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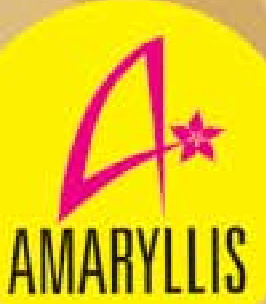

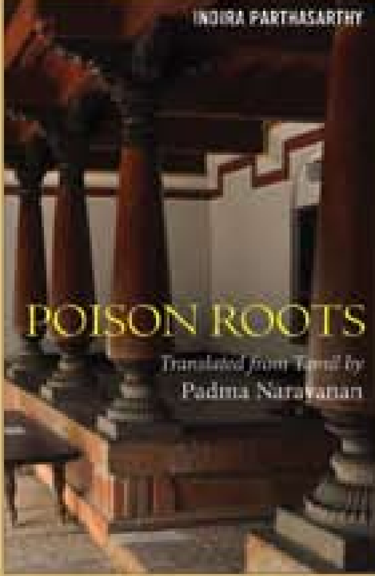

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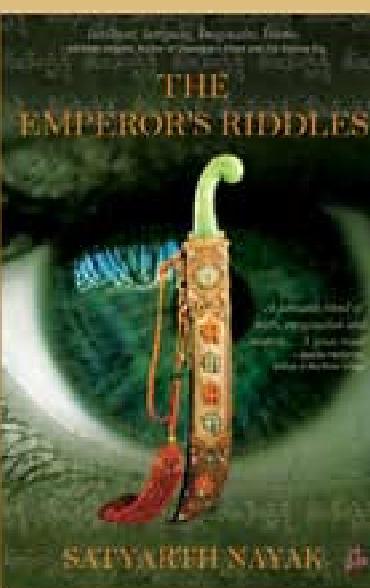

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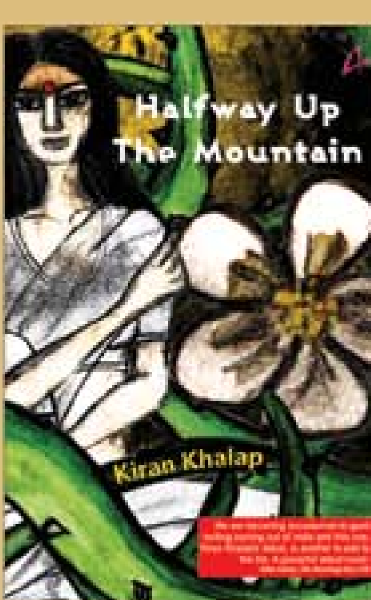

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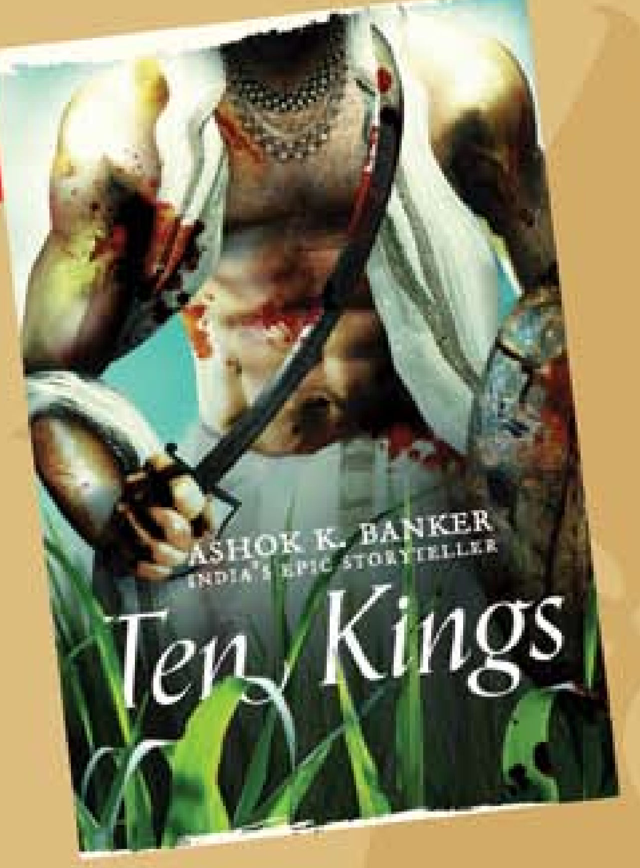

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Biblio: A REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Printed and published by Brinda Datta, 2204 Sector D 2, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi - 110070. Printed at Archana Advertising Pvt. Ltd., C 78 Okhla Industrial Area, Phase 1, New Delhi - 110 020
Editor: Rukmini Bhaya Nair

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RNI No. 65560/96
ISSN No. 0971-8982

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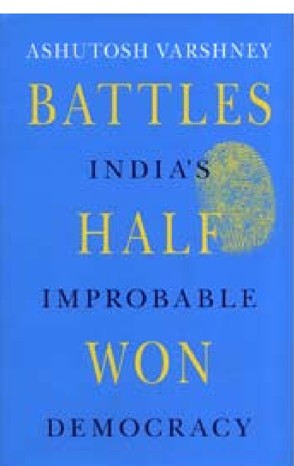

Battles Half Won – India's Improbable Democracy
By Ashutosh Varshney
Viking/Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2013, 415 pp.,
Rs 599 (HB)
ISBN 978-0-470-08426-7

HARISH KHARE

Ashutosh Varshney exudes a kind of intellectual self-confidence that enables him to escape a familiar failing of most professional political scientists, especially those who research and analyse the Indian political landscape, characterised by an inexplicable inability to remain unintimidated by the political correctness of the week, which is invariably defined by the politician, the polemicist and the pamphleteer. It is this refreshing autonomy that makes this collection of articles a sobering read

Ashutosh Varshney is one of the brighter sparks to come out of the "Political development" stable of American Political Science. The Political Development School assigned to itself the onerous task of initiating the post-colonial academic elites into the "modernisation" project, educating them on how to make a distinction between right and wrong constitutional principles, and, between desirable and undesirable institutional choices as emerging nations undertook the task of organising their collective affairs. This academic discourse ran a close parallel to the American foreign policy templates at the height of an all-consuming Cold War. As it happened, Ashutosh Varshney earned his academic spurs just at a time when the Cold War was petering out and indeed was presumed to have been concluded. And not unsurprisingly, since then the American Social Sciences' love affair with the emerging world, too, turned somewhat tepid. Under these circumstances, it was easy for him to saunter off the reservation.

Also, the battle Varshney chose to fight – on behalf of democracy, with a capital D, in India – was an easy fight; but, he was willing to see before others could see "the exceptionalism of India's democracy with stunning clarity". Though from an Indian point of view it is rather difficult to understand what all the fuss is about; evidently his quarrel is with his condescending North American colleagues who had to be necessarily sceptical about India's experiments with democratic practices and arrangements. Varshney proceeds competently to dissect "in a highly counter-theoretical way", why Indian democracy has survived and, while he is at it, draws up a dhobi list of failures and successes. He rejoices in the fact that Indian democracy has "defied" the "standard democratic theory".

This overarching theme holds together nine previously published (but updated) essays in *Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy.* A new introductory essay, clearly a bonus, sums up the argument, elaborated in different shades in the rest of the book. Varshney exudes a kind of intellectual self-confidence that enables him to escape a familiar failing of most professional political scientists, especially those who research and analyse the Indian political landscape, characterised by an inexplicable inability to remain unintimidated by the political correctness of the week, which is invariably defined by the politician, the polemicist and the pamphleteer. It is this refreshing autonomy that makes this collection of essays a sobering read.

The book also becomes a sobering read at a time when India seems to be in the grip of its periodic self-doubts about how to sort out the mess produced by its own democratic excesses; even the liberals seem unable to make up their mind between the clamour for a "strong and decisive" leader and the romantic appeal of the anarchy of *mohalla* republics, in complete rejection of Cicero's caution against "the mad and irresponsible caprice of the mob". These confused souls may benefit from Varshney's equitable analysis.

Given the fact that a systematic effort is on to delegitimise Jawaharlal Nehru's democratic and liberal legacy, Varshney's analysis on the Indian democracy's longevity does well to highlight the historical significance of that leadership. Asserting that "Nehru's emergence as the topmost leader was a monumental fortuity", Varshney invites speculation as to what would have happened if Nehru had had to contend with Subhash Bose or Sardar Patel: "Bose dies in 1945, Patel in 1950. Given their political trajectories, one shudders to think what kind of political system India would have evolved into if they had dominated the 1940s and 1950s."

Varshney's essays are remarkable on another count. It is understood that after all, scholarship is obliged to see larger themes which may necessarily be at work beyond the daily grind of professional noise-makers in television studios and newspapers and even in Parliament. Scattered through these essays is an important theme – a theme for which there seems to be not many takers in the present cynical days – of the centrality of the Indian National Congress in the consolidation of the democratic arrangements, in particular as one of the "institutions that have played a key role in generating all-India loyalties, historically and currently".

All said and done, the Congress accent on the middle path and moderation remains the key to the overwhelming task of governing a vast, continental polity. This accent is ideologically premised on a cultivated rejection of extreme partisanship and allurement of exclusion; on the other hand, the pronounced emphasis on "inclusiveness" may be a clever electoral strategy but it is a ploy that nevertheless is democratic and is anchored in vague – almost John Rawls-type – notions and premises of fairness. And, that is why, as Varshney notes perceptively, the Bharatiya Janata Party will not be able to do things vastly differently:

> It should be noted that the BJP – should it return to power in an alliance – cannot entirely escape these inclusionary pressures. In search of votes, the BJP also has to move downward for support. That is where the biggest numbers of votes exist. Unsurprisingly, the BJP did not oppose the NREGA, nor did it resist the 2006 affirmative action plan, nor the right to education and food security bill. All parties are subject to the rise of inclusionary pressures.

The very title of the collection suggests that there remain profound dissatisfactions with the way India conducts its collective affairs in a democratic idiom. But, all democracies – including the presumably super-perfect American democracy – produce their own share of absurdities, aberrations and anxieties. Varshney's labours carry a reassuring message: notwithstanding the greedy and hypocritical middle classes' clamour for an Indian version of the Chinese authoritarian arrangement, it would be difficult to turn our back on the liberal Nehruvian legacy and on our democratic promises. "India is hyper-mobilised, much of it by political parties. Hyper-mobilisation might make Indian democracy very noisy, even chaotic, but in many ways, it also keeps democracy going."

The very title of the collection suggests that there remain profound dissatisfactions with the way India conducts its collective affairs in a democratic idiom. But, then, all democracies – including the presumably super-perfect American democracy – produce their own share of absurdities, aberrations and anxieties. Varshney's labours carry a reassuring message: notwithstanding the greedy and hypocritical middle classes' clamour for an Indian version of the Chinese authoritarian arrangement, it would be difficult to turn our back on the liberal Nehruvian legacy and on our democratic promises

All this is very flattering to the argumentative Indian. However, Indian democracy has yet to confront the problem identified by James Madison in *The Federalist*: "The inference to which we are brought is, that the causes of faction cannot be removed." Our national discourse, for understandably historical reasons, had sought to paper over differences inherent in existence of "faction" and its inevitable demands on attention, resources and policy. Instead, somehow, we had sought solace in the presumed curative power of this or that "leader" to harmonise varying and often conflicting interests and outlooks of different factions. This fiction – of a painless reconciliation – is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain; or, at least, it requires a sophistication in political dexterity that is not so easily available. Varshney alludes to this dilemma in his concluding essay. Making an eminently sound proposition that "a nation's politics decides what is acceptable", he identifies the nature of new challenge:

> Under such circumstances, a universal-franchise democracy, where the deprived – defying standard democratic theory – have come to vote at least as much as, if not more than, the privileged, is bound to feel inclusionary pressures. Many more would like the fruits of the economic boom to come to them. The greatest challenge for India's policymakers today is to balance the new growth momentum with inclusionary policies.

That elusive "balance" again. But so be it. ■

RANA DASGUPTA
CAPITAL
A PORTRAIT OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DELHI
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A forced Punjabiyat

Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten

By Rajmohan Gandhi

Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2013, 432 pp., Rs 695 (HB)

ISBN 978-93-82277-58-3

ELLORA PURI

In this study, Rajmohan Gandhi takes on the ambitious task of tracing the history of pre-Partition Punjab over 240 years, from the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 to the departure of the British in 1947. He gives a chronological account focusing primarily on the political history of the region, which he identifies as the area in which the Punjabi language, in its various avatars, is spoken.The book is a labour of competent research that draws from varied resources and duly offsets the time-span that Gandhi aspires to cover. Given the relative weakness of historiography of Punjab, the book is a welcome contribution.

Gandhi seeks to address a number of issues in this book: what makes for Punjabi distinctiveness; reasons for the success of a century-long Sikh rule starting from mid-18th century; explanation for the inability of the region's Muslim majority to fill the power vacuum at the end of the Mughal empire; the achievements and failures of the British rule in Punjab; history of community relations, its antagonisms and accords; causes of the Partition; and possible future trajectories. It is a tall order. It is to the credit of the scholarly penmanship of the author that he is able to touch upon each of these topics.

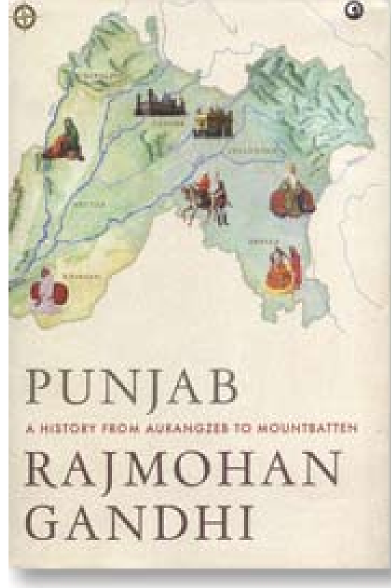
Like any other work aiming to look at such a wide range of issues, however, Gandhi's narrative is more confident and stimulating in particular areas than it is in others. This book is a testament to the fact that biographical detail and modern-contemporary politics are the author's forte. The sketches that he draws of various protagonists, small or major, are absorbing. He outlines the triumphs, peccadilloes and engagements of the Mughal emperors, the Sikh Gurus, a one-eyed Ranjit Singh, the Lawrence brothers and the Unionists, as well as the machinations, scandals, and tyrannies of the relatively less important Mughlani Begum,Sada Kaur, and the flog-loving John Nicholson.

