile public. It is important to further qualify Keswani’s cinephilia. His passion gets refracted through a prism of an Islamicate imagination wherein the vocabulary of desire is that of the literary conventions of Urdu. He cites a couplet of Ghalib when he compares the making of Mughal-e-Azam with Farhad’s heroic act of making a river of milk flow from rocky mountains (p. 19). He conceptualizes his book as a ‘dastan’ of Mughal-e-Azam and draws parallels with the epic romances of Laila-Majnun and Heer-Ranjha (p. 16). In this universe, the figure of the

Throughout the book, we are presented with anecdotes that cast Asif in the role of the maverick, romantic artist whose vision was to create paradise on screen. The expanse of his genius was not limited by any logic of capital—we are repeatedly told of Asif’s insistence on using real objects as props and his habit of offering a big bundle of notes in order to woo artists.

‘deewana’ becomes the thread that connects the various registers—be it Salim’s yearning for Anarkali in the film, Asif’s desire to represent the greatest love story on screen, or Keswani’s labour of love which gets concealed in this book—probably explaining why Keswani gravitates towards the figure of K Asif.

Even though Keswani consciously tries to single out the auteur, after reading the book, one is likely to emerge mesmerized by the tales of the people who participated at various stages of film-making. The book ends up surpassing the declared intent of its author which I believe is an unconscious nod to the democratic potential inherent in the art of cinema.

Ravi Prakash graduated from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University with a Master’s degree. He is working as an independent researcher on the history of early Hindi courtly poetry.

Khwab Nama by Akhtaruzzaman Elias, translated from Bangla by Arunava Sinha captures the variegated experiences of the people of Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) during the turbulent times of the 1947 Partition. The novel also delves into the socio-political realities of that period—the communal riot, the rebellion of the peasants against the landlords and the conflict between different ideologies, among others. It documents the Tebhaga movement, wherein peasants demanded two-thirds of the harvest they produced on the land owned by zamindars.

Akhtaruzzaman Elias has created an extraordinary tale of magical realism, blending memory with reality, legend with history and the struggle of marginalized people with the stories of their ancestors.

Penguin/Hamish Hamilton, 2021, pp. 552, ₹699.00

Asylum: The Battle for Mental Healthcare in India by Daman Singh explores what prompted the reform in mental healthcare which began in the early 20th century, during British rule, in India. Which were the new ideas that took root? Who were the people that pushed for change? How did political events, and especially the World Wars and Partition, affect progress? What changed when Indian doctors and administrators took over the management of mental hospitals? What did all of this mean for the treatment and care of the mentally ill?

Westland Publications, 2021, pp. ₹499.00
Beyond Veneration: Understanding Adi Shankaracharya

Swadesh Singh

Na mein manushya boon, na devata, ya yaksha, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra bhia naahin boon, brahmachari, na grihastha, vaanapratthi ya sanyaas bhia naahin boon, mein keval nij bodhswaroop atma boon. (Sharma, p.124)

(I am neither man, nor god or spirit, neither am I Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Shruder, nor am I celibate, householder, hermit, or monk, I am simply a conscious self.)

These are famous lines associated with Adi Shankaracharya in multiple narratives. The life and journey of this seminal thinker, philosopher and ascetic are wrapped in layers of lore and discourse. Incidents associated with him have been passed down generations with varying versions of hagiographies spread from Kerala to Kashmir. In the book Vidrohi Sanyasi Rajeev Sharma attributes the above quoted lines to a boy who breaks his silence in the presence of Adiguru Shankaracharya. He pares the incident of its association with miracles performed by Shankaracharya and presents it as his acumen to identify rare intellect. A similar quote appears in Pawan Varma’s book on Shankaracharya published in 2018. ‘I am neither the earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor sky, nor any other properties. I am not the senses and not even the mind. I am Shiva, the undivided essence of consciousness’ (Varma, p. 18). In this case, though, the quote is attributed to a young Shankaracharya answering a question posed by the Vedantic scholar Gaudapada. According to this version, the profound answer ensured that the scholar took the young applicant under his tutelage.

Shankaracharya has been perhaps one of the most undervalued and misunderstood social reformers of India. The author states that even in his lifetime Shankaracharya was called a ‘Buddhist in disguise’ for his attempts to reform Hinduism. Sharma says that it is no surprise then that even today he is widely venerated but rarely understood. In his journey of writing this book, he interacted with Shankaracharya Swaroopan and other scholars. He visited Kalady in Kerala, the birthplace of Adi Shankaracharya and many other seats of learning.

Nevertheless, the importance of Shankaracharya in Indian philosophy cannot be overstated. In the introduction to the Penguin selection of Shankaracharya’s writings, editor Sudhakshina Rangaswami describes him as a ‘dynamic philosopher whose works can stand alone as a corpus for evaluating his contribution as a thinker. He is the turning point in the history of Advaita (Monism) which naturally falls into two phases—pre-Shankara and post-Shankara’ (Rangaswami, p. 16).

Rajeev Sharma’s work is a collection of incidents from Shankaracharya’s life, written in simple language and easy storytelling format. Some of the incidents are popular in collective memory and his narration lends it dramatic details that are easy to visualize. Take for example, the famous dialogue with Pandit Mandan Mishra, a proponent of Karma Mimamsa as opposed to the Vedantic Advaitism of Shankaracharya. While Mishra was a ritualist, Shankaracharya was a proponent of non-dualism and self-realization. Sharma presents this battle of ideas over three sections bringing alive the arguments as well as the dramatic turn of events that saw Mishra lose to Shankaracharya who is challenged by the former’s wife Vidyushi Sharda to a debate. This incident is commonly referred to in the context of Shankaracharya’s dialogic exploits. Sharma has collected sixty-seven such incidents around the life and works of Adiguru Shankaracharya covering the period from his birth to the establishment of marts which is considered as his one of the most important contributions.

Other popular incidents etched out in this book include Shankaracharya’s interactions with his mother, scholar Kamaril, as well as his travels. Through Sharma’s story-telling, the reader develops a greater understanding of the times, the challenges faced by the Hindu society then, the popularity of Buddhist ideas and the vast travels of Shankaracharya. He also portrays how multiplicity of voices was always an organic part of Hindu society and in fact constituted its life and blood.

Sharma, a civil servant by profession in Madhya Pradesh, says that his attempt through this book has been to reach the younger generation who have to face the unprecedented challenges of the modern world. Through this work, he attempts to create an understanding about Adi Shankaracharya, who he says is widely venerated but rarely understood. In his journey of writing this book, he interacted with Shankaracharya Swaroopan and other scholars. He visited Kalady in Kerala, the birthplace of Adi Shankaracharya and many other seats of learning.

Sharma’s work, through its simple narrative forms, attempts to plug a gap in knowledge. He makes Shankaracharya relatable to the reader of the day and in the process also reveals the vast and verdant areas of philosophical and intellectual inquiry waiting to be explored by inspired young minds.

References:

Swadesh Singh is Assistant Professor, Political Science in Satyawati College, University of Delhi, Delhi. His core areas of interest are party system, caste, social justice, media and Hindutva.
Dalit History as Literature

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay

This novel by Sharankumar Limbale, a prominent Dalit writer, is epic in scope. It covers almost the entire colonial period from the late eighteenth century to early twentieth century. The conditions, thinking, and predicament of the Dalits, and the quest to bring their humanity and heroism back, are in the centre of this ambitious undertaking. The lives and struggles of the adivasis (tribals) are also occasionally touched upon.

The novel, which has been awarded the prestigious Saraswati Samman in 2020, was originally written in Marathi in 2018.

This work has been conceived in the tradition of Dalit literature which arose, initially in Marathi language, as a rebellion against the conventional forms of Marathi literature. This novel is also located in the tradition of Dalit history-writing which sharply differed from professional historiography in many ways.

Set in a historical mode, it is a hard-hitting statement against oppression and exploitation of the untouchables in colonial Indian society. All the religions and all forms of governments—Mughal, Nizam, Maratha, and the British—failed to provide justice to the Dalits and adivasis and relentlessly discriminated against them. However, it was under Hinduism and the indigenous Hindu regimes that the Dalits suffered the worst forms of indignities.

The novel begins with a glimpse of Holi celebration by the Mahars in a Deccan village under the Nizam’s rule, probably in the late eighteenth century. In an elaborate depiction of rural Mahar culture, many themes are brought out—the crucial but subordinate social role of the Mahars in the village, their joy over the possibility of eating the flesh of a dead cattle, celebration at their own temple, the charge of poisoning the cow and consequent beating at the local kotwali, and finally the news that the East India Company was recruiting the Mahars as soldiers. This last one was a turning point for some at least, though to the mass of them it would be only real news while the rest was more or less routine. This was a kind of a crucial but subordinate social role of the Mahars in the village, their joy over the possibility of eating the flesh of a dead cattle, celebration at their own temple, the charge of poisoning the cow and consequent beating at the local kotwali, and finally the news that the East India Company was recruiting the Mahars as soldiers. This last one was a turning point for some at least, though to the mass of them it would be only real news while the rest was more or less routine. This was a kind of a

Another important factor, introduced in the novel quite early, is the Christian missionary push for conversion of the Dalits and adivasis. The Dalits, particularly the Mahars as depicted here, were quite susceptible to its influence because of the promise of more freedom, some job opportunity, and a life free of stigma. Conversion was not unknown to the Mahars as some of them had earlier changed their forces were killed.

The novel also depicts the outbreak of the Revolt of 1857 in many regions and its impact in this particular region. The Revolt was finally crushed after about two years but its consequences were momentous. The military services of the Mahars were discontinued and many of them came back to their villages. One important avenue of their humanity was snatched away and the Mahars now had no option but to fall back upon their traditional dehumanizing work.

One other option was indentured labour in far off countries where one’s culture, language, and identity were totally lost. The exploitation and oppression was intense and a new form of discrimination on racist lines had replaced the one which the untouchables had left behind. Thus, the change of religion, regime, or region did not lead to any improvement in the lives of the Mahars. What is sanatan (eternal) here is the oppression of and discrimination against the untouchables by all concerned.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, some rethinking was going on among the Brahmans and other high castes about social and religious issues. In the last scene, a Brahman aptly named ‘Vedanta’,
advised by his widow mother equally aptly named ‘Saraswati’ who tells him to be ‘human’, frantically talks about fraternity cutting across castes towards a radically new Hinduism and an integrated nation: ‘We all Hindus are brothers. We should say with pride that we are Hindus… . Brotherhood implies an exalted relationship of co-existence…. . Brotherhood is the soul of culture. Brotherhood is the chemical called nation. Brotherhood means the festival of freedom! Beautiful dream of democracy! The energy of human life!’ (p. 216).

The novel ends on an ambivalently optimistic note. It clearly brings out and is pitted against Brahmanical, colonial and other forms of oppression which the untouchable castes had to endure. Even the mindset of the Mahars did not change. These had continued throughout the colonial period at least as covered in the novel. The biggest achievement of the novel is its weaving of Dalit mythological tales with realistic historical and social events, and a picture of Dalit life and culture.

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay teaches history in the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi.

The novel resonates with Freudian psychoanalytic ideas which

Of Love and Other Maladies
Shikha Vats

A

aye din Saeed ko zukaam ho jata tha. Ek roz jab us zukaam ne taaza banlaal kiya toh usne socha–mujhe ishq kyun nahi hota?’ (Every other day Saeed would catch a cold. On one such day, when he was braving a fresh attack of common cold, he thought—why don’t I fall in love instead?)

Thus begins Saadat Hasan Manto’s only novel to be published in his lifetime. The novel first appeared in a serialized form in a magazine Karwaan and later as a book in 1954 from Lahore. The story is narrated, in most part, as an interior monologue of its young protagonist Saeed who desperately wishes to fall in love anyhow. In due course, he begins to feel infatuated with Rajo, who works as a maidservant in a house nearby, and later, fortunately or unfortunately for him, at his own house. He is unable to cope with a maddening love-hate emotion he feels for her and eventually, falls severely ill with delirious fever and pneumonia. During his convalescence at the hospital, he meets an Anglo-Indian nurse Miss Fariya who seems attracted to him. Later, unable to bear the sight of Rajo, he leaves his hometown Amritsar for Lahore and while there, incidentally reunites with Miss Fariya.

The title of the novel is Bagair Unvaan Ke or Untitled. The subtitle reads enigmatically ‘ek poonatadhoora upanyaas’, that is, ‘a finished/unfinished novel’. The sense of indeterminacy with which the story is imbued from the get-go, at first, conveys the anxieties of the author regarding the new, uncharted terrain of a long-story format. However, Manto presents a nuanced meditation on love—narrated as stream-of-consciousness in the first half and spruced up with some dialogues in the second half—symptomatic of the protagonists’ movement out of his own solipsism. The ending is a hopeful one with a seemingly interminable quality which lends an openness to it. The reader is left wondering if the story ended or began from that point because of its ceaseless, cyclical movement—perhaps conveying another meaning to the sense of incompleteness in the subtitle.

The novel resonates with Freudian psychoanalytic ideas which

Saadat Hasan Manto is considered the most popular and significant storyteller in Urdu and Hindi. Born on 11th May 1912 in Ludhiana, he obtained his early education at Amritsar and Allagarh. His stories, especially on the themes of Partition and riots, are invaluable documents of cultural history. Manto also worked as a scriptwriter in Bombay. He also edited a weekly magazine called Musawanar. He worked at Film City, Film Company and Prabhat Talkies in Bombay. He left for Pakistan in 1948 and died a few years later in 1955. Manto’s first story was ‘Tamasha’. Bagair Unvaan Ke is the only novel he wrote. His last story was titled ‘Kabootar aur Kabootari’.

Hachette India, 2021, pp. 224, ₹999.00
The translation into Hindi by Mahtab Haidar Naqvi is eminently readable yet generously sprinkled with Urdu words. Complex Urdu expressions, where required, are annotated with explanatory notes at the bottom of the page. The dark humour characteristic of Manto is not lost on the reader and the modernist existentialist predicament of the protagonist Saeed is powerfully conveyed. The ‘Introduction’ by senior journalist Rajkumar Keswani, who succumbed to Covid this year, is beautifully written in moving prose. Published by the renowned Hindi publishing house Vani Prakashan, the book bears a paperback gatefold binding, and the cover is artistically illustrated. The present edition is ill-served by its proof-reader for erroneously mentioning the author’s year of birth as 1921, instead of 1912—likely a typographical error—on the back-cover fold. Nevertheless, the world of Hindi readers, in general, has gained another masterpiece by the famed writer. Being a novel, it comes as an absolute delight for those who wish to devour more and more of Manto’s writings. For academics, historians, and researchers interested in Manto, this translation opens up questions not merely restricted to its own literary merit, but also for the new light it throws on his other much-studied short-stories.

‘Manto’s life was cut short’ by an untimely death at the age of forty-two. His self-chosen epitaph, written five months before his death, runs as follows, ‘Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto buried, and buried with him in his bosom lie all the secrets of the art of storytelling. Weighed down by mounds of earth, he wonders still: who is the greater storyteller, God or he?’ Referring to his short-stories with dramatic, tragic, shocking, numbing, unexpected-yet-befitting endings, Harish Trivedi wrote that one may say, ‘God had, at least in a metaphorical sense, borrowed this ending from Manto.’

Even so, the reviewer would like to add that Manto had the last laugh, as with this novel—almost seven decades after his death we may still uncover the many hidden secrets of storytelling through a renewed critical engagement with his difficult life and multi-layered works.

End Notes
1. The similarities with D.H. Lawrence are present in a few other plays and stories by Manto. Scholars like Leslie Flemming and Mumtaz Shirin have discussed these in their critical writings.

Shikha Vats is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi.

**Book News**

*Prison Notes of a Woman Activist* by B. Anuradha, translated from the Telugu by Gita Ramaswamy is a vivid description that takes us to the unknown and unseen world of women prisoners, their children, their day-to-day lives and their world view of society as a larger prison even outside the Jail. Anuradha wonders what constitutes a crime—Who does the law protect? Are the laws of the land capable of rendering justice to classes and social groups that are exploited?

Ratna Books, an imprint of Ratna Sagar, 2021, pp. 208, ₹399.00
Travails of Immortality

Gauri Sharma

Ashwatthama is the journey of a cursed wanderer with a never-ending global pilgrimage wrought with painful life-altering realizations. Once a feisty warrior, he now has to suffer the bane of immortality due to an ill-intentioned stroke of vengeance.