The chapters on the British Raj in Punjab compellingly construct a history that shows how the Imperial army and rural policies impacted Punjabi society and politics, and were, in turn, affected by the societal realities. Punjab became the main recruiting ground for the British army, which faithfully reproduced its rural social structure, while carefully dividing the regiments along communal lines.The divisions that were already present were exacerbated by these policies, which were logically extended to other spheres as well. Alongside, the Singh Sabhas, Arya Samaj and the Anjumans, the popular press also played up these differences. So, by 1940, when the Mahatma asked, "How are the Muslims of the Punjab different from the Hindus and the Sikhs? Are they not all Punjabis, drinking the same water, breathing the same air and deriving sustenance from the same soil?" according to Rajmohan Gandhi, "It was indeed the same water, yet Punjabis were usually drawing it from different wells and taps. In the cities, the government has ensured that 'Hindu *pani*' was separately served at railway stations and other public places, an arrangement that did not seem to invite popular protest."(p 316)

Gandhi's account of the high politics in these chapters – the confabulations between the British, the Unionists, the Muslim League, and the Congress – is valuable as it skillfully outlines a cohesive picture of the complex happenings of the period. The failure of the Congress to make headway in the province, the initial tepid response of Muslim Punjabis to the Muslim League and its demand for Pakistan, the rapid eclipse of the Unionist Party from the 1920s to 1940s, and the eventual coming round of all the parties to the idea that the province had to be divided are fairly well described.

Likewise, the reasons – particularly the role of the post-World War II demobilised soldiery in a highly militarised province – for unprecedented violence that wracked the region are explored. Given his focus on elite politics, Gandhi is, however, unable to delve deeper into the question of why communal violence, which lead the British to call it the 'Ulster of India', was initially primarily an urban phenomenon, and engulfed the rural areas only as the Partition drew near.

The preceding chapters, which deal with the period between the death of Aurangzeb and the British advent, mirror the chaotic nature of the times that they deal with, when the end of the Mughal era lead to a power vacuum in the region. This resulted in continued clashes between three forces – the Afghan rulers, Mughal governors and the Sikh chieftains – becoming the order of the day. Gandhi fills these chapters with minutiae, which though interesting, overburden the narrative, and distract attention from exploring the historical processes underway during this period. Under the weight of detail, Gandhi is unable to adequately address the main question that he wants to address in this part of the book about why Punjab's Muslim majority did not fill the post-Mughal void. His explanation – the innate proclivity of a Punjabi to privilege survival over political power – borders on orientalist descriptions of Indians preferring despotic rule to self-government. The reason perhaps lies in the anachronistic nature of his question. It projects a later-day communal identification on a set of people who preferred their tribal, caste and clan affiliations to the religious one. Indeed, the fact that this question is posed at all is, in itself, strange in view of the description that Gandhi otherwise provides of the pre-British Punjab of common Sufi saints, of *zaat* loyalties and of composite armies.



Like any other work aiming to look at such a wide range of issues, Rajmohan Gandhi's narrative is more confident and stimulating in particular areas than it is in others. This book is a testament to the fact that biographical detail and modern-contemporary politics are the author's forte. Overall, in his endeavour to provide a three centuries' history of Punjab, Gandhi is more successful when he details the high politics of intrigue and machinations and of the interconnections of the *persona grata*. He is on weaker ground when he makes forays into cultural history and the interactions of the *hoi polloi*

In the same chapters, the reasons for the success of Sikh chief's campaign for political power, in comparison, are delineated much better. They were an active organised local force led mostly by warriors from the countryside, which had acquired influence and territory via battles with their historical foes, Mughals and Afghans. Their symbols and beliefs were shaped through these encounters as well as the persecution that they suffered under latter-day Mughal rulers. The militant fighting spirit and desire for political control was thus engendered, as was embodied in the *nishan sahib* with a double-edged sword surrounded by a pair of *kirpans*, and regal symbols in some Guru's courts. Sikhs saw themselves as a single people, unlike the rest of the Punjabis. These attributes aided the Sikh chiefs and gave them success.

Gandhi's expertise in drawing biographies is evident again in the chapter that he titles "*Insaniyat* amidst insanity" in which he records interviews of more than two dozen survivors of the Partition and their life-saving acts. This is his attempt to chronicle the history of collaboration and humanity alongside the more visible history of violence in Punjab. In keeping with this agenda, the narrative of the book is interspersed with anecdotes of cooperation between three communities — their similarities, their common history, saints, poets, and folklore. The disproportionate lack of focus on this aspect, however, makes the argument for a shared cross-religious and denominational history of the region underpinned by a notion of *Punjabiyat* look forced. In fact, it makes the conflictual nature of Punjabi politics, which is presented more comprehensively, stand out.

Overall, in his endeavour to provide a three centuries' history of Punjab, Gandhi is more successful when he details the high politics of intrigue and machinations and of the interconnections of the *persona grata*. He is on weaker ground when he makes forays into cultural history and the interactions of the *hoi polloi*. The emphasis might be deliberate since a cursory look at the bibliography shows that he did not consult the scholarly work on socio-political history of Punjab like, for instance, David Gilmartin on the British Empire and the making of Pakistan, or various commentators like Swarna Aiyar on Partition violence, or Kenneth Jones and Mark Juergensmeyer on socio-religious movements.

Chronologically, the chapters on British Punjab are more comprehensive in the way they draw out processes and linkages, than Gandhi's preceding chapters that are heavy on detail. The reasons for this might not just lie in his relative strength in dealing with modern historical material than the pre-British sources. It might have to do with the fact that the modern history of Punjab is better studied and its strands better delineated. Pre-British Punjab, except for Sikh history, is comparatively under-researched. Rajmohan Gandhi is thus opening up space for further historical explorations. All the questions that he seeks to answer are threads that can potentially lead to a book each. Along with that this book holds promise of separate biographies of the scandal-prone Mughlani Begum, the manoeuvring Sada Kaur and the rather sadistic John Nicholson. ■

Partition as a process

Partition's Post-Amnesia:1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia

By Ananya Jahanara Kabir

Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2013, 261 pp., Rs 475

ISBN 978-81-88965-77-9

SHOHINI GHOSH

In her work on cultural memory, Marita Sturken (1997) reminds us that memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived. All memories are "created" in tandem with forgetting because to remember everything would be to be overwhelmed by memory. Ananya Jahanara Kabir's book titled *Partition's Post-Amnesia* is about the excavation of memorial recall from the silence that had surrounded the post-Partition period. Moving away from the scholarly impulse of the "objective" and the "neutral", the author implicates herself in the "participation" of this post-Partition memorial recall.

The events of the Partition transformed entire generations but it took more than 50 years after 1947 for the silence to be broken by those who witnessed it. Reflecting on this long silence, Ashis Nandy (2003) writes: "Those of us who saw it tried to forget what we saw; our imagination of evil failed to cope with it while others sought to "jettison their memory and history itself" in order to restore a moral world and reconfigure life.

Over the last 15 years, we have seen, read and heard a diversity of material that has tried to address the epochal events of 1947. This book contributes to this increasing body of work but is driven by a new impulse: one that challenges the Indocentricism that has dominated scholarship on the Partition in the subcontinent and the many historiographic assumptions that have informed such work. What makes this book particularly unique is that it links the Partition of 1947 to the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971 through the privileging of cultural memory over political history. Further, by foregrounding her own subjectivity in the project Kabir is able to mobilise 'modernity' as an analytical category in opposition to a fixation on religion as the "major axis of post-Partition self-fashioning". Kabir writes:

> The post-memory of the holocaust exemplarily constitutes the memory of memory, coupled with the re-telling of its telling; in contrast the politics of memory regarding 1947 and 1971 are characterized by an intergenerational movement from retrieval of those affective and cultural connections that amnesia denied. This retrieval, I term post-amnesia: a symptomatic return to explorations of places lost to the immediate post-1947 and post-1971 generations through a combination of psychological and political imperatives.

Taking the epochal moments of 1947 and 1971, Kabir works through the connections between both and their implications for an exploration of what Vazira Fazila Yacoobali Zamindar calls the "partition effects or the ways in which Partition is socially remembered and retrospectively assessed". The book is mediated through the author's own family history that, after the "collective and laminated traumas" of 1947 and 1971 found themselves dispersed "across the new nations of post-Partition South Asia and the cartographic arrangements created in its wake. A "secularized Bengali Muslim growing up in Nehruvian India" the author finds herself to be "the point of convergence of several maverick South Asian histories". From this vantage point Kabir writes a book that navigates its way through a diversity of cultural processes (and products) in order to understand how the monumental events and processes unleashed by 1947 and 1971 could possibly speak to each other. Kabir's book asks how we might proceed to remember 1947 given the events of 1971 and conversely, how we might understand the events of 1971 given its relationship to 1947. How do these cultural traumas – "processes that damage the tissues of a community" – impact on the "the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory"? The book becomes an exploration into memorialisation; an attempt to understand the self's relationship to society (and the nation) and the individual's "filial and affiliative" connections.

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***Partition's Post-Amnesia* is driven by a new impulse: one that challenges the Indocentricism that has dominated scholarship on the Partition in the subcontinent and the many historiographic assumptions that have informed such work. What makes this book particularly unique is that it links the Partition of 1947 to the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971 through the privileging of cultural memory over political history. Further, by foregrounding her own subjectivity in the project Kabir is able to mobilise 'modernity' as an analytical category in opposition to a fixation on religion as the "major axis of post-Partition self-fashioning"**

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The political energy of Kabir's book emerges out of the insights gained from a new body of "revisionist" work that challenges an earlier understanding of history where the onus of Partition has rested squarely on the Muslim League and Jinnah's separatist Two Nation Theory. To this impulse of forming a theocratic state, the Indian National Congress, as Indian textbooks tell us, responded with plans for a secular India. More recent contributions to Partition Studies has challenged this historiography to argue that Jinnah's desire for Pakistan was perhaps more in the nature of "driving a hard bargain" than a desire for establishing of a theocratic state just as many members of the Congress (in Bengal and elsewhere) were "driven by visions of a Hindu majority regional demographic rather than secularist ideals". These new insights, Kabir says, only heighten the sense of the "enormous human loss" incurred by the Partition that was then followed by the long and bloody war between East and West Pakistan resulting in the creation of Bangladesh which dismantled the "cartographic and political decisions of 1947". Partition is therefore understood not as an event, but an ongoing process, where the creation of India, Pakistan and then Bangladesh are inextricably entangled.

Partition's Post-Amnesia is divided into two parts titled 'Between 1947 and 1971' and 'Deep Topographies' with two chapters each titled "The Phantom Map", "Terracotta Memories", "Archeogeography" and "The Enchanted Delta". The chapters are journeys through a diversity of cultural productions. "The Phantom Map" – focusing on the work produced by authors from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan – invokes the spectral presence of East Pakistan; that historical aporia between 1947 and 1971. "Terracotta Memories" harks back to an earlier generation of cultural producers who were active during the time of East Pakistan. "Archeogeography" in 'Deep Topographies' looks at Pakistan's invocation of a pre-Islamic past through archaeological and geological evidence while "The Enchanted Delta" looks at the competing claims made by cultural producers of India and Bangladesh over East Bengal. The personalised Conclusion is aptly titled "Darjeeling Chai" which refers both to Darjeeling tea as well as the desire for Darjeeling as the word '*chai*' in Bengali means 'to want' or 'to desire.' Not only do the chapters challenge a certain Indocentric understanding of political and cultural history but also urge us reflect on the 'methods' by which cultural memory could be excavated.

One of the inaugural epigraphs in the book is a quote from an interview with Bengali vocal artist Firoza Begum who says: "The Partition of these two countries dealt an irreparable blow to my singing. I became completely detached from everybody. The Gramophone Company [of India in Calcutta] kept asking me to record with them as a guest artiste, but how could that happen? Where would I live? Who would stay with me? These thoughts preoccupied me so much that I became mentally ill. I came to Dhaka, but didn't like it one bit." How does one read into this 'condition'? The excavation of cultural memory therefore must necessarily be a reading into deep silences and gaps and an attempt to cull insights from fragments of pain and incoherence. Kabir's approach may remind readers about Shoshana Felman's important work on Holocaust testimony where she argues for the elevated position of literature because it acts as a specific mode of testimony. She says writers often feel compelled to testify through literary or artistic channels precisely because they know or intuitively feel that in the court of history (or in a court of law) evidence will fail or will fall short.

In the same vein, Kabir has argued that in order to understand cultural traumas and the fragmentary nature of pain, we may have to move away from the mode of the narrative or more specifically, the "scholarly preoccupation with narrative modes of remembering Partition". She argues that the breaking of the silence around Partition in the early '90s led to the retrieval of oral histories and narrative accounts that congealed into a certain predictability because of its "overwhelming reliance on narrative forms of memory" with oral history on the one hand and on the other, "novels, short stories and films easily accessible to an Anglophone audience". Kabir then makes the useful suggestion that more than the material gathered, it is the perspective used to analyse them that needs to be innovative. But what does Kabir mean by narrative? She explains:

> The term indicates a text or representation that possesses temporal extent and bestows on its components a relationship of cause and effect. Post-enlightenment modes of narrative typically rely on the concept of a singular perspective from which material is organised in order to produce the linear logic of cause and effect. Narrative also privileges closure, a moment with enormous ideological potential, in order to complete the circuit of meaning-making.