The premise of the story begins with the epic of Mahabharata where a battle between two cousin clans led to the famous ancient Hindu Kurukshetra War. The struggle of succession between the Kauravas and Pandavas led to the death of almost everyone who fought this war except Ashwatthama who backed the Kauravas. The final days of this eighteen-day battle witnessed the Kauravas struggling to let go of their immense power at the hand of Pandavas who were being led by the Hindu deity Krishna. Ashwatthama’s inability to accept defeat made him commit one of the most heinous of war-crimes by slitting the throats of sleeping opponents and blasting the womb of a woman carrying an unborn child.

This unforgivable disaster marks the beginning of his eternal curse to march on earth till its last day which was the sentence given by Lord Krishna. He was doomed to live with his unhealed wounds from the war, reeking of old blood and pus with multiple zits all over his body. This punishment was accorded to challenge the symbol of arrogance and deceit that he had become by the humbling experience of a disgusting appearance for the rest of eternity. He was left behind to witness every other face of war and human atrocity to re-live the horrors of the past in new story lines.

There was not even a hint of repentance when his destiny as a recluse began while creeping in the depths of uncharted territories. The vicious cycle of hate was passed down by many connecting generations and incidents which Ashwatthama kept replaying in his mind’s eye. The author has been able to capture the emotional realizations. Once a feisty warrior, he now has to suffer the bane of immortality due to an ill-intentioned stroke of vengeance.

The description of multiple war zones teaches that during war no one wins except animality which a man coerces out of his own self-interested instincts. Ashwatthama observes how Ashoka, Alexander or Genghis Khan’s thirst to lead blinded them to merciless killings or contested places like Jerusalem, Rome or Greece burnt in the name of the right order. From time immemorial to the fairly recent destruction of Hiroshima during World War II through the ease of a nuclear bombing birthed from a single thought of vengeance. Reading such diverse incidents in one story helps to conclude that the choice to rise above enmity to restore basic human rights will always trump over man-induced destruction. The weight of the curse turns the anxious wanderings of Ashwatthama in the beginning of the novel into a mature insight and reverence for the timeless realities of earth.

The author incorporates Ashwatthama’s supposed loneliness while ruminating on questions of worth within time and space. Within the creative aspect of moving beyond the summary of the much-speculated epic of Mahabharata, she attempts to mention many remarkable historical figures along with their tales of grandeur. She manages to create a reference of intercontinental stories without losing the relevance of Ashwatthama’s part. She exercises fictional freedom while paying respectful homage to many great epics of history. It is left to the reader to speculate whether the legend of Ashwatthama is still lurking in some part of this world resolving infinite questions of faith through present scenarios or has gained the much-awaited salvation.

Gauri Sharma, with a Master’s in Human Rights and Duties from Jamia Millia Islamia in 2020, is currently working in the Department of Telecom, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology as a young professional. She is always ready to explore diverse pieces of art and hopes to continue reading the celebrated stories on love, life and beyond.
Myriad Hues of Bureaucracy

Bharti Arora

Dnyaneshwar Mulay’s *Naukarsyahi Ke Rang* (Hues of Bureaucracy) is a Hindi translation of the eponymous Marathi original. The book, written in an autobiographical format, does not simply recount his experiences as a diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service but also acts as a training manual for prospective administrative officers. As he asserts, ‘Public has the right to know the workings and procedures of the administration. That is why the government has instituted the Right to Information Act at both the Centre and State levels. The administration should be people oriented, transparent, and involve citizens at each level of decision making; both the government and public should collectively work towards it. This book is a step in that direction’ (p. 18).

Born in a humble familial context of Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Mulay would like to present this work as a living document on and about the educational initiatives of the Indian Government in post-Independence India and ways in which they have equipped the first-generation citizens to acquire upward social mobility in the institutional structures of the nation. Mulay talks about how he got an opportunity to ‘rightfully participate in international meetings conducted with prime ministers, presidents, foreign ministers, industrialists, litterateurs, and reporters of the country’ (p. 14) and the world owing to his being in the Indian Foreign Service.

This was possible precisely because he was curious to learn new things everyday, undertake new assignments and perform new responsibilities during his tenure as an administrative officer. He motivates his readers and/or prospective IAS aspirants to keep this spirit of curiosity alive if they have to succeed in life. *Naukarsyahi Ke Rang* is divided into three parts. The first part recounts Mulay’s official sojourn in Tokyo from 1983-89, describing his alacrity and hard work in learning Japanese, his meetings with then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1985), exposure to the Japanese civilization, diplomatic relations between India and Japan, the legacy of Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru and finally, lessons India could learn from Japanese technology and superior industrial production.

The second part of the book deals with Mulay’s return to India and his deputation at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (1989-92). He relates his negotiations with peers, his assignment as an administrator in the Tea Section of the Ministry, his failed attempts to revise the ‘outdated’ Tea Laws of India 1953 (p. 144) and his disappointments with the banal and unnecessary paperwork of bureaucratic institutions.

Mulay says that during his tenure as Junior Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, he faced a peculiar situation vis-à-vis the then Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Mr. Subramanian Swamy. Mulay prepares a proposal to reconstitute the Tea Board and submits it to the Minister. However, Swamy rejects all the names suggested by Mulay, proposing instead three new names on his own. Mulay realizes that the procedure followed by Swamy not only bypasses the legitimacy of the selection committee but is also illegal. He states, ‘The Minister had ordered the appointment of three representatives who had nothing to do with the Tea Industry. They were unable to protect the interests of the Tea Industry as they were neither qualified nor experienced to do so’ (p. 156).

However, despite repeated representations to this effect, Swamy continues to reject the candidature of Mulay’s representatives. Having failed at altering the Minister’s decision, Mulay sends the file to the Ministry of Law and Justice so that the Union Minister of Legal Affairs could endorse and notify it in the *National Gazette*. After three weeks, Mulay receives a response from the Ministry of Law and Justice, declaring that they could not endorse the illegal orders of the Minister of Commerce and Industry. ‘The Minister of Legal Affairs has asked to reconstitute the panel to appoint qualified representatives in the ‘Tea Board’ (p. 159).

What might sound as a banal instance of red tapism and corruption in policy making, however, constitutes the heart of this book. Evidently, Swamy was both the Minister of Commerce and Industry and the Minister of Law and Justice (10 November 1990 to 21 June 1991) during this time in history. Even as Swamy proposes illegal appointments to the Tea Board as the Minister of Commerce, he overturns the order in his capacity as the Law and Justice Minister. As Akhil Gupta states in *Red Tape* (2012), ‘far from being a unitary organisation acting with singular intentions, the state is characterised by various levels that pull in different directions’ (p. 46).

Thus, it might be useful to consider the disparate legislative, juridical and administrative procedures embedded in the different bureaus of the state to bring forth the unintended outcomes produced by negotiations and frictions amidst them. It further foregrounds a disaggregated view of the state produced across a horizontal spectrum instead of a vertically structured administrative hierarchy.

Next, the readers witness the normalizing power of statistics in the bureaucratic apparatus, propounding violence at the lowest of low levels in society and the state. During his tours and travels to tea estates across the North-eastern and southern part of India, Mulay gets to meet tea farmers, landlords and discuss their grievances. His interactions betray the classic phenomenon of what Foucault calls the biopolitical state engaging with the populace, whereby statistics are collected for policy revisions without considering their impact on women, contract workers and labourers. Mulay states, ‘there is

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founding the Indian Business Association of Moscow.

Even as his so-called pragmatic approach recognizes the need of private-public partnership in the altered scenario, as a state representative he does little to lessen or even acknowledge the implications of neo-liberalization for the ordinary citizens of India and Russia. While he does focus on the deteriorated security condition of Russia post the disintegration of USSR, Mulay considers it insofar as it affects a successful reestablishment of business confidence between the two countries.

Alternatively, the vulnerable security situation in Moscow and the rise of anti-social elements could have been a consequence of the vagaries of capitalist economy and aggravated neo-liberal agendas of Russia. Being a part of the administrative machinery, he could have offered an objective analysis of the private sector, micro-credit and entrepreneurial versions of empowerment, which often lead to structural violence and inequities among citizens. Instead, he restricts himself to offering personal musings, describing cultural encounters, disappointments, Marathi-Indian identity and heritage, his ingenuity in negotiating the bureaucratic malaise, along with an insight into the generalized/routine workings of the Indian Civil Service. However, even as Mulay has interesting arguments to offer, his book falls short of effectively performing what it claims, that is, how to bridge the gap between ordinary citizens and bureaucratic structures.