Competing narratives and a diversity of closures, says Kabir, become "epistemological burdens" that lead to the "mutual entanglement of nation and narration" in the manner suggested by Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. In her study of texts therefore, she brings in a contemplation of paratextual material like epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, cover-designs, maps and illustrations. More importantly, Kabir mounts a legitimate critique of our willingness to accept "psychoanalysis's

reliance on models of narrative closure for the purported healing of traumatic memories without heeding the warnings of historians of conflict who point to the susceptibility of foreclosed narrative to the enhanced sense of a group's 'chosen trauma' as the reason for its persecution of a targeted other." The continuing dependence on the models of Trauma Studies, she argues, demonstrates how inextricably narrative as a "cultural, juridical, and testimonial form is powerfully implicated in the creation and sustenance of European modernity."

As a legacy of Western thought the narrative structure of beginnings middles and ends, claims Kabir, turns a linear sequence into a causal one. The logic of the linear, forward-moving narrative, she argues, may seem to be illustrative of how narratives are shaped by time when on the contrary, the experience of temporality is shaped by narrative. In such a situation how would one react to narratives that do not bind the spectator to sequential readings? Kabir asks: What happens when, as in Indian popular cinema, the linear unfolding of story is regularly interrupted by a song? Kabir makes an argument for a dialectic where two impulses play off against each other, the forward-moving narrative impulse and the lyric impulse which "lingers over moments and demands that we linger with it". She contends that the study of non-narrative moments in films and literary texts as well as non-narrative cultural production like lyric poetry, photography, painting, sculpture, public monuments should become integral to Partition Studies. Here, one could suggest that the term 'narrative' may be used to refer to a diversity of narrative form and structures which could also include the lyric mode. In other words, one need not understand the term narrative as one that is only linear and forward-moving.

In this review, I have chosen to pay more attention to the methodological approach than the details of individual chapters. This is because I feel that notwithstanding the wealth of interesting material the individual chapters present – some of which may appear to some readers like me to be too diverse, uneven and eclectic – the book is made exceptional through its conceptual framing. One of the difficult challenges facing scholars who have taken the affective turn is to figure how language and 'narrative' in scholarship might adapt to the affective impulse. To my mind, the book would have had greater sparkle had it accommodated in the mode of its writing what the author describes as the non-narrative, lyric impulse. But such a stylistic shift takes time and may require authors to spend more time sculpting their texts than our professional lives will allow. Ananya Jahanara Kabir's work has always sustained this reviewer's interest and therefore I look forward to future work that will do justice to the author's own conceptual promise. But till such time, this book has much to offer.

Endnotes:

Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS epidemic and the Politics of Remembering by Marita Sturken, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.

"The Days of the Hyena: A Foreword" by Debjani Sengupta, in *Map Making: Partition Stories from Two Bengals*, Srishti Publishers and Distributors, Calcutta, 2003.

The Juridical Unconscious: The Trials and Traumas of the Twentieth Century by Shoshana Felman, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts & London, 2002.

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War of illusions

1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh

By Srinath Raghavan

Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2013, 358 pp., Rs 795

ISBN 81-7824-380-6

The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide

By Gary J Bass

Random House India, Noida, 2013, 499 pp., Rs 599

ISBN 978-81-8400-370-3

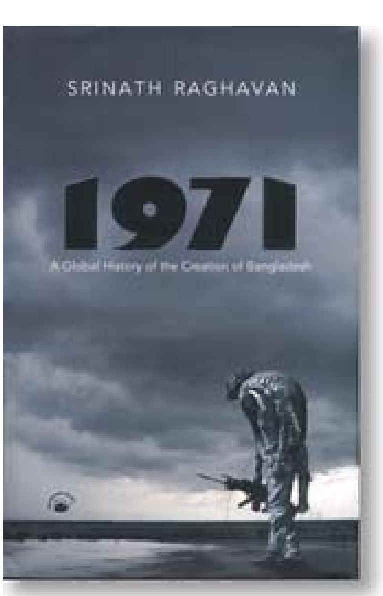
DEB MUKHARJI

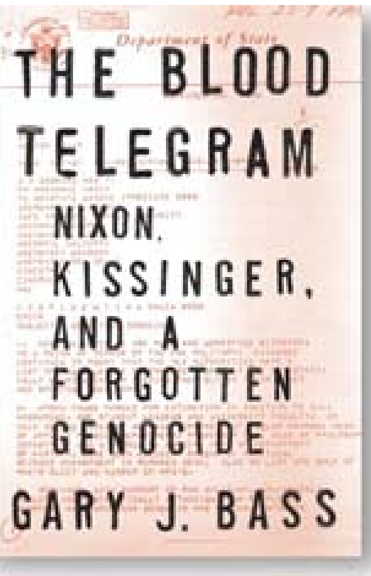
On the night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistan army commenced its undeclared and savage war against its own citizens in East Pakistan. Over the next nine months, uncounted hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, would be killed and uncounted women violated. Where entire villages are eliminated, it is difficult to arrive at neat statistics of the number of victims, but the genocide was one of the bloodiest of the 20th century. Ten million refugees took shelter in India. Bengali members of the East Pakistan Rifles and the police, peasants, university students and professionals formed the Mukti Bahini to fight the Pakistan army and gain independence for Bangladesh. Trained and armed in India, over the months the Mukti Bahini inflicted losses on the occupation forces and severed communications, eliminated collaborators, their daring raids infusing fear and uncertainty in the army of occupation and hope among a people besieged and tormented in their own land. After war broke out between India and Pakistan on December 4, the demoralised Pakistan army in East Pakistan surrendered on December 16, 1971, to the combined forces of India and Bangladesh.

A comprehensive account of what happened in 1971 was not convenient for many. Many books have appeared in Bangladesh, from participants in the War of Liberation, or those who survived the tortures, to tell future generations of what happened in those nine months. But in the consciousness of the world at large, this is a forgotten chapter. Some considered it forgettable. Pakistan remains largely in a state of denial, anguished only at the memory of its humiliation. Indians recall 1971 as the great victory of its arms over Pakistan. In the United States facts have been air-brushed to exonerate two key figures at the time, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, for their complicity in genocide. In Bangladesh itself, scars of 1971 remained raw as the political kaleidoscope provided immunity to many who had committed heinous crimes in 1971.

In recent times there appeared a concerted move to downplay, if not distort, the depth and extent of the genocide in 1971, Sarmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (Hachette, 2011) being a prime example. It is fortuitous that at this moment, even as Bangladesh attempts a process of closure and healing with the International Crimes Tribunal, that two remarkable books on 1971 by Srinath Raghavan and Gary Bass should have appeared. They are similar in the depth of scholarship and the terrain covered, even though their approaches differ. While not omitting the details, Raghavan takes a wide-angle view of political and diplomatic developments of the time. Gary Bass is more focused on establishing the complicity of Nixon and Kissinger in the genocide in 1971, anchoring his work on the remarkable telegram of dissent sent by the US Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood, and his men.

Archer Kent Blood was the US Consul General in Dhaka when the military crackdown commenced on the night of March 25. Within a day he reported the systematic elimination of Awami Leaguers, intellectuals and Hindus by the Pak army and its collaborators. His cables continued to stream into Washington, eliciting no response. As they saw US supplied planes and tanks being used against the populace, Blood and 20 of his colleagues sent a 'dissent' telegram charging the government with moral bankruptcy in its support to the military government,





It is fortuitous, that even as Bangladesh attempts a process of closure and healing with the International Crimes Tribunal, that two remarkable books on 1971 by Srinath Raghavan and Gary Bass should have appeared. They are similar in the depth of scholarship and the terrain covered, even though their approaches differ. Raghavan takes a wide-angle view of political and diplomatic developments of the time. Gary Bass is more focused on establishing the complicity of Nixon and Kissinger in the genocide in 1971, anchoring his work on the remarkable telegram of dissent sent by the US Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood, and his men

disregarding the atrocities and assault on democratic values. Blood was withdrawn and US policy of support to Yahya Khan continued with increasing vigour till the very end.

Raghavan details that while the 'tilt' towards Pakistan vis-à-vis India was to come at a much later date when the die had been cast, what was more significant was the US refusal to advise Yahya Khan when this could have made a difference. As early as February, the National Security Council had advised that though army action was unlikely, if it happened, "then the US had an interest both in avoiding violence and in checking its escalation". This is supported by Bass who demonstrates that, despite the consistent Kissinger line that the US should not intervene in an internal affair of Pakistan, the "White House was actively and knowingly supporting a murderous regime at many of the most crucial moments. There was no question of whether the US should intervene. It was already intervening on behalf of a military regime decimating its own people".

Raghavan and Bass have different interpretations of Indian intentions. Raghavan describes as "received wisdom" the "tenacious of all myths" about Indira Gandhi's desire to go early to war, based on the Army Chief Maneckshaw's much publicised account of a cabinet meeting. The general's memory was clearly embellished. As Raghavan points out, there was an "impressive increase in Pakistan's armed might since her confrontation with India in 1965". Besides, hostile international reactions had to be considered and the possibility of Chinese intervention in the summer months. Bass subjects himself to the "received wisdom" and posits that India intended to go to war from the beginning and hence made the fullest preparations. He does not consider that any government in that situation would need to make necessary preparations for any eventuality, and that preparations do not necessarily imply intent.

If Nixon and Kissinger stand brutally exposed by Raghavan and Bass, their nervousness and prevarication revealed, the patience and steely resolve of Indira Gandhi is a study in contrast. Gandhi charted a course through perilous waters with little support from the international community and defied a super power with aplomb. Days after her frosty November visit to Washington, Nixon was to wail to Kissinger they had been "suckered". Indira Gandhi had won on more than one front

There are two aspects to 1971 which may have merited greater attention in Raghavan's admirable account. One, that there may not have been unanimity in India about any advantage resulting from the emergence of an independent Bangladesh. Not everyone believed, as Raghavan assumes, that a Bangladesh would undercut the two-nation theory. After all, the very first clause of the contentious Six Points of the Awami League had called for a federation based on the Lahore Resolution, the so-called Pakistan resolution, which had called for one or more Muslim majority states. The other issue is with regard to the West Pakistani attitude to separation. The increasing tempo of resentment at economic disparity, starkly reflected in the Six Point programme, made it clear that exploitation of East Pakistan was no longer feasible. The draft Five Year Plan of 1969 had envisaged a substantial net resource transfer from west to the east, to the dismay of Punjab. The results of the 1970 elections underlined the demographic advantage of the east and, hence, the shift of power in any democratic system. In mid-March 1971 the editor of Bhutto's (PPP) mouthpiece had plaintively told me that India should take over these pestilential Bengalis and rid Pakistan of them. An East Pakistan with a separate identity was, therefore, to the advantage of both commercial interests as well as political aspirations in the West. However, instead of seeking accommodation through a federation, Bhutto and Yahya decided that a whiff of grapeshot would take care of the Bengalis and the old order would continue.

Raghavan posits that the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was not inevitable, but the result of multiple internal and external factors. This is a truism, for, obviously, if the Pakistan ruling elite had acceded to the legitimate demands of the East, there would have been no separation. Or, indeed, if the international community, notably the US, restrained Pakistan in the early stages. At least, the separation would not have occurred in 1971. If India had not extended support and had absorbed the refugees, the separation would have been delayed. Where Raghavan seeks, perhaps, to find facts to justify his thesis is about the global explosion of students' unrest influencing developments in Pakistan. This was not the age of Twitter and Facebook, and the developments in Pakistan, particularly in the East, had entirely indigenous motivation, roots and history.

Known, but with India cautiously avoiding the issue in 1971, was the focus of the genocide on the Hindus of East Pakistan. This is brought out starkly by the authors, by Bass in particular. Eventually, some four fifths of the ten million refugees would be Hindu. Bass details the concerns of Blood, and the assessments of US agencies, that Pakistan was trying to eliminate all Hindus in East Pakistan as they could not be trusted, and a Hindu-less East Pakistan may be more amenable. One must wonder if this fact may not have contributed to some extent to the Western indifference on the issue, assuming that the Hindus could and would be eventually assimilated in India and the bonds of Islam would reunite the two wings. Raghavan refers to a resolution which Canada considered, but did not table at the UN, suggesting that the world community should "assist India to integrate those refugees as productive members of the community". This provides an interesting, and possibly significant, window into Western thinking.. It may be noted in parenthesis that except for a Hindu member (Dhirendranath Datta, then 85, tortured and killed by the Pak army in 1971) standing up for the Bengali language in the Pakistan National Assembly in 1948, the leading figures and martyrs in East Pakistan's struggle in the '50s and the '60s were almost all Muslims, as were the freedom fighters.

Raghavan provides details of the dilemmas faced by India as the carnage

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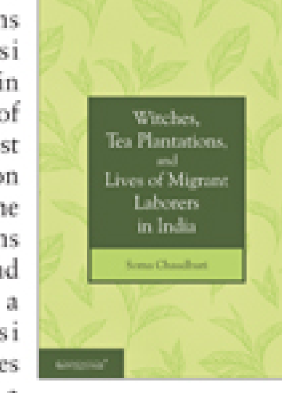

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ISHTIHAAR

started. Support to the Bangladesh freedom fighters was halting in the beginning, picking up only in July, when initial concerns about the resistance being taken over by leftist elements were overcome. There were internal wrinkles within the Bangladesh government in exile which needed to be addressed. The US effort to wean away a part of the Bangladesh leadership had to be thwarted. India's efforts to persuade governments to leash the Pak military met with little success, but the conscience of the people in the West was stirred by the atrocities and the plight of refugees. Public opinion – and the State Department – checked to some extent the support that Nixon and Kissinger wished to provide Pakistan.

An Indo-Soviet treaty had been in the coming for two years. When finally concluded on August 9, it enhanced Indian confidence in facing up to the nexus between Pakistan, the US and China. Contrary to the fulminations in the White House, the Soviet Union consistently urged restraint on India.