As per various fact-finding reports and researches on Assam women tea workers, majority of them constitute the most vulnerable section of tea plantation workers in India. They have to deal with the domination of local middle-men who offer very low prices for women workers’ labour and produce. In addition to this, they are racialized and sexualized in the labour market, resulting in a structural violation of these women workers’ rights. As Debarati Sen asserts in ‘Women, Fair Trade Tea, and Everyday Entrepreneurialism in Rural Darjeeling,’ ‘the images on tea packaging and posters that show women happily plucking tea obscure the male domination of the actual process of justice delivery’ (p. 135, p. 138).

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Thus, one needs to focus on everyday negotiations, social structures, familial organization, economic marginalization of these women workers rather than a statistical, top-down approach of homogenous governance and/or bureaucratic model.

In the concluding part of the book, Mulay describes his experiences as the First Secretary at the Indian Embassy in Russia from June 1992 to 1995. This is interesting especially in the context of the Cold War and eventual disintegration of the USSR. Mulay takes pride in the fact that at a time when no one amongst his peers wanted to go to Russia and deal with a disintegrated socio-political and bureaucratic structure along with economic instability, he takes it as a challenge and went to Russia.

Mulay undertakes efforts to revive the nearly broken economic trade relations between India and Russia during this period. He does an impressive research on evolving a re-formed approach towards the Rupee-Ruble crisis in the post-liberalization scenario. In doing so, he appears both eager and ‘pragmatic’ to leave behind the welfarist state model once endorsed by both India and USSR. Alternatively, he appears to be searching for stability on an otherwise slippery terrain of capital domination. He facilitates meetings and negotiations between traders’ associations and industrial establishments of India and Russia,
Through Sita’s Eyes

Shubham Solanki

Sitaayana which is the Hindi translation of Forests of Enchantments written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and translated by Ashutosh Garg is an ambitious modern re-telling of the epic Ramayana. As the title suggests, Sitaayana narrates the events of Ramayana from the perspective of Sita. The author puts firmly her intention in the foreword: to impart a new meaning to the age-old blessing, ‘Become like Sita’. To put in other words, the novel is invested in tracing a new figure of Sita.

In keeping with the times, Sita’s subjectivity or interiority has been foregrounded in the novel. She is depicted as one who experiences the pull of desire, reflects and learns from the challenges she faces, questions tradition and continually undergoes a dialogue with herself. She is confident, self-assured, and thinks independently. The novel seen from another angle is an elaborate romantic drama between Rama and Sita. It can be divided into phases of Sita’s initial infatuation with Rama in Mithila, their joyous living together in Ayodhya, surviving hardships in the forest and painful separation where attachment to Ram remains the primary reason for her suffering. Since the new figure of ‘Sita’ is traced as an ordinary yet exceptional individual, many events and facts pertaining to the ‘divinity’ of Sita and her life are told in the form of dream visions. It is an imaginative attempt by the author since the medium of dream vision allows a real yet fleeting glimpse of the divine background, which because of its ethereality doesn’t completely nullify the realism of the human suffering of Sita. For instance, the encounter with Parashuram on the return journey of the wedding convoy to Ayodhya and the ensuing passage between Ram, Sita and Parashuram which establishes the cosmic significance of Ram and Sita is narrated as a dream vision.

The author has scattered expositions and comments on the nature of love, its intricacies and vicissitudes across several chapters, mostly as didactic reflection on various mistakes made by the characters. However, the notion of love is stretched to the extent that it becomes a placeholder for any affective investment in the world. ‘Love’ begins to stand for all kinds of desires including narcissism. Kaikeyi’s deeds become an opportunity to explicate on love, and so does Sita’s indecision to cross the boundary drawn by Laxman to give alms to Ravana disguised as a sage. If we pay attention to the latter event, it is the possibility of Ram’s disappointment on hearing about a sage having to leave without food and the disrepute to the house of Mithila along with the threat of inviting misfortune on their return journey to Ayodhya for not doing her duty that pushes Sita to cross the boundary. This turmoil within Sita strangely leads to her imagining the pitiable face of Dushrath undergoing a similar tussle in the narrative. We receive another maxim about love at this point, about how Dushrath was pushed to banish Ram because of his ‘love for Kaikeyi’. The contrived conjunction of these various things clearly indicates how the notion of love in the novel is deeply entangled with duty, honour and filial responsibility. Moreover, these notions are clearly etched in a patriarchal frame which the novel in a way wants to wrestle with. If we then return to the scene of Kaikeyi’s demand, it is not Dushrath’s love for Kaikeyi which forces him to exile his beloved son. Dushrath in fact calls Kaikeyi a demoness and the sole cause of his sorrows. It is clearly not love, but the fact that Dushrath gave his word to Kaikeyi to fulfill her demand, whatever it be, for saving his life. It is a matter of chivalrous honour for Dushrath that compels him to do the deed. It is a question of the prestige of the Raghch House!

A clever aestheticization of sovereignty has thereby seeped into the novel from the epic. The ideals of dharma, duty, honour and responsibility which are glorified throughout retain their imperial colour. For instance, the author’s description of the ‘peaceful’ kingdom of Mithila only serves to naturalize the order of kingship.

She writes quite unconvincingly, ‘My [Sita’s] father [King Janak] didn’t like violence even when it was necessary. Sometimes, the neighboring kingdoms would attack taking advantage of my father’s peace-loving nature and my mother would forcibly prepare the army’ (p. 19) (trans. mine). For one, the reader is left to wonder about the nature of ‘necessary violence’. Any violence can be necessary only from a particular perspective, which is the perspective of sovereignty in this case. The other is that this sentence claiming the exceptionally peaceful character of King Janak and metonymically the parasidical quality of the state of Mithila can only do so because Janak doesn’t embody the coercive iron will of the state. That doesn’t mean that the state of Mithila doesn’t have a coercive aspect. In fact, the novel hints in quite an appreciative tone that it is really Sita’s mother who rules the kingdom of Janak. The nobility of Janak then becomes a ruse to hide the actual complex and conflicting nature of rulership.

Such an aestheticization of sovereignty puts into jeopardy the entire focus over the lives of women in the novel. The empowered women figures of Sita and her mother are depicted as steeped in their desire to be an aide to their husbands as rulers. Their sense of recognition comes from their sharing sovereign power. On the one hand, this appears as the new millennium’s rightful response to the absolute power that the male monarch wields in the epic. But, in the same breath, what is still portrayed as the object of desire is sovereign power. The power of the monarch, now shared between husband and wife, appears as not only legitimate but sanctioned by and in complete tune with dharma. It is glorified as duty, responsibility, good will, etc. There is only one place where the novel does tangentially create a space of criticism of that sovereignty when Sita questions Ram for having cut Shurpanakha’s nose and ears. She thinks to herself how the sense of superiority was

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The novel factor about the figure of Sita is that instead of blindly following the duties of a daughter-in-law, she now takes the law unto herself and willingly chooses to enforce those same duties. Her interiority foregrounded in the novel remains confined to demonstrate this choice. What is lacking in the novel is a serious questioning of dharma. Likewise, a creative attempt has been made by the author to extend Sita’s figure as the daughter of the earth. So Sita can silently communicate with the trees and establish an almost magical connection with them. She can perform the role of a doctor because of her knowledge of medicinal herbs. However, this aspect is again pushed to the clichéd trope of the benevolent sovereign whose touch heals the faceless masses. With this easy trope, the possibilities of a serious explication of the point of view of the figure of the earth and a relation to the forest dwellers for instance is abandoned. It is no surprise then that the forest dwellers remain completely on the margins of the novel, appearing only as faceless figures perennially involved in disputes over land. The function of forest dwellers remains merely to indicate the industrious sovereignty at work in the obscure hinterlands.

Ashutosh Garg has done a fine job in translating the novel. The language is easy to read and tries to retain the philosophical edifice which Divakaruni has intended.

Shubham Solanki is a graduate student in literature at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi. His research is concerned with the issues of time and memory.
Let’s Hit Regressive Traditions for a Six!

Indrani Das Gupta

India’s most admired entertainment spectacle—cricket—has often been read as an element of folkloric imagination. Cricket, underscored as more than a sport, materializes as a potent site to examine the idea of the nation-state, investigate the discourse of nationalism founded upon idioms of war, study the construction of fandoms and celebrityhood. In contemporary times, with T-20 and Indian Premier League (IPL) becoming ever popular by the day this gentleman’s game has become unmistakably identifiable with registers of success and a rags-to-riches story. But what happens when cricket combines with popular cultural representations of Norse mythological figures like Loki, The Mischief God of Asgard, depicted in the Hollywood Avenger Series, draws inspiration from the Harry Potter series, Twitter’s #hashtag revolution, and Bollywood movies like Rang de Basanti, Lagaan, and 3 Idiots?

A former advertising copywriter, a newspaper columnist for over a decade, and author of several picture books for children, Menaka Raman’s new book—Loki Takes Guard, uses multiple popular cross-cultural references, with cricket serving as the central motif to offer the readers a fun-filled, thrilling ride that underpins our contemporary quotidian existence. Raman’s Loki is not like its famous counterpart, a mischief-maker and neither a mythical character. Nevertheless, Loki’s unconventional ideas and actions in a traditional Indian middle-class society frame her as a mischief-maker. Raman’s Loki is a coming-of-age story, the distinctive feature of the genre of young adult fiction. To explain Young Adult (Y.A.) fiction is not a simple task—as it defies easy classifications. Nevertheless, despite its heterogeneity, a common thread in most Y.A. narratives is recognition of one’s desires and working towards actualizing them. Raman’s Loki is also about finding oneself amid a cacophony of voices, rebuttals, and labels.

Against the backdrop of the Indian women cricket team’s recent successes across the globe and women breaking the glass ceiling in various professional settings, Raman’s Loki brings home to us a fact that in most Indian households, the female sex is bound to specific roles and identities undergird by male-dominated interests. Loki takes Guard narrates the story of eleven-year-old Loki—Lokanayaki Shanmugam trying to be a part of a local boys’ cricket league team—The Temple Street Tankers. Narrated and written from the perspective of Loki, the story takes us on a delightful journey of following one’s passion against all odds. Loki’s cricket craziness faces numerous obstacles when she’s informed that only boys can join the local cricket league team. Despite coach Amir’s inclination to allow Loki to play in the local cricket team because she had the talent and skill to play cricket, the administration and the neighbourhood families were not willing to change the rules all by herself. In this endeavour, she

is supported by an unlikely and unpredictable set of people—her neighbour, a divorcee—Malati Akka, her brother, and few Samaritans like the local vegetable seller—Thambi Uncle and his good friend later wife—Rani Akka.

Loki writes a petition to convince the cricket league’s board members that she has the will and the drive to contribute to cricket. However, even her own family is reluctant to sign the petition, and barring a few people, her petition finds hardly any takers. However, soon this petition finds a new lease of life when it is posted online by twiter sensation @poetic_paati, whose identity remains a mystery to all. Soon, Loki’s petition goes viral, and the entire nation is rooting for her. With sensational celebrity television hosts Rasna Arya also entering the fray, things begin to warm up for Loki as problems start piling up. However, her persistence soon becomes visible with Loki being asked to present her case before the Board of Trustees of the Club that administers the local cricket team. Loki’s belief in her dream swings things for her, and she proves her cricketing talent on the cricket field as well—to bring in a change not seen in that neighbourhood in the last hundred years. Her immediate family also recognize her dreams, and even her brother becomes free from the pressures of qualifying for the engineering exams. At the end of the novel the identity is revealed of the twitter sensation who posted her petition online, which further validates family as fundamental to harness change. Loki appears as the new-age ‘Muggle’ who does not require magic to transform her immediate surroundings.

Raman’s novel articulates the need to challenge moribund rules to foreground equality for all through popular icons, practices, and motifs of the contemporary era. Written in witty, simple, engaging, and conversational prose, Loki fighting for her dream busts the patriarchal mindset of our society without ever resorting to didacticism. Using cricket as the presiding motif of this novel, Raman directs our attention to how family and academic centres shape our society according to regressive gender roles. The novel, in its very local aspirations merging with popular global motifs, introduces global politico-cultural configurations.

Raman etches a story sparkling with wit, joy, and an unmatchable liveliness to showcase cricket as the transformative site of activism countering the forces of patriarchy, traditions, and caste inequalities. Loki’s never-say-die attitude and unwavering spirit amidst her neighbourhood society full of conventional platitudes and sermonizing is at once an ode to cricket as much as it is a paean to follow one’s passion. This novel is a beautiful read, facilitating new forms of meanings to emerge.

Indrani Das Gupta is Assistant Professor in English at Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. Currently pursuing her Ph.D. from the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.
Travel Across Time

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan*

Joseph Srinivas wakes up one day to find that things aren’t quite right. He hasn’t jumped through a closet door, nor got a special letter—he just happens to find himself in a strange new place. He is greeted by Mishi, a fellow transitioner who guides him through Gravepyres, a school for children recently deceased. Joseph, unsure of how to unlearn all that he has known his entire life, wants to find a way to get back home to his family. He discovers that the vultures can travel between the world of the living and the dead, and wants them to take him back. However, the lake through which they travel between the worlds is drying up because the River of Time which feeds it isn’t flowing as it used to, and no one knows why.

Joseph and Mishi embark on an adventure, following the River of Time up the Kozitsthereistan mountains to its source where they discover the reason for the river drying up. Along with the help of an eccentric baba, and creatures thought not to exist, Joseph and Mishi restore the flow of the River of Time. Every adventure comes to an end, and Joseph’s ends with the Final Test. Anita Roy is an experienced storyteller and the book has all the essential elements which make a good fantasy adventure novel. She combines a familiar world of a castle-like school, quirky teachers and seemingly nonsensical subjects, all with a bit of Indian-ness. The wordplays while not everyone’s cup of tea, work well enough.

A fantasy world takes constructing, and creating one in a 225 pages standalone book is a difficult task. The author draws on familiar themes and ideas which the reader may be familiar with to accomplish this. The book does not suffer from long descriptions of novel sports or strange terrains. The writing is crisp, and holds the reader’s curiosity throughout, especially with the threat of a more sinister plot unfolding at some point.

Anita Roy has dealt well with a sombre idea of dead children, without getting philosophical or too dark. The book does require a certain familiarity with the idea of death, an afterlife, and certain references. Readers below the age of ten might find it difficult to relate to the ideas, while those older than twelve might find it a bit simpler compared to the other books in the same genre. A bit of the macabre, and a bit of humour, and a journey to the source of the River of Time, Gravepyres School for the Recently Deceased is an engaging and entertaining read.

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan is a poet from Chennai who is also a Chartered Accountant.


Editor-writer Anita Roy has played a pivotal role in Indian publishing for children and young adults. In 2004, she set up Young Zubaan, an imprint that promotes diversity in children’s publishing; she was also one of the founding members of the popular Bookaroo Festival of Children’s Literature in 2008.

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A Cautionary Tale on the Influence of Social Media in Teens

Sango Bidani

At a time when we are cooped up in our houses thanks to the ongoing COVID pandemic and with our lives increasingly dependent on technological tools, and trying to lead our lives through posting information on various social media feeds, comes this cautionary tale about the destructive forces that can be unleashed on young minds and its effects on their psyche.

Social media has emerged as one of the biggest signposts of the dangers that the overuse of these tools can have on young, impressionable minds and how it can affect self-confidence and self-worth. This book, being addressed to young readers, through the protagonist, shows the perils of the ‘star phenomenon’ that lures one into extensively engaging in its use and how despite knowing that one needs to pull back, the young mind is not able to act in a mature manner and the dangers that emerge as a result of that are highlighted in this tale.

There are some key elements to this narrative that capture the reader’s attention. The first element that immediately makes it a contemporary document of the life of a teenager in the current times is the aspect of generational conflict. Generational conflict is one of the key reasons why young people struggle to deal with the experiences that they face during their growing up years. This is demonstrated quite beautifully through the innocent thoughts that assail the mind of the young protagonist as she fails to understand the significance of certain rituals, customs and gets extremely annoyed when she is called lovingly by her grandparents by a different name. She feels completely uncomfortable in the company of her grandparents and complains about the life that she leads during times.

The second element that is critical to the functioning of this narrative is the influence of social media and its impact on the psyche of the user. When Arya rejoins school in Class XI, because she has been the victim of body shaming during her school days, and desperately trying to be part of the cool brigade of the school, she uses social media to lead the life that she hopes she could have lived.