The major justification for the blinkered US attitude to the 1971 genocide was the need to preserve Yahya Khan as the conduit preferred by Beijing. As Chinese documents are not available, it is not possible to judge if they may not have accepted another, if the US had so suggested. What emerges from the accounts of Bass and Srinivasan is the almost craven attitude of Washington, continuing its support to Pakistan, even when it ceased to be an intermediary, on the plea that Beijing would look out for American reliability. A low point in American diplomacy and statecraft was surely reached when, meeting in secrecy after the war had started, Kissinger pleaded with the Chinese ambassador for a show of military strength to frighten India. On their part, while willing to be abusive of the Indians in their discussions with the US, and indicating general support to Yahya Khan, the Chinese did not respond positively to American pleas for any military engagement. Zhou had advised Yahya in the early days of the crackdown that "the question of East Pakistan should be settled according to the wishes of the people of East Pakistan".

Much has been made by Kissinger about India's plan to split up Pakistan, and success in preventing this a prime success of US policies. After his visit to Delhi in July he had reported that the Indians expected Pakistan to disintegrate after the separation of East Pakistan. By December he had decided that the Indian objective was assault and destruction of Pakistan by military means. "You see those people welcoming the Indian troops when they come in…why then Henry, are we going through all this agony?" asks Nixon. Kissinger replies, "We're going through this agony to prevent the West Pakistan army from being destroyed. Secondly, to maintain our Chinese arm. Thirdly to prevent a complete collapse of the world's psychological balance", which would follow if the Soviets and their client state destroy a country. This exposition must rank high as an exercise in sophistry. As Raghavan comments: "This was Nixon and Kissinger's war of illusions. In retrospect they come across not as tough statesmen tilting towards their ally, but as a picaresque pair tilting at windmills."

The two books complement each other. Bass's passion is moderated by the clinical scholarship of Raghavan. Bass wants to restore history mauled by Kissinger as Raghavan uses facts without judgement. They both establish that it may well have been possible for Nixon and Kissinger to rein in the murderous Pakistan army. They both place before the reader the deep racial prejudices that motivated the US leadership. Bass becomes exposed to criticism from Kissinger acolytes because of his focus on exposing Kissinger's fraudulent reputation and the flaws in his self justification. Raghavan compels the reader to arrive at the same conclusions, but his detached recounting and analysis of facts leave no such room.

Robert Blackwill, former US ambassador to India and presently Henry A Kissinger Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, has defended Kissinger's actions in 1971 and questioned Gary Bass for placing "human rights concerns at the pinnacle of US foreign policy, at least in this crisis". Blackwill is dismissive of the abusive gutter language consistently used by Nixon and Kissinger in their references to India, recalling Eisenhower's comments on the Soviet Union. But this sophistry cannot airbrush the intense distaste, if not hatred, for India, Indians and, above all, Indira Gandhi, that permeates all conversations between the two. The racism is palpable and the Indians were clearly children of lesser gods. Blackwill crowns his arguments with the self serving myth of US having "successfully deterred a major Indian campaign against West Pakistan".

The United States did not initiate the conflict in Pakistan. But a series of actions and abstention from action, from failing to caution Yahya before the crackdown when its own agencies reported what the army intended, to its eventual pleading with China to threaten the Indians as the noose tightened, made it complicit in the genocide that intervened. It could be argued from a counter perspective, that Nixon and Kissinger were acting in the best interests of the United States as they saw it, that what they did – or, more aptly, did not – is what any powerful nation might, secure in the cynicism of its supremacy. The criticism of the two may therefore arise not from objective analysis, but what some Americans, and other nations, expect from a nation with its self-proclaimed adherence to democratic values, liberty etc. Thus seen, the Statue of Liberty may hide feet of clay, and that Nixon and Kissinger merely acted with the same disregard for international norms or human values as US establishments have on many stages from Vietnam to Chile to Iraq.

If Nixon and Kissinger stand brutally exposed by Raghavan and Bass, their nervousness and prevarication revealed, the patience and steely resolve of Indira Gandhi is a study in contrast. Gandhi charted a course through perilous waters with little support from the international community and defied a super-power with aplomb. Days after her frosty November visit to Washington, Nixon was to wail to Kissinger they had been "suckered". And as Pakistan unraveled and Kissinger went into depression, Nixon wondered if "Henry required psychiatric care". Indira Gandhi had won on more than one front. ■

Controversial commander

Courage and Conviction: An Autobiography

By General VK Singh with Kunal Verma

Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2013, 263 pp., Rs 595 (HB)

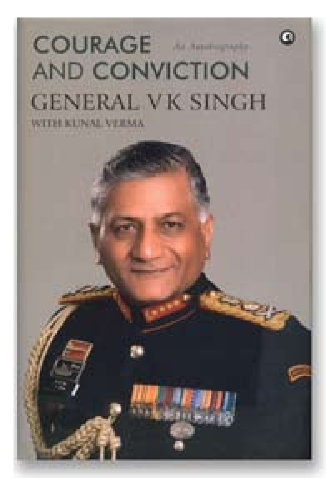
ISBN 978-93-82277-57-6

VIPUL DUTTA

General VK Singh's autobiography has come out at a time when the controversies surrounding him have outlived his tenure as Army Chief by a fair margin. It sets the record straight on the passage of his career and on the many controversies which affected it – of which the "age issue" which grabbed headlines in the media overshadowed the many other insidious ones – if he is to be believed. A review of any autobiographical/biographical work is a dual exercise — an assessment of a life and of the mind which lived it. The 17th century English poet Abraham Cowley's cautious quote on the practice of writing literary 'selfies' perched atop Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (published in 1936) has managed to hold true to this day — it must have been a "hard and nice subject" for General VK Singh (and Kunal Verma) to write of himself, but while "it grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement"; it grates "the reader's ears to hear anything of praise".

Gen VK Singh's career of almost half a century saw him in action across diverse theatres. Although not a part of the 1962 India-China war in which his regiment (better known as Kali Chindi which he commanded later) saw the worst of the fighting, Singh went on to take part in the 1971 war against Pakistan as well as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) that went to Sri Lanka in the latter part of the 1980s. However, no combat experience could have prepared the General for what he was faced with in his years as the COAS (Chief of the Army Staff). History might probably treat him kindly, but for the present, one would have to make do with this autobiography.

Singh, born in Rajasthan to a predominantly Army family (most being commissioned into the Rajput Regiment), followed a typical "Army kid" education at schools across the country before being put into the Birla School at Pilani from where he got into the National Defence Academy (NDA) wishing to join the Air Force but eventually getting commissioned into the Army. Anyone close to Singh during his years at the academy and familiar with his subsequent career would not have been overwhelmingly surprised to see his tenure as Army Chief mired in controversy. At one level, his description of events at NDA and IMA and the troubles he got himself into seem to be rather innocuous, at another level they are curiously prescient of the trajectory his actions took when he scaled up the ladder.



General VK Singh's autobiography is a rare example of Indian military writing, that also happens to be a page turner in terms of readability. It has gripping, crisp and moving accounts of the Sri Lankan insurgency and the liberation of Bangladesh. That Gen VK Singh's "courage and conviction" came to be derided as "conceit and careerism" is a fall out of his need to push with the "age controversy", which formed but a small though significant part of his tenure, and brought too many skeletons out of the Army's closet

So just what is it so wrong that Gen VK Singh did as COAS, that has ensured his reputation to precede him everywhere and which evokes such strong reactions? The answer is provided soon enough. Singh starts his litany of complaints with the infamous "age issue" where he lashes out at this particular office in the Army Headquarters (termed by Singh as the "Sanctum Sanctorum of the Indian Army", p 137) which goes by the name of the MS (Military Secretary's) Branch. While I worked my way to get a more solid grip on heavy military jargon used in the book and the way it christens its offices in the Headquarters, it is the MS Branch that is easy enough to remember precisely because it is the most reviled in Singh's account. Non-specialist readers of this book, of whom there will be quite a few, will shut this book with a less starry-eyed account in their minds of the way the Army functions at the higher echelons. This is actually one of the basic points why Gen Singh's book has acquired some acclaim from certain quarters, which is generally reserved for books penned by politicians or statesmen. Of course criticism too – both of his tenure and his book – has also been well laid out in numerous blogs and the print media, sometimes credible, while deeply personal and churlish at other times.

At the centre of the age controversy was the refusal of the government to consider his date of birth (as recorded in his matriculation certificate i.e. 1951 but erroneously recorded as 1950 in subsequent documents starting from the UPSC) as the correct one. Even though Singh was apparently willing to give "a commitment" that he would demit office by May 2012 (his official date of retirement going by 1950 as his year of birth), the government refused to budge and the office of the Attorney General, then and still occupied by GE Vahanvati, going by Singh's account set down two neat questions which are crying out for a closer examination. The first question asked if the officer could change his date of birth; the second one (even craftier than the first) asked if it would disturb the "line of succession?" (p 312). The age issue acquires grave implications in the face of the allegations that Singh's age was deliberately kept incorrect in order to 'fix' the next successor. Be that as it may, Singh's winning bet would have been to stick his neck out when the MS had stood firm on his date of birth as 1950 just before he was to take over as Corps Commander and when warning bells had first sounded. Also the question of succession to the post of the Army Chief has been part of a larger debate that has generated immense heat but little light. With no set criteria in place for promotions, the Army has become a flashpoint for top generals to fight out for 'earning their stars' and 'fixing others' while they unwittingly inspire those below them to take a cue and chart a similar path for themselves. All talk of appointing a collegium of experts to appoint Army Commanders and other top appointees has come to nothing and largely staid clerical issues (and hence susceptible to manipulation) are left to determine the successors to these vital posts.

The age controversy was not merely Gen VK Singh's doing. To be fair to the general, the error first crept up in his application to NDA (which had then delayed his joining the academy by a week) but then was rectified later. However, it reared its head again at the Indian Military Academy, where he was "made to enter the same date which he had put in his application form to the UPSC" (p 31) but then got corrected later again for a second time only to be arbitrarily and erroneously fixed just before he was due to take over as a corps commander at Ambala. Maybe his struggle which led him to court was not as rosy and selfless as he claims in the book. Singh could have readily quit and made himself the 'bigger man' at that point but didn't. However, his decision to use litigation instead of quitting and earning the temporary admiration of an earlier generation of soldiers who'd rather step on hot coals than face the indignity of going to court, but who then wouldn't think twice when accepting ambassadorial and gubernatorial posts showed Singh as a citizen who firmly exercised his right to recourse to legal remedy. A major reason why Singh shocked a lot of comfy drawing rooms in Delhi was because India is yet to get used to having an 'Erin Brokovich moment' of its own. A great amount of moral opprobrium on Singh was attributed to the fact that he dared to step outside his office and seek legal help (that he acted itself was problematic, regardless of the issue), a lot of scorn came from former officers themselves some of whom equate India's apolitical armed services with a muted concern for legitimate rights. Pursuing the case in the court and its denouement would have perhaps cleared the air had it not been withdrawn by Singh prematurely.

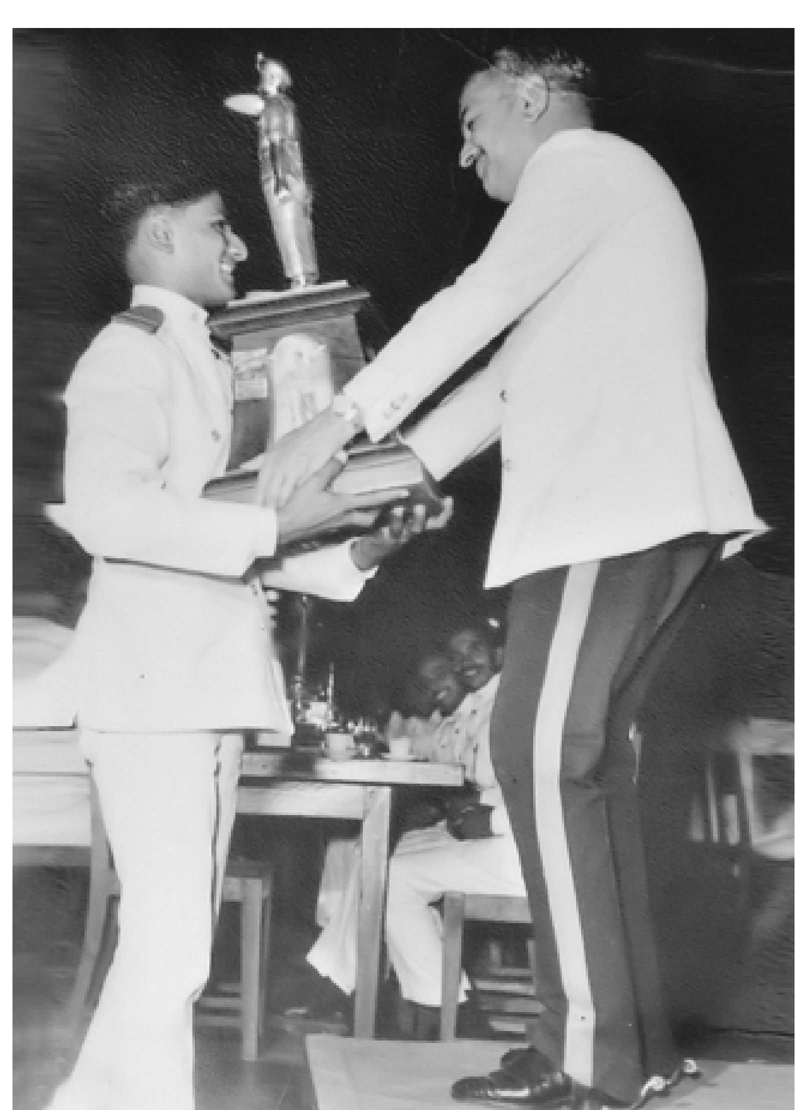
Singh's tenure coincided with some of the most widely publicised incidents which portrayed the Army top brass in less than favourable light. Until then, people had been quite alright with reading about one erring colonel here and there, or at the most finding two or three corrupt generals' names in their daily newspapers. However, when reports of the Sukna Land Scam (p 280) surfaced that signalled embezzlement and covert land transfer, it became a bit too prickly and led to the sacking of the then Military Secretary (MS) and the indictment of many other big fish. As if that wasn't enough, the Adarsh scam, which will now be reviewed by the Maharashtra government, threw up names of two former Army Chiefs among other high profile names as beneficiaries of flats which were originally intended for the Kargil War widows. To top it all, came scandalous charges of being offered a bribe by a "middle-man" in the TATRA case (military vehicles). Leaving aside Singh's own inflated sense of being right (which appeared punctured when he recently made remarks about "paying Kashmiri politicians"), there has never been a barrage of corruption cases being unearthed by any of Singh's predecessors, some of which began during their tenures. Why Singh is reviled in some army circles today is because he has managed to show what some corrupt individuals have done to the system as a whole and in doing that there has been a waning in the public admiration of this institution which was thought to be relatively cleaner than other departments.