In this tale, she creates an anonymous account on Instagram and uses that as a tool to get back at her detractors and in the process her friendships with even her true friends becomes strained. Being a self-reflective person, she expresses a desire to come clean on her misdemeanors but decides to continue enjoying the popularity and expanding viewing community that this secret identity provides to her. As a consequence of this, her friendship with one of her true friends Nick gets impacted and in her rage she uses her anonymous account to get back at him for his part in her facing humiliation at a party organized by one of her school friends. After this incident, when everyone gets to know who the persona behind this account is, she faces social ostracism from her peers. Spurred on by her desire to undo her mistake, she decides to use social media to promote positive messages in a bid to stop the menace of body shaming.

The third element that is related to this second aspect is the question of clash between the public and the private persona. This clash has serious psychological implications for the user because as youngsters are drawn in by the lure of leading an alternate life where everything is rosy and you are liked by everyone. It is this desire to be part of the cool brigade and trying to lead an alternate life which leads to serious consequences for the protagonist. There is even a moment in the narrative where she has the opportunity to come clean but she refuses to take that opportunity due to the enjoyment that she was getting through her alternate persona.

Written in the genre of Young Adult Fiction, the author employs the graphic novel form to present to us this compelling narrative of the perils of social media and its impact on the human psyche. Using innovative thought bubbles and blurbs, we get a fascinating insight into how the young mind works and how there is a constant battle between leading a life which one desires and leading a life which one actually faces in the real world. It is this conflict which gets highlighted by the use of social media in this graphic novel.

Sango Bidani is a PhD scholar, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia. His research interests are in the fields of Film and Adaptation Studies, Translation and Partition Studies. His translation of Premchand’s ‘Rashtrabhasha Hindi aur Uski Samasyaein’ has been published in Premchand on National Language edited by Anuradha Ghosh, Saroj K. Mahananda and Trisha Lalchandani (Aakar Books, 2019).
The doodling is quite random. It tends to come out of nowhere and occupies a vast amount of space in the story-telling. Perhaps, this is an effective coinage for the chaos within. But it definitely allows the reader to engage with the meaninglessness that Ravishankar tries to capture in her story-telling."

she has of her own in order to become the Messiah. From writing a novel to attaining an influential position in her people’s eyes are all very comically depicted. Even though there are times when the narration tends to be embroiled in language, philosophy, logic, sporadic references to middle-school science and mathematics, and a lot of doodling, there is always something unexpectedly humorous or just pleasant enough to smile with. The language remains fairly direct while the narrative is constantly at struggle with meanings and inferences.

The doodling is quite random. It tends to come out of nowhere and occupies a vast amount of space in the story-telling. Perhaps, this is an effective coinage for the chaos within. But, it definitely allows the reader to engage with the meaninglessness that Ravishankar tries to capture in her story-telling. This may be something new in itself as it promises us the possibility of finding threads of sensibilities to grapple with. Ogd is also a reminder of Sukumar Ray’s Abol-Tabol where meaning and language are at constant play and, possibly, at conflict. Concepts, truth, and logic are all interlinked and quite meticulously addressed. Then again, they are questioned and abandoned easily too.

The Messiah is a young adult who seems to have her share of fear, doubts, anxiety, and struggles. These traits would be pleasantly relatable for many readers. Her journey is remarkably similar to the modern day conundrum and, perhaps, this voice is an echo of our concerns with our modern-day publication or educational systems too. She depicts the Messiah’s journey in the land of Ogd as irrational and, probably, what is expected of public engagements. As a champion, the protagonist is politically and culturally motivated to dissolve boundaries between standardized and liberalized positions. It may not be far-fetched to think that the author has deliberately engaged with the populist sentiment where the chaos of language and cultural actions are effectively addressing the havoc we have become.

Satarupa Bhattacharya is a Delhi-based writer. She is occasionally found dabbling in the arts and academia.

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The Sickle by Anita Agnihotri, translated from the Marathi by Arunava by Juggernaut, 2021, pp. 280, ₹599.00

Battlefield by Vishram Bedekar, translated from the Marathi by Jerry Pinto is a tragic love story between Herta, a Jew escaping Hitler’s Germany, and Chakradhar Vidhwans, a Marathi man returning from England to India. Originally published in 1939 in Marathi as Ranaangan, this powerful investigation of nationalism is also a testimony to the redemptive power of love. A chance encounter leads to Herta and Chakradhar finding solace and love in each other. But when Chakradhar disembarks in India and Herta can’t, their separation is tragic and moving.

Speaking Tiger, 2021, pp. 216, ₹190.00
The Phoenix in Us
Dipavali Sen

I was feeling somewhat low when this book arrived for review. By the time I had gone through a few of its stories, I felt my spirits rising like the very Phoenix the book is titled after.

Established writer for children Indira Ananthakrishnan has a way with words that has always captivated her readers. But this work I found just superb in its case of expression, depth of study, and expanse of coverage. The book begins with a story about Mullah Nasiruddin—‘The Banquet’. While many are familiar with Mullah Nasiruddin stories, many do not know that he was a wise scholar of Turkey and was called Nasiruddin Hodja or Teacher Nasiruddin. It is more for his wit and humour that he is known. It is brilliant to begin a book on world religion with him.

The next story is the well-known one about Rama appreciating the little squirrel’s efforts to help in bridge-building. Indira Ananthakrishnan points out that this is to be found in the Tamil version of the Ramayana by Kamban (and not in the original Valmiki Ramayana in Sanskrit).

Ananthakrishnan begins the third story by explaining who Samaritans were and why Jesus used a Samaritan especially to exemplify his lesson on unselfish assistance. In several renderings this is never made clear. Such valuable information abounds in the book, sometime in the body of the story and sometime in the box at the end. But it is provided with a very light touch, and no exhibition of pedantry. Scholarly research must have gone into the making of this book. As the blurb says, the author has a special interest in making scriptures ‘creatively appealing for young readers.’ Yes, that interest comes through very well.

Take ‘The Mystical Cart Driver’, adapted from the Chhandogya Upanishad. The repose of the king with an aura of fame round his head is described almost poetically and at length. For a moment I wondered why so many sentences were spent on this till I realized that they helped create that atmosphere of complacency in which the king received a jolt from the geese flying above the balcony—and was stirred into self-questioning and seeking spiritual guidance from the cart-driver Raikva whom the passing geese had held to have a bigger aura than him.

There are thirty-three stories in all, drawn from ancient religious thought such as Hindu, Islam, Buddhist, Jain, Zen, Taoist, Ancient Greek, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and relatively new ones like Baha’i and Sikh. The stories are not arranged in any sort of system, either of religious order, or of time, or of the alphabet. ‘Mother Teresa’ occurs before ‘Abraham’, ‘Zoroaster’ or ‘Dattatreya’, ‘The 14th Dalai Lama’ comes before ‘Kabir’. I wondered about this random ordering and rationalized it as a shuffling of cards to eliminate bias. But some would have preferred an arrangement at least roughly according to time, or region, indicating how religious thought has developed over time and across the world.

A printing error creates a moment of confusion in ‘Swami Vivekanand’ when he is said to have been born in 1893 as well as attended the World Parliament of Religions in America the same year. His year of birth was 1863 and the 6 has got inverted. But in general the publication is excellent.

The artwork and designing reminded me of old hand-crafted Bibles with their decorative borders. Thankfully, there are no portraits. It is really the stories or the messages that are left to resonate in the reader’s mind. The cover, bordered in the same style as the pages, conjure up the phoenix in all its glory.

Why is the book titled after the Phoenix, when there was so much to choose from?

To steer clear of identifying it with any one of the religions. The Phoenix, as the story states, ‘has figured in ancient Chinese, Egyptian and Greek mythology’ (p. 94). It may have a distant kinship with the Shyena of Vedic lore that flew up to bring Indra’s pots of Somarasa but was shot down, the drops of blood fallen from its wings taking seed as the Palash tree. The point is that the Phoenix is ‘a grand symbol of immortality’ (p. 93). Not of the body but of the aspirations common to all humanity.

The one critical remark I would like to end with is that it is not just a Children’s Book as classified by Hachette India. Adults, usually much more misguided than children, are likely to benefit more from it—and enjoy it as well.

Dipavali Sen, a retired academic, writes for children as well as adults on both mythological and contemporary themes, and loves to review books.