Gen VK Singh's memoirs will be closely read, both by his admirers and his detractors. The book is acerbic on many of Singh's superiors during his early service and is also perhaps symptomatic of the stresses and tribulations which several officers have complained about over the last few years relating to their tenure, service conditions and incentives. Careerism and the way officers have fought for top jobs is one of the worst kept secrets of the Indian Army in recent years. The side columns in our newspapers do not do justice to the reams of litigation that is filed frequently in tribunals today by personnel relating to manipulations in promotions and appointments. Singh's repeated brushes with the MS Branch during the course of his career for instance is also the story of several other officers who have suffered for not being in their good books and will readily vouch for the Branch's aptly titled motto, if it ever gets one: "You show us the man and we will show you the rule", p 239). Singh's account of his many transfers (at first hyperbolic and Khemka-esque) may not sound convincing and the castigation of the MS Branch may be a bit exaggerated, but the story of unwarranted transfers in return for "new curtains and fresh upholstery" (p 192) has sealed many a fate.

On many other issues Singh and Verma write with alacrity and furnish their side of the story with aplomb. His account of the transformation study (in cold storage now) suggested an overhaul of the services wing of the army into a logistic corps that could have made it more responsive to current operational needs. Singh is refreshingly honest about the miles of red tape that strangulates decision making in the Army headquarters and the stranglehold of the MOD (Ministry of Defence) over the former (p 288) through its own internal bureaucracy. There is also mention of the "cadre reviews" and the impact they have had on the officers and appointments (p 321). Singh rues the fact that the upgradation of several appointments as recommended by the Second Phase of the AV Singh Committee Report skewed the balance between the civil and military levels of government which led to the "downgrading of the rank" while ostensibly upgrading the appointment.

The book is a rare example of Indian military writing (if one can call it that) that also happens to be a page turner in terms of readability and the quality of its publication. Given General VK Singh's turbulent tenure, it will add to its popularity (or notoriety?). This book deserves to be read to get a perspective on crucial milestones in India's history of which Singh was a part. It has gripping, crisp and moving accounts of the Sri Lankan insurgency and the liberation of Bangladesh. That Singh's "courage and conviction" came to be derided as "conceit and careerism" is a fall out of his need to push with the "age controversy", which formed but a small though significant part of his tenure, and got too many skeletons out of the Army's closet.

Singh reserves his fiercest criticism for the political class, whom he unfairly blames as being paranoid about a military take-over of government since Nehru's days. Naming top officers like Thimmayya, Cariappa, Thorat and more recently SK Sinha and perhaps sub-consciously putting himself on par with these personalities, Singh seems to portray himself as one of the many individuals who could have gone on to change the face of the organisation had politicians not been busy "looking over their shoulders" and "raising the spectre of a military take-over…which always works" (p 335). Gen VK Singh had the zeal to reform the system, but he is missing the point that civil-military relations mirror the workings of a democratic country like India where each passing day is a work-in-progress towards its meaningful evolution. Past conflicts between generals and politicians have only led to the strengthening of a dialogue between the two sectors and not a renunciation of it. ■



Cadet VK Singh receiving a trophy from the Commandant at the Indian Military Academy, 1970

War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men.

— Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929)

A call to arms

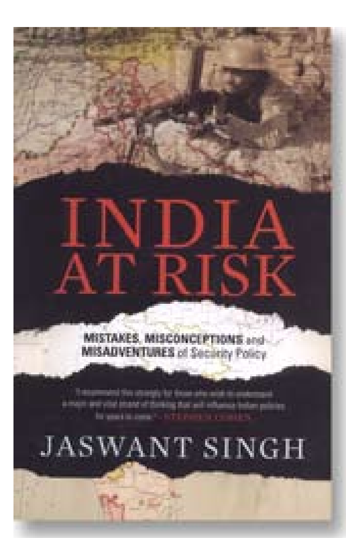
India at Risk: Mistakes, Misconceptions and Misadventures of Security Policy

By Jaswant Singh

Raintree/Rupa, New Delhi, 2013, 292 pp., Rs 595 (HB)

ISBN 978-81-291-2907-9

ANIRUDH DESHPANDE



In the Epilogue, Jaswant Singh holds forth on the "double disarming of India". First, the British disarmed India after the Revolt of 1857 and then, Mahatma Gandhi brought about the "other great disarming". Gandhi's "attitude harmonized with the fundamentals of certain faiths, thus adding yet another element to the decline in India's martial ethos, military expertise and logic. To this, post-1947, was added a militarily illiterate and untrusting civilian control of the armed forces". Thus the Westminster style of governance, in true BJP style, is taken to task by Singh, who does not pause to examine the achievements and failures of modern nations guided by military cultures

It has become common these days for publishers to produce attractively packaged mediocre books on fashionable, pseudo-academic themes, endorsed by well-known foreign 'experts'. *India at Risk* by Jaswant Singh, soldier-diplomat-Right-wing-politician, is no exception to this trend. It is endorsed by none other than Stephen Cohen, a venerable darling of the security establishments of India and Pakistan *both*. Cohen's certificate: "I recommend this strongly for those who wish to understand a major and vital strand of thinking that will influence Indian politics for years to come" stands out on the cover of the book. The prose of the book makes it clear that either Cohen has not sampled the offering or he is being kind to an old friend or he endorses the RSS-BJP view of Indian military culture and strategic matters. I am certain that this kind of American certificate would be obtained by a similar book written by a Pakistani general or politician. Another endorsement, by the famous Air Marshal Arjan Singh, calls the book a "treasure trove of views and opinions on all matters that concern our national security needs". Sadly, the enlightenment promised by the jacket does not materialise in Singh's anti-Congress narrative, which all too often slips out of the thin academic sheath hiding it.

The book has a Preface, a short Introduction, eight chapters which reproduce well-known facts, an Epilogue and eight appendices familiar to historians and journalists in general. The book studiously omits chapters on the Hyderabad Police Action (1948), the Goa Liberation (1961) and the annexation of Sikkim (1975). These events are examples of the strategic successes of the Congress-dominated Indian State – an anathema to the Saffron critics of Nehru and his daughter. The book also presents a selection of chronologically arranged familiar photographs which date from the partition of India till the Kargil War of 1999.

Jaswant Singh tries to endow his narrative with a modicum of academic legitimacy in the Preface by quoting from Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* in favour of pursuing objectivity, truth and criticism in the writing of history. Singh wants his narrative to "regain balance" in a milieu of subjectivity characterising "our accounts of the security challenges that India has faced since Independence" and to remove the "debilities" of Indian strategic studies (p ix). He admits that it is a "sad and instructive reflection, that in more than sixty-six years of independent existence, there have been almost the same number of internal and external conflicts or grave incidents of violent nature" (p x). Certainly this amounts to a failure of Indian statecraft. The causes of this failure are complex and, therefore, cannot only be blamed on Nehru who seems to have become the favourite whipping boy of the Indian security experts since the 1980s. The assertion that the history of Indian statecraft is a history of failure comes from a dedicated soldier of *Hindutva* and a long-term member of the largest Right-wing Hindu nationalist party of India – the BJP. The *Muqaddimah* asserts the role of "critical investigation" in the narration of history but this book, predictably enough, amounts to a weather beaten criticism of the Congress. It does not criticise the Sangh Parivar or the NDA for having contributed even an iota to the events, which have made its author sad and reflective. Jaswant Singh accepts and regrets the wrong done to the Sikhs by the Congress regime in the 1980s. Almost immediately after the Operation Blue Star (1984) the author visited Amritsar in an "act of penance" and to realise that the "nation cannot be permitted to fragment merely because we are trapped within the narrow immobility of our thoughts, and of our preoccupation with the empty arithmetic of electoral advantage" (p 151). This sensitivity seems to have deserted the author in 1992-93 and 2002.

Chapters One, Two and Three comprise arguments which continue to resound in the living rooms of the Indian middle classes every day. While Gandhi is blamed for having created a strategically deleterious pacifism in India, Nehru is taken to task for almost everything that went wrong in Kashmir in 1947-49 and on the Himalayan border in 1962. All this hardly makes for a "major and vital strand of thinking" promised by Cohen on the cover. Chapter Six of the book is titled "India's Destructive Decades" (pp 140-163). On p 141 a table of important events is presented. This table begins with the Pakistani surrender in Dhaka in December, 1971 and ends with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in May, 1991. The *rath yatras* of the BJP undertaken by LK Advani during the *Ramjanmabhoomi* agitation and their communal consequences are missing from this list of events. The congregation of thousands of Hindu *kar sewaks* in Ayodhya in 1992 under the protection of the BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Kalyan Singh is also missing from this selective list. The demolition of the Babri Masjid (December, 1992), the killing of Muslims in large numbers following this traumatic event and the role played by the Shiv Sena in arousing communal sentiments in Maharashtra find no mention. When it comes to an investigation of his own party's policies and active role in creating the internal security risks faced by India since the murder of Gandhi in 1948 the author conveniently abandons the lessons of his own erudition.

The Kargil War (May-June, 1999) and the well documented, infamous, hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane (IC-814) from Kathmandu to Kandahar (December, 1999) is described in detail by Jaswant Singh. The description of these events is highly personalised because Singh was involved in them as a cabinet minister in the NDA government. However, two things stand out in this narration. First, we are not told how some of the well-equipped units of the Pakistani Army came to occupy the heights of the Kargil-Batalik region of Kashmir. Singh skirts this issue to save the NDA government from taking blame for the Indian intelligence failure in the weeks preceding the start of the Kargil operations. This from an author who does not tire of berating the Congress government's intelligence failures in 1961-62. Second, the narration of the sordid hijack drama focuses on Singh's role in it *after* the plane was allowed to take off from Amritsar having been on the tarmac there for quite some time. Singh does not explain why the fourth largest army in the world could not incapacitate this plane in Amritsar. The fact that Singh flew to Kandahar in the company of dreaded terrorists to negotiate the release of Indian hostages speaks volumes of the BJP's charge that the Congress has converted India into a 'soft' state. Further, it was the BJP-led NDA government which welcomed General Parvez Musharraf "the man who had, during Kargil, been the chief of Pakistan's army as also the chief perpetrator of the incursion" (p 219) to India in July 2001. This gave the dictator the legitimacy he desperately needed in the face of international disapproval at the time. Readers must note that these events happened when the NDA was in power and their occurrence seriously qualifies the allegations of strategic weaknesses levelled by Singh against the Congress leadership since Independence.

In the Epilogue, *inter alia*, Singh holds forth on the "double disarming of India". First, the British disarmed India after the Revolt of 1857 and then, to make matters worse, Mahatma Gandhi brought about the "other great disarming" (p 236). Gandhi's "attitude *harmonized with the fundamentals of certain faiths*, thus adding yet another element to the decline in India's martial ethos, military expertise and logic. To this, post-1947, was added a militarily illiterate and untrusting civilian control of the armed forces" (p 236, emphasis mine). Thus the Westminster style of governance, in true BJP style, is taken to task by Singh who does not pause to examine the achievements and failures of modern nations guided by military cultures. Finally, the cat is out of the bag, when he asserts that no government can "possibly push Semitic religions into becoming advocates of pluralism" (p 253). In Singh's *Hindutva* world-view the inflexible Semitic and an accommodative 'Sanatan' ultimately appear as binaries *sans* internal differentiation. We are back to the Clash of the Civilisations thesis. In any case, since Indians have no sense of geography and civilisation, they must begin their journey into the future by arming themselves! Only then will they regain a national martial ethos. On this account Jaswant Singh seems needlessly anxious because India probably has the largest quantity of illegal personal firearms in the world today. Republican votaries of the Second Amendment and their cousins in India might like this book. ■

Embedded scholars

Indian Mujahideen: Computational Analysis and Public Policy

By V.S. Subramanian, Aaron Mannes, Animesh Roul and R.K. Raghavan

Springer International, Switzerland, 2013, 173 pp., Price not mentioned

ISBN 978-3-319-02817-0

MANISHA SETHI

All the rule syntax is unable to save *Indian Mujahideen* from its own weaknesses: lack of primary research about the organisation the authors wish to speak of so authoritatively, ignorance compunded by rank prejudice and the boilerplate language of national security. The window dressing of algorithm serves to reinforce rather than hide its blindspots

Indian Mujahideen. Computation analysis. Public policy. These are the three elements of this book, as the title clearly – if rather uncreatively – suggests. First, let's get Indian Mujahideen out of the way. Announcing its existence with an email communiqué mailed to media houses before a series of blasts rocked courthouses in Uttar Pradesh in 2007, the Indian Mujahideen has been invoked with great frequency by investigating agencies, their dossiers bulging with Interrogation Reports of suspected IM operatives, lengthy accounts of secret meetings and *modus operandi*. Over the years, these secret dossiers, chargesheets and reports have congealed a narrative about the birth and growth of IM in public consciousness. This book does no more than tritely reproduce that narrative. "The 'source' data for our study", say the four authors, are primarily "an excellent book by Gupta (2011) and work reported by Fair (2010)", besides "a vast range of other open source information, particularly from the Indian press". Shishir Gupta's sources in turn are mainly custodial confessions. Christine Fair has relied on Indian press reports and terrorism analysts, but concedes, "It is nearly impossible to validate the authenticity of the journalistic accounts of the organisations and their actions." Further, she says, "The most prominent Indian journalist on this subject is Praveen Swami, who is exceedingly well-connected to the Indian intelligence community…"

In brief then, the IM chronicle is largely an enterprise crafted by the intelligence and investigative agencies.