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Simply Told

Nita Berry

Little Puja is a happy child. She only smiles, and smiles…and smiles. Even as a baby she never cries or fusses, to the great delight of her rustic parents. She smiles at everyone and everything around, and most of all at animals and pets with whom she seems to enjoy a special connection…like Bulbul. Her parents own a beautiful white mare called Bulbul, who is used in the wedding season to carry grooms to their weddings. While other children begin to talk, to go to school and learn many things, Puja only smiles still. Will she never talk? Her parents begin to worry.

Puja wants to spend all her time with Bulbul’s little foal. They seem to understand each other well. But he must be sold as he is of no use as a wedding horse. For he is a colt with big black blotches! A buyer is found and he is being led away when…”Takbak, my Takbak…” A loud voice shatters the silence! Puja has begun to talk! And then she begins to talk and talk, at first only to Takbak, as though she will never stop!

This delightful story highlights the special bond between children and animals, which needs no words to be understood. Puja is obviously a late bloomer. Some children walk late and some talk late. All develop at their own pace, but usually reach around the same level, unless there is a medical problem. Of course, urban parents would fret and paediatricians frown, but Puja’s rustic parents are laid back enough to let nature take its own course. Eventually, she goes to school—on Takbak of course, instead of bus or bike!

This picture book is simply told for small children, who will understand that no words are necessary between them and creatures they seem to understand each other well. But he must be sold as he is of no use as a wedding horse. For he is a colt with big black blotches! A buyer is found and he is being led away when…”Takbak, my Takbak…” A loud voice shatters the silence! Puja has begun to talk! And then she begins to talk and talk, at first only to Takbak, as though she will never stop!

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This picture book is simply told for small children, who will understand that no words are necessary between them and creatures and pets. They have their own secret language! Paro Anand’s writing is always replete with psychological insights, be it a novel, a short story—or just a simple picture book, like ‘A Quiet Girl’.

Taposhi Ghoshal’s elegant illustrations done in simple lines with expressive faces effectively complement the text. The special bonding between child and pet is brought out beautifully through the warmth of their expressions. With its attractive production, storyline and illustrations, as also a simple quiz on the last page on Animal Babies, this Hook Book from Duckbill is sure to get little children hooked!

A Quiet Girl
By Paro Anand. Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal
Duckbill Books, an imprint of Penguin/ Random House India, 2020, pp. 40,
₹175.00

Colours Galore

TCA Avni

Small children are like sponges, rapidly and avidly absorbing language, objects, concepts. Parents and other caregivers would love to expose them to fun learning of the right values. Tulika Books, Chennai, has been doing a great job of bringing out vibrant and sensible books for children. One among them is It’s My Colour, a winner of the International Excellence Awards 2019 at the London Book Fair, which makes a perfect purchase or gift for the little boy—or girl—who is learning the names and concept of different colours.

Nine colours flit through the pages, with large whacky pictures to illustrate each of them. The objects Raj has chosen to illustrate the colours are an interesting combination. Of the 18, four are familiar veggies. She starts, of all things, with a bitter gourd, sitting at ease in an ornate sofa chair, and moves on to luscious grinning tomatoes, wicked carrots, and airborne brinjals. An excellent way to glamorize vegetables and make them attractive to the growing child.

A profusion of smiling sunflowers and purple non-specific ‘flowers’ to include all other blooms are the other representatives of the plant kingdom. Then come six representatives from the animal kingdom. Again an eclectic variety. Parrots and dogs the two year old would see often enough, as also cows. But this is not just any cow sadly foraging the streets for some food. This is Maharani the Cow: sneakily put in the idea into the child’s mind to look at bovines with a little respect the next time. Once again, apart from the named parrots, a non-specific ‘bird’ for all other winged creatures. Then a crab, perhaps unfamiliar in vegetarian families, more so as it strums a guitar! And finally a whale: definitely a large concept, which the parent or grandparent can, to make another poor joke, have a whale of a time explaining about.

The choice of non-living objects too is fascinating. The child can identify with a mud pot, a lorry and an umbrella. Then comes ‘father’s shirt’, flapping dry in the wind, a little whimsical for the kid whoopded up in a flat with a washing drying machine, and also, hold your breath, ‘Grandma’s wig’! I can just imagine the mischievous grin shared by the person reading out the book and the tot, whether they know some white-haired lady donning a black wig or have to imagine

It’s My Colour
Written and illustrated by Nancy Raj
₹195.00

Nancy Raj’s interest in illustration, design and food finds its way into her pictures for children to make them bustle with exuberant energy, delightful detail and wacky humour! Mala’s Silver Anklets, Hanuman’s Ramayan, The Snake and the Frog and The Village Fair are some of Tulika’s most popular books.

Nita Berry is an author and editor. She has written short stories, picture and activity books, historical biographies and full-length nonfiction for children of all ages. She has won many awards including Shankar’s Medal for The Story of Time (CBT). She has represented AWIC, the Indian Section of IBBY, at several international conferences.
One! Finally, last and most certainly not the least, are jumping jalebis. Which child would not get excited by a sweet so crunchy and sticky and drippy, so capable of messing up an entire room with fingerprints? The limited text makes it easy for the toddler to understand, and perhaps even begin to recognize the words. The touch of alliteration adds to the cuteness. Thus, the parrot preens, the bitter gourd babbles, the tomato titters, and so on, ending with grandpa’s umbrella grunting and grandma’s wig gloating to illustrate the colour black. The crazy mélange is guaranteed to make for fun reading. And there is plenty of white surface still left on the pages of the book, which are sensibly not glossy, so the child can scribble with crayons and make the book his very own.

So do buy it for someone you love!

TCA Avni is an independent researcher currently based in New Delhi.

**Valuing Nature**

Anju Virmani

COVID has taught us many things—among other things, valuing health, self-discipline, home cooking, and for young parents, the fine art of keeping children happily and productively confined to the house. The new normal seems to be all online: classes, homework, even dance and yoga classes. So it makes for a nice change to be able to hold books in hand and savour the bright colours and bold print the old-fashioned way, without eye strain.

COVID has also made us realize how wise most of our ancient systems were, and how silly we have been to look down upon them as we get seduced by ‘modernity’. Thus, the gracious ‘namaste’ meant we kept our bacteria to ourselves, much better than the contaminating handshake or hug. Frequent hand washing; washing hands and feet when entering home; changing out of the dirty ‘outside’ clothes into clean home clothes when returning home, especially into the kitchen. Community eating seated in rows six feet apart, with someone serving with clean hands rather than using grubby hands to take second servings. Even tiny details like not blowing out candles—thoroughly contaminating the cake before serving it. Do all these practices sound familiar?

COVID has also made us realize how healing our ancient systems were, and how unwise we have been to get seduced by the philosophy of ‘each man for himself’ and advances like antibiotics. We rediscovered that everyone is vulnerable if one person is vulnerable; that greedy hoarding and black marketeering can kill; that even blindly taking turmeric and *karha* was preferable to blindly taking toxic medicines.

Ishani Naidu’s simple little ‘story’ combines concepts from Ayurveda and Vedanta with a reminder of how we are destroying nine colours flit through the pages, with large whacky pictures to illustrate each of them. The objects Raj has chosen to illustrate the colours are an interesting combination. Of the 18, four are familiar veggies. She starts, of all things, with a bitter gourd, sitting at ease in an ornate sofa chair, and moves on to luscious grinning tomatoes, wicked carrots, and airborne brinjals. An excellent way to glamorize vegetables and make them attractive to the growing child.

Ishani Naidu conducts talks and workshops for children, teens and adults on awakening body and mind health awareness and creating a lifestyle that promotes holistic wellbeing with Ayurveda and Vedanta. Her writing can be found at www.wholepeace.in. Kalyani Ganapathy is a self-taught illustrator and art director. She illustrates both fiction and non-fiction. Her books include *Hambrelnai’s Loom*, *A is for Anaar*, *Janice Goes to Chinatown* and *Amrita Sher-Gil, Rebel with a Paintbrush*.

**Book News**

*Asprishya Ganga and Other Stories* by Kolakaluri Enoch, translated from the Telugu by Alladi Uma and M Sridhar, jolts us out of our complacency to ponder over the questions of caste, class and gender; of love, friendship, power games, exploitation and politics. Through the title story, Enoch brings out the relationship between the Ganga, the revered river and the water in the well of the ‘untouchable’.