Though to be sure, there is not an absolute absence of critical reportage and writing, more cynical of the claims of the agencies — but those don't find their way into this book. The farthest the book travels in its critique of the agencies is to refer to the dispute over the perpetrators of the Mumbai suburban train bombings of 2006. That one of its authors is an ex-director of CBI whose "years of experience within an investigative authority" was drawn upon by the research team only reinforces its insider-ness. It takes the security establishment's views as unimpeachable truth, raising no questions, offering no insights.

But it does have some gems. In an apparent bid to analyse the Indian Mujahideen – which lacks a head office or a centralised structure, by the agencies' own claims – the book provides us with a rapid overview of their areas of operation. One could speak of power bases of LTTE, or Taliban, or Lashkar, with its head office in Muridke in Pakistan Punjab, but what precisely does one mean by averring:

> In addition to regions like Azamgarh and Saharanpur, IM also has significant centers of action in Deobandi madrassahs in Bharuch (in Gujarat) and Ujjain (in Madhya Pradesh).
>
> In the north, one may also count the states of Bihar and West Bengal as areas of considerable (current or previous) IM activity.
>
> In the south, IM has strong power bases in Maharashtra (within the urban centers of Mumbai, Pune, Surat, and Nasik), in Andhra Pradesh (where they have carried out frequent attacks in the city of Hyderabad), in Karnataka (the Bhatkal brothers who co-founded IM with others grew up in Mangalore, Karnataka) as well as in Bengaluru where numerous IM attacks have taken place. IM also has power bases in both the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

What the authors mean is this: "Attacks usually, but not always, occur in places where a group has at least some support within the underlying population."

And just in case, we did not comprehend who the "underlying population" was, it further clarifies:

> Though support for fundamentalism is common in some Muslim neighborhoods, support for Islamic jihad is limited and not rampant in urban centers. Islamic fundamentalism is strongest in some pockets of southern India (such as Kerala and Karnataka) and northeastern India (particularly areas bordering Bangladesh and Myanmar), in the villages of Uttar Pradesh, and in Jammu and Kashmir. Rajasthan and Orissa are hibernation grounds for Islamic militants and they often escape to these places after perpetrating attacks." (p 39)

Sweeping prejudiced proclamations masquerade as observations.

"IM also has a robust media wing responsible for issuing the emailed communiqués under Mansoor Peerbhoy, which is headquartered in Pune, Maharashtra." (p 38) Headquartered? One hopes that these authors – claiming to be experts on terrorism and counter terrorism – understand what it means to say headquarters of an organisation. Where precisely is this geographical and physical site of the media headquarters? In Peerbhoy's laptop? Writing in 2013, they allude to Peerbhoy and Pune in the present tense, forgetting that Peerbhoy has been in Sabarmati Jail since 2008. But such are the pitfalls of copy pasting from 'official' sources with no independent research.

Now, the computation analysis part. The authors claim to have collected data on more than 770 variables on a monthly basis between January 2002 to December 2010, organising them along the two axes of environment and action. Is 770 their lucky number? Because that was the exact number of variables the authors gathered data on for their previous book on Lashkar. That IM did not exist in 2002 is a minor problem solved by the authors' recourse to coding Asif Raza Commando Force and Students Islamic Movement of India as part of IM. This relatively brief lineage, however, ought to be welcomed as the original source on IM, Swami, has elsewhere insisted on tracing it to 15th-century Malabar.

Employing what they call the Temporal Probabilistic Rules (T-P rules) based on data mining algorithms, the authors predict possible future behaviour pattern of the IM. "Simplified versions of TP-rules" have been used earlier by the authors to "successfully" predict the behaviour of Hezbollah, Hamas and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Chapter 3 lays out the impressive mathematical models which yielded 37,000 TP rules, most of which the authors admit were either "uninteresting or repetitive". The more interesting TP rules are delineated in Chapter 4 -7. For all the pages expended on these interesting rules, they can be summarised as follows. First, there are three kinds of 'bad acts' of IM:

- Attacks on public sites;
- Bombings;
- Simultaneous/timed attacks.

How precisely can the three be distinguished considering that attacks on public sites attributed to IM have been bombings, as have simultaneous/timed attacks been bombings. Furthermore, simultaneous/timed attacks have targetted public sites. But this isn't a book where one should expect clarity of categories (even one titled "bad acts").

The TP rules predict that an attack by IM can be expected five months after thawing of Indo-Pak relations ('bad men' in Pakistan army will want to play spoiler); four months after IM holds a conference; three months before the interactions between IM members and NSAGs would get pronounced and a public declaration is made about its intent and future actions; and finally, a month or so after members of IM are arrested. Chapter after chapter repeats this same hypothesis, first for attacks on public sites, then for bombings, followed by simultaneously timed attacks. None of this of course can be verified with any authority "without access to the internal deliberations and planning processes within IM". Why then go through all the trouble of creating elaborate mathematical models and fancy syntax if good old intelligence groundwork is all that will eventually matter. Even within the paradigm of unquestioned credulity that the authors are operating, these algorithmic conclusions – predictions for the intelligence and security agencies to act upon – are sparse.

But deeming computation to be its USP, the book goes on to use integer linear programming to automatically generate policy options to counter the IM. The policy recommendations are nothing short of dangerous — leaving one wondering what was fed to the computers in the first place. Among its key recommendations is setting up of "special counter terror courts". What, pray, are counter terrorism courts? The task of the courts is to try the accused, weigh the evidence, and arrive at a conclusion — not to become instruments of counter terrorism policy. Moreover, these are envisaged as secret courts "out of the glare of India's energetic press". The authors would also like to see the "elimination" of IM operatives "if authorised by courts". In other words, they seek the legalisation of encounter killings.

The book further suggests closer counter terrorism ties between India, US and Israel (little wonder that it comes glowingly endorsed by Uzi Arad, former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel and Head, Israel National Security Council).

There is one recommendation though which had me smiling: "security organisations should put out deliberate misinformation". Do the authors realise the probability (since TP rules are the favoured term here) of their book being the product of such a strategy?

All the rule syntax is unable to save the book from its own weaknesses: lack of primary research about the organisation the authors wish to speak of so authoritatively, ignorance compunded by rank prejudice and the boilerplate language of national security. The window dressing of algorithm serves to reinforce rather than hide its blindspots. Reading the book I was reminded of the anthropologist Robert Albro's quip, "Im not saying that computational social science is a voodoo science. Im saying that voodoo science is all too frequently being generated from computational social science." Albro's caution describes this book rather aptly. ■

NEW ARRIVALS

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The great divergence

Catch Up: Developing Countries and the World Economy

By Deepak Nayyar

Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2013, 221 pp., Rs 595 (HB)

ISBN 978-0-19-965298-3

PREM SHANKAR JHA

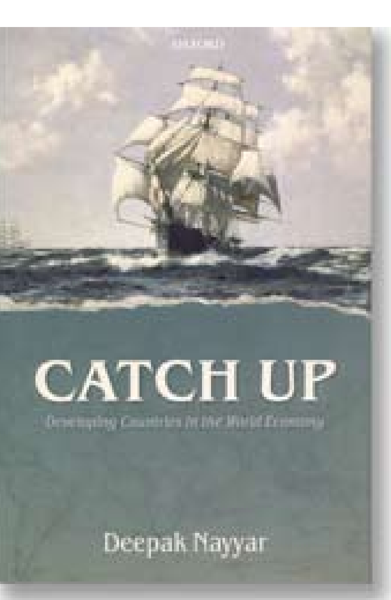
The subject matter of Deepak Nayyar's new book, *Catch Up*, is almost as old as the science of Economics itself. It is the perennial hunt for answers to one question: How did Europe, a relatively small, and climatically not very hospitable, part of the world, and its offshoots – the West, in short – get to rule the world economy for more than two centuries? And why did that dominance end so abruptly in just 30 years after the decade of the 1970s? Economic historians, and Marxist economists, have sought answers to the first question for the better part of a century, but today as global capitalism – globalisation for short – enters the middle phase of its development and the sun begins to set upon the nation-state, it is the second that has gained salience. And this has begun a renewed quest for answers amongst a growing legion of liberal economists as well.

Nayyar's book does not so much try to answer these questions as to survey, succinctly, the vast recent literature on the subject. As he himself emphasised during a recent book launch in New Delhi, his purpose in writing it was to synthesise current knowledge into a readable account of the way in which the world has changed, and is changing again, during the past thousand years, and give a fair presentation of diverging views where these exist. He has done all this with extraordinary skill and a lightness of touch that makes the book easy to read.

Catch Up is, however, more than just a survey of the current literature on economic development. In every section, Nayyar has carefully assessed the validity of divergent claims and views with the help of data culled from various sources, and arrived at unambiguous conclusions on their validity. The reader is thus given little chance to become, and then remain, confused.

Perhaps the central question in the book is "how did Asia – China and India in particular – which dominated world production and trade for four millennia, sink so suddenly into poverty and obscurity within barely a century and a half, between 1820 and 1950?" The historians' answer is that it was caused by a combination of four developments: the Industrial Revolution in Britain followed by western Europe; a vast expansion of international trade, facilitated by the development of steamboats and the telegraph; colonial expansion – notably in Asia – that created markets for cheap, mass produced manufactures through the barrel of the gun while depriving the local governments of the right to protect their artisanal industries by limiting or heavily taxing imports.

The key driver in this explanation is the forcible de-industrialisation of Asia (and parts of Africa and Latin America) through the use of force to create space for the cheap manufactures of Europe. However, economists have argued with some justification, that colonialism only made the rise of the West and the decline of the East more swift. The root cause of Europe's rise to dominance was the enormous burst of productivity released by the Industrial Revolution. Europe's cheaper manufactures would have found their way across the world through trade anyway. In the absence of colonial control this would have taken place solely through trade, so Europe's rise and Asia's fall would have been slower, but not less sure. Thus the real question is why did the Industrial Revolution take place in Europe first and not in Asia. Most of the recent writing, especially by liberal economists, is devoted to showing that this was due to the innate advantages, if not superiority that Europe enjoyed over Asia, Africa and South America. They trace these to three factors: culture, institutions



> **Perhaps the central question in the book is "how did Asia – China and India in particular – which dominated world production and trade for four millennia, sink so suddenly into poverty and obscurity within barely a century and a half, between 1820 and 1950?" Nothing could be further from the truth, or more self serving, than the myth the liberal economists are now trying to create that the Great Divergence was not a product of war, conquest and a forcible de-industrialisation of Asia and parts of Africa and South America; that Europe in a sense deserved its greatness and Asia its decline**

and geography. The first two have more than a racist tinge in them. Present-day Western economists start by citing Marx, Weber and Hegel, among others to trace the causes of failure of the Industrial Revolution to take root in Asia. These include everything from the Asiatic mode of production which, Marx believed, involved rule by despots that constrained individual initiative and did not allow representative institutions to develop, to the absence of Weber's "protestant ethic" and therefore of instrumental rationality and a "capacity to reason", to the absence of the "very concept of a state" (India – Hegel). These early, in retrospect ill-informed, conclusions have persisted to the present day. In 1999 David Landes argued that the Industrial Revolution came to Europe because it had an edge over Asia in terms of knowledge , science, culture, politics and institutions.

The geographical argument boils down in the end to climate and proximity to markets. People living in cool temperate climates with very cold winters enjoyed a distinct advantage over the rest because the cold winters routinely killed off viruses and bacteria while the melting snows and warm summers provided ideal conditions for agriculture. Geography, Europe's configuration around three small, sheltered seas – the Mediterranean, Baltic and the North Sea – also facilitated cheap and safe maritime transport and hence an early integration of markets and development of exchange. Nayyar dismisses the first two explanations, and accepts the third, but points out that misconceptions apart, none of them is capable by itself of providing an adequate explanation for "The Great Divergence".

If there is a lacuna in his critique it is the relative absence of a discussion on the role of technological change. This could be because of his desire to critique recent liberal explanations and stay clear of discussing the voluminous writing on this issue by Marxist scholars such as Braudel, Polanyi, Hobsbawm, Sweezy, Baran, Magdoff, Gunder Frank, Wallerstein and the latest but not by any means the least of them, Giovanni Arrighi. However without a thorough discussion of the role that technology has played in shaping the capitalist world it is not easy to bring both the Great Divergence from 1820 to 1980, and the partial convergence of GDP and income after 1980 onto a single plate.

If one brings technology into our analytical toolbox, it immediately becomes apparent that start of The Great Divergence coincided with the rise of the nation-state, and Re-Convergence with the onset of globalisation and the weakening of the nation-state. Both these tectonic shifts in the organisation of human society marked staging points in the remorseless expansion of what Braudel called the "container of capitalism" — the minimum size of market needed to accommodate an efficient production system at the existing level of technological development. The expansion of capitalism's container was dictated by the progress of technology.

The Great Divergence began not with the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which actually took place in three stages over more than a century, but with the harnessing of steam power, i.e the energy from fossil fuels, within this more prolonged and diffused technology shift. Steam power immensely expanded the scope for mass production and economical transportation, thereby causing an explosive increase in capitalism's container. By the same token the Re-convergence began when capitalism's container became too large to fit within the political boundaries of even the largest and richest nation-state — the US. Capitalism then burst the bonds of the nation-state, rendering all the political structures that had sustained it – high tariff walls, capital movement controls and forbidding national borders – obsolete. At that point it was the migration of technology and manufacturing, not foreign direct investment and labour, to the low income countries that began the de-industrialisation of the West and the resurgence of Asia.

Once the role of technology is acknowledged, the only question that remains to be answered is why was so much of its development concentrated in northern Europe, and specifically in Britain? The answer, paradoxically, is the sheer poverty of its people. Northern Europe was cold and inhospitable, and its inhabitants were hungry for the affluence of their neighbours to the south. Till as late as the 12th century the only way they knew of acquiring some of this wealth was through plunder. That accounted for the incessant raids of the Goths, Visigoths and Huns upon the Roman Empire, and the Viking raids and voyages of the end of the first millennium.