Ratna Books, 2021, pp. 256, ₹449.00

*Wooden Cow* by T. Janakiraman, translated from the Tamil by Lakshmi Kannan, is a translation of the author’s path-breaking novel *Marappasu*, the coming-of-age story of a young, beautiful, intelligent, fiercely independent, yet deeply emotional woman who does not believe in the institution of marriage, or in human bondage of any kind, and her unconventional and volatile relationship with a renowned and gifted musician.

Orient BlackSwan, 2021, pp. 232, ₹575.00
A Two-in-one Book

Madhu B Joshi

A two-in-one (or is that conjoined twin) book, this easy read has been made even more impactful by its fun and realistic illustrations. Winner of The Library of Congress Literacy Award (2020) the book challenges societal stereotypes of acceptable behaviour from boys and girls imposed upon children from their early days. It illustrates boys and girls in all their moods and whimsies and fancies, and declares it is perfectly alright to be oneself. Its strength lies in the fact that it brings children at a level platform without praising or condemning their USPs. In this republic of children the ‘bad’ ones are just as good as the ‘good’ ones; in fact, there are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ children. Just children: including bald and naughty girls and embroidery loving, dress wearing, bullying boys.

A level 3 book meant for readers capable of reading independently, this book allows children to read and understand the text without adult assistance (and thereby interpretation). The concepts are simple, ones that children come across in day-to-day transactions within their milieu; so is the language. The illustrations aid inference, a great tool in the process of making sense of the world through one’s very own grid. The paperback comes in a size comfortable for children in the 6-9 age group.

The author Kamala Bhasin is a respected feminist who worked in the areas of gender and social equality and I remember at least another delightful children’s book of hers Ultee-sultee Meetto (The Toppy-turpy Meetto) voicing her concerns. It is sad that published under particular mandates, these remarkable books are not made available for wider dissemination. The illustrator Priya Kurien is by now something of a specialist at bringing to life a range of characters through her brilliant, inclusive illustration. This book is no exception.

A very welcome addition to the small number of children’s books venturing to tackle ‘uncomfortable’ issues like gender stereotypes, Satrangi Ladke, Satrangi Ladkiyan should be part of every children’s library and a must read for teachers and parents alike. Available in print in English, Kannada, Marathi and Tamil, the book is also available free in a digital form on StoryWeaver. The platform opens possibilities for this text to be translated into a horde of languages within India and abroad. I hope that happens. And soon.

**Anju Virmani** is a Senior Consultant Endocrinologist in Delhi, specializing in childhood diabetes and prevention of non-communicable diseases.

**Book News**

Five Novellas about Women by Indira Goswami, translated from the Assamese by Dibyajyoti Sharma represents a cross-section of Indira Goswami’s writing, with a special focus on women. Sensitively translated, with detailed notes on the translation, these stories bring to light the human condition that Indira Goswami portrayed in her writing. Thornbird, an imprint of Niyogi Books, 2021, pp. 256, ₹495.00

**Kamala Bhasin**, a feminist and development activist, she worked on issues related to sustainable development, gender equality, human rights, peace and justice.

**Priya Kuriyan** is a children’s writer, illustrator, comics creator and animator, film director.

Madhu B Joshi prefers to be known as a communication practitioner.

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**SATRANGI LADKE, SATRANGI LADKIYAN**

By Kamala Bhasin. Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan

Pratham Books (fourth edition), 2021, First Hindi Edition: 2019, pp. 34, Rs 55.00

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Living with Nature

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

*Making Friends with Snakes (But From a Distance)* introduces us to the various snakes in India, including the four big venomous ones. The book tells us how to identify them, their favourite hang-out spots, and how to keep away from them.

A couple of children playing cricket hit the ball into a bush, where they encounter a snake. As it turns out, the snake called Dhaman, a non-venomous Ratsnake and its friend Naagin, a venomous Spectacled Cobra, have a story to tell.

They introduce themselves and their fanged friends, and explain how they are just like people—they are beautiful (like the Indian Rock Python), colourful (like the Malabar Pit Viper), and love to dress up (like the Ornate Flying Snake).

Naagin further explains how they like to avoid people and strike only if they are threatened. She introduces the four big venomous snakes in India—the Spectacled Cobra, Saw-scaled Viper, Common Krait, and Russell’s Viper—who each explain where they hangout and how you can avoid them. Most importantly, she tells the children what to do if they end up being bitten by a snake.

The narrative is simple to follow, fun, and engaging. The tiny bits of cheeky humour helps bring character to the various snakes, and helps us see their individual personalities. Each snake differs from the other not just in size and their favourite meal, but in where they like to search for food, and how they respond to an encounter with humans.

The drawings are lively, and show us how the various snakes actually look. Bright and colourful, the book’s design is attractive.

*Making Friends with Snakes (But From a Distance)* is a wonderful introduction to snakes, their ways, and lives to young readers. Meant for children who can read on their own, the publishers have brought together an engaging and entertaining read which is not only educative, but clarifies the common misapprehensions around snakes (they can’t hear, and they don’t like milk).

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan is a poet from Chennai who is also a Chartered Accountant.

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Gauri Datt’s *Devrani Jethani ki Kahani or A Story of Two Sisters-in-Law* translated with Annotation and Introduction by Smita Gandotra and Ulrike Stark, written in 1870, is often considered the first novel in Hindi. This sparsely written story follows the fortunes of an Agarwal merchant family in the north Indian town of Meerut, then under colonial rule.

Primus Boks, 2021, ₹1595.00 (Hb), ₹495.00 (Pb)

Religion, Community and Nation: Hindu Consciousness and Nationalism in Colonial Punjab by K.L. Tuteja examines the emergence and growth of a Hindu communitarian identity in Punjab and its interface with the nationalist discourse and the anti-colonial struggle from the late nineteenth century to the closing years of the 1920s.

Primus Boks, 2021, ₹1250.00

Notorious for rolling up into a ball like a pangolin, Rohan Chakravarty is a cartoonist, illustrator and animation designer hailing from Nagpur, the ‘tiger capital of the world’. He is the creator of Green Humour, a series of cartoons, comics and illustrations of wild animals, wildlife and nature, conservation, environment, sustainability, and all things green.

**Making Friends with Snakes (But From a Distance)**

By Rohan Chakravarty and Madras Crocodile Bank Trust

Pratham Books, 2020, pp. 16, ₹50.00

Level: 3 (for children who are ready to read on their own)

**Religion, Community and Nation: Hindu Consciousness and Nationalism in Colonial Punjab**

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South Asian Ways of Seeing: Contemporary Visual Cultures edited by Samarth Singhal and Amrita Ajay brings together eminent as well as new scholarly voices from across disciplines to explore South Asia from a visual standpoint, exploring multiple mediums and multiple ways of seeing, including tarot, film, graphic novels, painting, death pictures, graffiti, and installation art.

Primus Boks, 2022, ₹1295.00

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Vishesh Unni Raghunathan is a poet from Chennai who is also a Chartered Accountant.

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Living with Nature

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

*Making Friends with Snakes (But From a Distance)* introduces us to the various snakes in India, including the four big venomous ones. The book tells us how to identify them, their favourite hang-out spots, and how to keep away from them.

A couple of children playing cricket hit the ball into a bush, where they encounter a snake. As it turns out, the snake called Dhaman, a non-venomous Ratsnake and its friend Naagin, a venomous Spectacled Cobra, have a story to tell.

They introduce themselves and their fanged friends, and explain how they are just like people—they are beautiful (like the Indian Rock Python), colourful (like the Malabar Pit Viper), and love to dress up (like the Ornate Flying Snake).

Naagin further explains how they like to avoid people and strike only if they are threatened. She introduces the four big venomous snakes in India—the Spectacled Cobra, Saw-scaled Viper, Common Krait, and Russell’s Viper—who each explain where they hangout and how you can avoid them. Most importantly, she tells the children what to do if they end up being bitten by a snake.

The narrative is simple to follow, fun, and engaging. The tiny bits of cheeky humour helps bring character to the various snakes, and helps us see their individual personalities. Each snake differs from the other not just in size and their favourite meal, but in where they like to search for food, and how they respond to an encounter with humans.

The drawings are lively, and show us how the various snakes actually look. Bright and colourful, the book’s design is attractive.

*Making Friends with Snakes (But From a Distance)* is a wonderful introduction to snakes, their ways, and lives to young readers. Meant for children who can read on their own, the publishers have brought together an engaging and entertaining read which is not only educative, but clarifies the common misapprehensions around snakes (they can’t hear, and they don’t like milk).

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan is a poet from Chennai who is also a Chartered Accountant.
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