War is the extreme form of competition and competition is the seed-bed of innovation. When Europe replaced war with its civilised counterpart, international trade, the competitive spirit survived and metamorphosed into an inquisitive spirit that gave birth to remarkable marketing innovations like the Venetian *galere da mercato* – vast trading ships financed by the world's first shareholding companies – and a rapid acquisition of existing technologies, notably the compass and the printing press from China and the Lateen sail, which allowed sailing ships to sail into the wind, from the Levantine Arabs.

This hunger to learn and absorb is the ultimate reason for the birth of the Industrial Revolution in one of the less hospitable parts of the world. Geography also played its part, but not solely in the sense that Jared Diamond emphasises. For at that time the sole fossil fuel available was coal and most of the coal deposits of the world were located in the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere.

Given these roots it was inevitable that the Industrial Revolution would create a predatory world order that would have to be maintained by force. Nothing could be further from the truth, or more self serving, than the myth the liberal economists are now trying to create that the Great Divergence was not a product of war, conquest and a forcible de-industrialisation of Asia and parts of Africa and South America; that Europe in a sense deserved its greatness and Asia its decline. The truth is that both China and India had all the pre-requisites of an industrial revolution: large integrated smoothly functioning national markets; a highly developed financial-cum-trading system and a close cooperation between the rulers and this new mercantile bourgeoisie. While China was relatively closed to foreign influence and ideas, the principalities of the later Mughal Empire were far more penetrated by foreign trade. Their rulers welcomed foreigners with open arms and employed them in every capacity from physicians at court to trainers and modernisers of their armies. Had there been no colonial annihilation of that diverse India, it would have been only a matter of time before their powerful trading-cum-financial bourgeoisies, which were already financing 'putting out' production on a large-scale to meet the demands of their own elites and of foreign traders, would have begun to absorb industrial technologies as well.

But the British take-over, and its financial, monetary, land ownership and other administrative 'reforms' destroyed the indigenous banking system and prevented the imposition of trade protection to foster local industry. Japan, which was not colonised did precisely this.

The role that the denial of protection played cannot be underestimated. As Nayyar has pointed out in his data, though not in his text, Latin America was able to reach substantially high levels of income and industrialisation before its growth stalled in the 1930s, because it shook off the colonial yoke in the 19th century. And Japan was able to give drastic protection to its nascent industry and banking systems in the late 19th century because it was never a colony. We were. Therefore although the modernisation of the Indian economy began ten years before Japan's, by 1980 Japan was an industrial super power, and we were nowhere. ■

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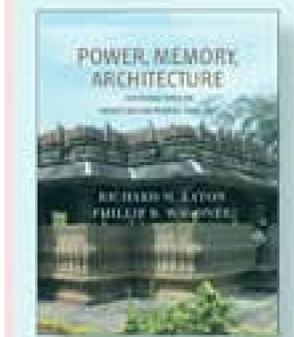

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Contested Sites on India's Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600
Richard M. Eaton & **Phillip B. Wagoner**
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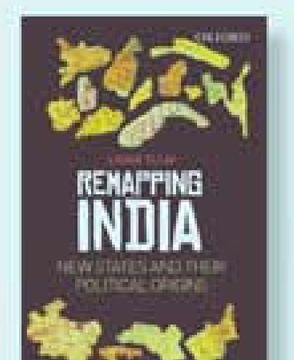

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Louise Tillin
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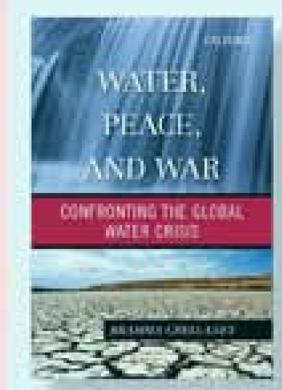

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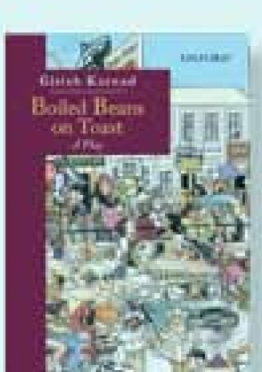

Boiled Beans on Toast
A Play
Girish Karnad
A lonely housewife regains her lost singing voice in a hospice; for a small-town job-seeker the concrete jungle rolling over the shrinking greenery holds promise of untold prospects; for the conservative old lady from the country the race course opens up visions of power; a village woman with an ambiguous past struggles to find a foothold amidst the urban chaos. Girish Karnad's play is vibrant with moments of lyricism, cruelty, and laughter, as it deals with a host of characters, jostling together, clashing, getting entangled, or preying upon each other, in the city of 'Bangalore'
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My Travels in the 1857 Rebellion
Mazha Pravas
Vishnubhat Godse
Translated from Marathi by
Priya Adarkar and **Shanta Gokhale**
Straddling both historiography and literature, this Marathi classic published in 1907, interprets the Rebellion as a righteous one and pins its failure to a moral point: in killing women and children the rebels violated the Hindu code of ethics and thus ensured their defeat. This first Indian account of the Uprising is sprinkled with anecdotes and descriptions of courtly relationships. The narrative captures the fear and hysteria of palace intrigues, and above all, the valour of Rani Lakshmibai.
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Democracy functions, governace does not

Reimagining India: Unlocking the Potential of Asia's Next Superpower

Edited for McKinsey & Company by Clay Chandler and Adil Zainulbhai
Simon & Schuster, New Delhi, 2013, 400 pp., Rs 699 (HB)
ISBN 978-1-4767-6333-0

MOHAN GURUSWAMY

This book is a compendium of wishes and dreams of a diverse cast of business leaders, academics, writers and journalists "reimagining India", put together by McKinsey and Company, an American global management consulting firm that focuses on solving issues of concern to senior management. The firm now serves as an adviser to businesses, governments and institutions around the world. McKinsey is considered to be the most prestigious management consulting firm in the world.

James McKinsey, a professor at University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, founded it in 1926. McKinsey has since then grown to become the biggest management consultancy in the world. It employs 9,000 consultants in 97 locations in 55 countries. Its former managing director Rajat Gupta, now serving time in a US federal penitentiary for fraud and insider trading, explains McKinsey's structure as follows: "It is very much, in many dimensions, like an academic organization. We have senior partners who are very much like tenured faculty: they are leaders in their own right. We have about 80 to 100 performance cells — a geographic office or industry practice or functional practice. They are very much autonomous and they are not organized in any hierarchy beyond that. We don't have any regional structures or sectoral structures. So all these performance units, in a theoretical sense, report to me, which means they don't report to anybody, because nobody can have 80 or 100 people reporting to them."

In September 2013, Simon & Schuster published a book by financial journalist Duff McDonald entitled *The Firm: The Story of McKinsey and its Secret Influence on American Business*. The book examines the influence of McKinsey over nearly a century: "The history of McKinsey, given its role as consigliere to the most powerful people in business, can be seen as a history of modern business itself." It has indeed been a consigliere to many corporate buccaneers, raiders and looters. Enron probably is an association that McKinsey would like to forget. *The Guardian* (March, 2002) wrote: "Enron is the house that McKinsey rebuilt. The brightest minds at the world's most prestigious consulting firm helped turn the lumbering old-economy gas distribution dinosaur into a new-economy success story envied by every corporation in America." Led by Jeffrey Skilling, a Harvard Business School graduate, who honed his skills at McKinsey for 11 years, Enron transformed "from being a company that simply piped stuff around the US to a giant market place in which companies could 'cherry pick' commodities such as oil and gas contracts, seeking out new suppliers and cheaper prices over the web. Enron made its money from trading on their behalf and offering a range of additional high-margin services, which brought in far greater returns than its old, vertically integrated model of producing and shipping gas". It was a big hoax and billions were stolen and thousands of individual lifetime savings went down the pipelines and pipedreams that McKinsey engineered. This digression from the contents of the book is so that we are aware of who is behind this latest attempt at "reimagining India".

With that *caveat lector Reimagining India* is like a 'drinks by the dram' whisky sampler set where you get a neatly labelled and compartmentalised case of various whiskies in 3 ml bottles. To most, having the sampler set itself becomes more important than sampling the wares. A small dram of 3 ml is too small and is soon gone. If you are the drinking kind, you just move on to the next one and before you can begin to savour it, it is gone. This book has that quality.

Mind you, there are some very good drams here. Propagating "A Uniquely Indian Growth Model" (pp 17-21), Anand Mahindra wisely writes: "For India's economy to expand as rapidly and yet more sustainably than China's, we need to make our differences into virtues rather than vulnerabilities." Without saying it explicitly, Mahindra suggests that rather than pretending India is a single investment destination or even a coherent, unified economic entity we should see the Indian States as varied from each other as the nations of Europe.

Indeed they are. India has about 1.2 billion people, and the Union of India consists of 31 States and Union Territories, with some more being currently midwifed. The biggest of these is Uttar Pradesh with a population of 199.6 million or 16.49% of India's. It is as big as Brazil. The smallest political unit is Lakshadweep which has just 64,000 (0.01%). Clearly, a monochromatic central plan administered by a central dispensation will not work any more. We need to locate decision-making in the State capitals. Mahindra advocates a creative competition between the States to attract investment for industrialisation. He advocates a similar competition between cities. When the units compete, the nation as a whole benefits.

In "Parsing the Grammar of Anarchy" (pp 68-73), historian Patrick French pinpoints the crisis in India's democracy with the observation: "The problem in Indian politics is not that the leaders are unelected; it is once they are elected, they are unaccountable until the next cycle of voting. Democracy functions, but governance does not." The French economist, JJ Boillot in his new book *Chindiafrique,* a look into the future of trajectories of China, India and Africa and the shift of the world's economic growth into these three regions recently very pithily remarked: "India has a democracy, China has a government." But Yasheng Huang (professor of political economy at the MIT Sloan School of Management) in "Overtaking the Dragon" (pp 74-79) concludes that nevertheless "the world is trending the Indian way, not the Chinese. Indians should continue to seek solutions to their problems within a democratic framework and ignore both fellow citizens and well-meaning outsiders seduced by overly simplistic notions about the ability of authoritarian governments to conjure rapid economic growth."

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***Reimagining India* is like a 'drinks by the dram' whisky sampler set where you get a neatly labelled and compartmentalised case of various whiskies in 3 ml bottles. To most, having the sampler set itself becomes more important than sampling the wares. A small dram of 3 ml is too small and is soon gone. If you are the drinking kind, you just move on to the next one and before you can begin to savour it, it is gone. This book has that quality**

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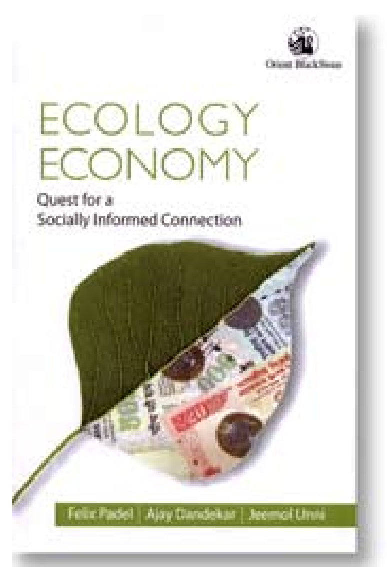
Where there are drams of pure delight there are drams of rotgut too, many of which come under the chapter 'Culture and Soft Power'. In "Fixing the Fourth Estate" (pp 312-316) McKinsey turns to Suhel Seth. The *Outlook* magazine Seth so approvingly quotes in his contribution had once famously listed him as one of India's top lobbyists. Seth bemoans: "Over the past two decades, India's press has become entangled in a corrupt nexus of politics and industry. Political pandering and commercial pressures have transformed our once-valiant fourth estate from a watchdog for the public interest to lapdog for the rich and powerful." Indeed it has. But whom do we owe this to?

In another poor essay, "Cricket Superpower" (pp 277-283) cricket commentator Harsha Bhogle chortles: "There is an element of pride also in the way India dictates to the rest of the world in cricketing matters. The Indian fan is today the most important entity in world cricket." These two lines perhaps tell us more about ourselves: the rather infantile longings to be a "superpower" that have come to grip the imagination of India's elite. Should we become a superpower just to dictate to the world? We seem to forget that the USSR was a superpower despite half its population living in primitive poverty and several millions in its many gulags. We even seem to forget that the USA became a superpower long before it allowed Black people to ride in the front of a bus, or enter a restaurant, or even to vote.

Though the title suggests that the notion of becoming a superpower is somehow desirable, the book is in most parts about how to become a better nation and a better people. Aziz Premji in "India Rebooted" (pp 80-85) dwells on the need to reboot the Indian system to lift millions of young people left behind with no or more often now, inadequate education, and millions whose productivity is blighted by poor health and whose sufferings are magnified by inadequate health-care facilities. Premji squarely puts this responsibility at the proper door — the government's. Quite clearly India needs to spend much more on health and education. This is obvious, but we see little of this enlightenment in business leaders. Premji's fellow Bangalore billionaire, Nandan Nilekani, is less altruistic when he touts "A Technology Solution for India's Identity Crisis" (pp 199-203). With the delinking of Nilekani's Aadhaar from the direct transfer of subsidies on LPG cooking gas cylinders, the biggest national boondoggle in recent times has effectively been laid to rest. It has cost India over Rs 6,000 crores and millions of headaches. But Nilekani is still plugging it as a panacea. As a wag in Bihar said: "*khana nahi diya, makan nahi diya, naukri nahi diya, par number de diya!*"

The book's structure dooms it to be like froth on a cup of cappuccino. Stir it and it's gone. Serious topics cannot be discussed in short op-ed style pieces. Would I buy it? No. Would I keep it? Yes. For, as I mentioned earlier, *Reimagining India* is like a collection of drams — it's a good collection to have on the bookshelf, but not to imbibe. ■



Our reality versus your reality

Ecology Economy: Quest for a Socially Informed Connection

By Felix Padel, Ajay Dandekar, Jeemol Unni
Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 315 pp., Rs 795 (HB)
ISBN 978-81-250-5179-4

KAVERI GILL

Social scientists working on and in India cannot escape introspecting on what is the role of the intellectual in actually changing the world they examine so closely. Is it to tread bounded paths of disciplinary rigour in method, and productive achievement in output, in peer-reviewed publication spaces, no matter what the provocation to engage more immediately, and to intervene only indirectly, through teaching or the evolution of ideas? Is it to weigh in on pressing public debates, even entire and irreversible policy trajectories, but to do so using research and evidence as a basis for argumentation, as opposed to personal opinion? Or is it to jump feet first into activism, which demands commitment and courage quite different to that required of an academic, and perhaps, some intellectual compromise to maintain the solidarity of ideological and social movements over time? Can one combine these roles, without losing footing in each sphere, given that time is finite and craft particular? In a complex and unequal society such as ours, overlaid are considerationsof positionality and reflexivity, of authenticity and representation, of integrity and humility, too, and in discussions with numerous friends over the past year, this is a question incessantly dwelled on.

It is therefore a pleasure to review a book that manages to traverse the tricky terrain of diverse roles and perspectives above, by authors – an anthropologist, a historian and an economist – who don't take themselves too seriously, and yet are the opposite of dilettantes. *Ecology Economy* deftly overturns conventional wisdom on its head, by asking the right first-principle questions. Based on a taught course at the Institute of Rural Management, Anand, and Mumbai University, it sets out to "reclaim the meaning of basic concepts such as development, growth, democracy and freedom through the experience of people living close to nature" (p xvi), Adivasis in particular. And yet, it continually doubles-back to juxtapose their worldview, with prevalent mainstream hegemonies of thought and practice, and their different epistemological foundations: that of economics over other disciplines; the elites over the subaltern; the 'educated' and the written, over the everyman and the oral, the First World over the World of the Third (as Anjan Chakrabarti *et al* term it), and so on. To do so, without romanticism or a patronising tone, and without fear of being labelled utopian dreamers, is a difficult feat.

The book begins with the simple but revolutionary question of whether, contrary to routine developmental rhetoric in capitalist societies, growth, industrialisation and their many imperatives "reduce or massively increase" poverty (p 2)? The interdependent, though not always acknowledged as being so, triad of economy, ecology and society, along with their disciplinary counterparts, sub-streams and movements, are then imaginatively discussed (pp 6-20), to demonstrate how a clash between economy and ecology might be inevitable. But if the "two cultures" could be mediated by society; if environmental sustainability is privileged above all else as the "basis of life on earth"; and if a holistic multidisciplinary approach giving non-economic factors full weight in decision-making is adopted, then perhaps there is yet a possibility that the capitalist economy will not crush a fragile ecology and the marginalised majority in its wake, as it is doing in India and globally at present.

The next chapter articulates why, viewed differently, tribal societies might be the sophisticated embodiment of artfully balancing nature and need, for *Homo Economicus* – despite being a dominant construct – is not necessarily a universal totem pole. On the internal logic of capitalism, however, the pursuit of relentless growth has disproportionately devastated these peoples, whose survival like earthworms (to use their own evocative language), is intrinsically bound to land, forests and ecosystems, and yet, these resources are what "investment-induced displacement" demands. Globalisation has only intensified such logic. Repeatedly, the book uses the chilling phrase, "reality gap", to reiterate the yawning chasm between what development, projects supposedly advancing development, and "the company" selling such ideas promises Adivasis and what actually traverses on the ground. The East India Company appears to have been replaced by many internal colonisers of hitherto relatively peaceful and pristine places and ecologies.

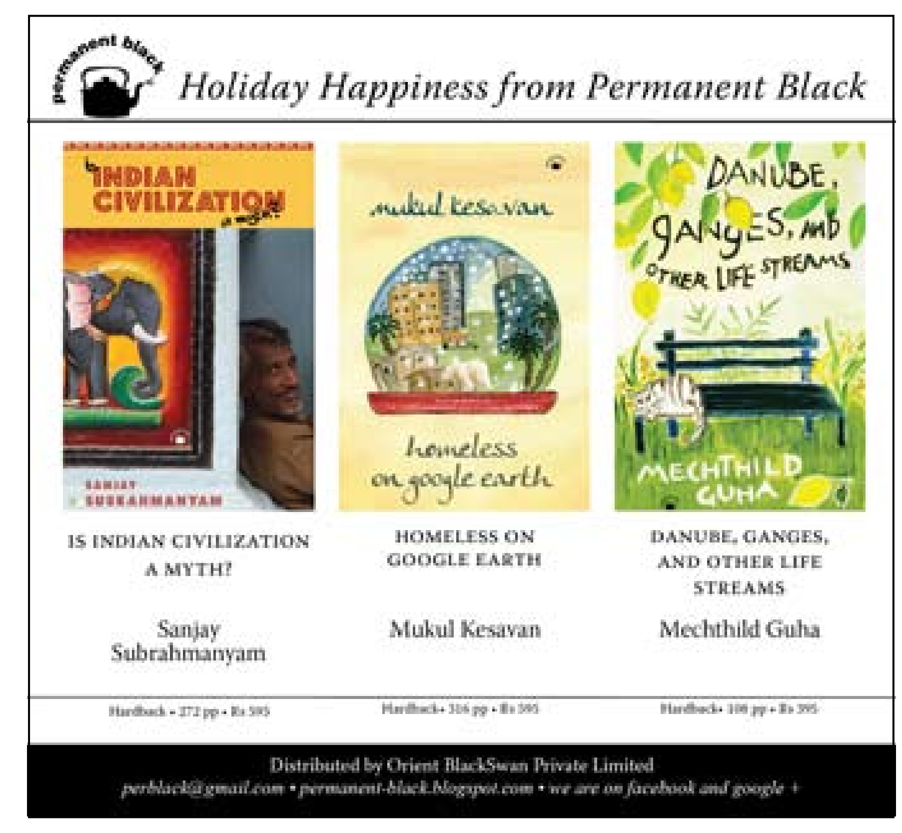
The following four chapters comprehensively explore the status of resources most necessary to the growth and accumulation project: water, mining, power, and land, as well as labour. Framed in nationalist developmental discourse terms, the reality is a fierce struggle between those literally living on and in a self-sufficient common property resource world, and those seeking to commoditise, privatise and close off access to these commons for significant personal gains, at best shared amongst distant outsiders. This is as true for abnormal profits (due to monopolies etc. and state collusion), as for the outcome of any "development", for example, being able to have electricity in subaltern tribal areas close to power generation projects. These chapters, with their broad sweep of the political economy of key resources and their markets within and without the country, are an invaluable resource for anyone wanting to know about the controversial and deeply contested reality on the ground.

The book ends with two highly original chapters on the dubious debt-financing underwriting corporate power in India, as well as contrarian legislation that negates with one hand what it promises with another — yet more reality mirages. Non-fictional writing is often as good as its bibliography, a teaser of authors' orientation and comprehensiveness in numerous dimensions, and so judged, too, this collaborative work, which could have been edited to synthesise what are individual author chapters and lectures, is a must read.

I end with a quote from Slavoj Zizek's intrepid Introduction to *Mapping Ideology* (1994):

> Ecology, for example, is never 'ecology as such', it is always enchained in a specific series of equivalences: it can be conservative (advocating the return to balanced rural communities and traditional ways of life), etatist (only a strong state regulation can save us from impending catastrophe), socialist (the ultimate cause of ecological problems resides in the capitalist profit-oriented exploitation of natural resources), liberal-capitalist (one should include the damage to the environment in the price of the product, and thus leave the market to regulate ecological balance), feminist (the exploitation of nature follows from the male attitude of domination)….and so on. The point is, of course, that none of these enchainments is in itself 'true', inscribed in the very nature of the ecological problematic: which discourse will succeed in 'appropriating' ecology depends on the fight for discursive hegemony, whose outcome is not guaranteed by any underlying necessity or 'natural alliance'. (p 12)

As complementary to the two very different but synergistic recent publications, *Churning the Earth* by Aseem Srivastava and Ashish Kothari (Viking/Penguin, 2013) and *Development and Sustainability: India in a Global Perspective* (Sarmila Banerjee and Anjan Chakrabarti (eds.), Springer India, 2013), this book does a courageous job of challenging the liberal-capitalist hegemonic articulation of the ecological problematic, which dominates discourse today, with a quiet and much-needed socialist inscription, coming from an Adivasi viewpoint. For really, a reasonable pause for thought about where India is and wants to go in years to come is called for, if as a country we seriously still want to bridge the widening gap between our privileged reality and multiple other subordinated, suppressed, displaced, disturbing realities. ■



The politics of making peace

The Almond Tree

By Michelle Cohen Corasanti

Fingerprint/Prakash Books, New Delhi, 2013, 352 pp., Rs 295

ISBN 978-81-7234-487-0

GITHA HARIHARAN

Many years back, I decided I would only write about books I admired. My reviews would pay tribute to such books by analysing what they taught me about how life gets lived, or can be lived. Not far into my reading of Michelle Cohen Corasanti's first novel *The Almond Tree*, it was clear that the novel challenged this old resolution. Sometimes a mediocre novel needs to be discussed because it sparks debate about troubling questions.

"My purpose in writing *The Almond Tree*, says Michelle Cohen Corasanti, "was to shine a light on Palestinian suffering and help bring about peace".

Corasanti's story about suffering and peace: Ahmad, a Palestinian, gets a break, studies in an Israeli university, and proves to be smarter than everyone. Every time the Israelis ill treat the Palestinians, Ahmad consoles himself with calculations -- of problems in physics or mathematics. He becomes research assistant to a Zionist supervisor; Ahmad converts the Zionist heart. They become best friends and collaborators, all the way to America, and then Stockholm, to pick up their joint Nobel Prize. Ahmad, the exemplary Palestinian, says at one point in the novel: "The last thing I wanted to do was talk politics." As reward for being politically comatose, he gets to live the American dream.

Ahmad's brother, Abbas, is the "political" brother. He is as twisted as his body becomes after an accident when building settlement homes for the Israelis. He goes underground, down the path of resistance. He works for George Habash, the founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Even worse, he refuses Ahmad's offers of sponsoring his family for a better life, preferably in America. When his son turns suicide bomber, Abbas realises his mistake.

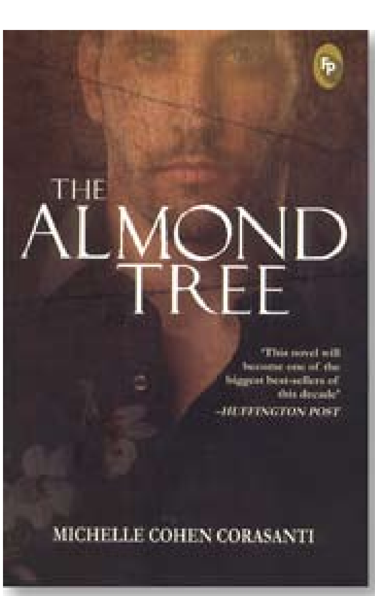
Somewhere in between, Ahmad marries the perfect Jewish American woman, not only beautiful and intelligent, but also a human rights activist. She dies in Palestine, exactly as real life American activist Rachel Corrie did, run over by an Israeli bulldozer. A heartbroken Ahmad is later coaxed into an arranged marriage with a Palestinian. He is miserable; but he grows to love her, especially since she cooks well, bears children, loses weight and generally learns to fit into his American life.

Why bother with this mishmash of cardboard and saccharine, the sort of concoction we know from so many Hollywood and Bollywood films? Mainly because this is a book that plays both the marketplace of sales and the marketplace of opinion-making.

The Almond Tree has arrived in bookshops and the social media in the way packaged books are wont to do in our market-driven times. The author has even hired a Palestinian actor to play Ahmad in an interactive website, and there is a video trailer online. Much has been made of some breathless predictions: that "this novel will be a bestseller"; that it "can do for Palestine and Israel what *The Kite Runner* did for Afghanistan". Corasanti herself has said that "part of [the book's] appeal is that it is a novel written in the voice of a Palestinian Muslim male by a Jewish American woman... Major publications also state that *The Almond Tree* is a *Kite Runner*-esque novel and can be a game changer." A "game changer", because Corasanti means to offer a "roadmap for peace" by educating people, Americans in particular, about Palestinian suffering. A campaign of sorts has been built around the novel, an "Almond Tree Project" that will reinforce this education, and make efforts to "reconcile" the Israelis and Palestinians, and promote "peace".

In 1948, the Palestinians went through what they call the Nakba, the catastrophe. They lost home when Israel was created. Palestinian villages were razed to the ground; Palestinians fled to refugee camps or were forced into exile. Those who remained in '48 Palestine, what became Israel, became "present-absent" aliens. After the 1967 war, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. Since 1948, the Palestinian experience has encompassed every possible form of loss, whether it is loss of land or control over their day-to-day lives. Even their past, their memories and their history, have been systematically eroded. For more than six decades now, Israel has done everything possible to make this all-pervasive loss a *functioning system* of apartheid policies put into practice. And this system has had the support of the pre-eminent military power in the world, the United States.

But the loss and damage that accompany colonialism, particularly the settler form of colonialism, is an incomplete story. History shows us that occupied subjects resist; and their resistance forms movements. The suffering of the colonised is a partial, even pointless narrative, if the inevitable fights for freedom, all kinds of fights under all kinds of leadership, are not in some way part of the story.



***The Almond Tree* begins with a long litany of sufferings; but throughout, resistance is absent, except as caricature. Just as Golda Meir famously said, "There are no Palestinians" to explain away the Zionist tenet of "a land without people for a people without a land", this novel seems to say that there is no struggle among the Palestinians, except for a few misguided, warped, violent individuals who stand in the way of "leaving the past behind" and moving on toward "peace". The novel simply does not face up to the fact that if it is about Palestine, it has to be about the last bastion of colonialism — a particularly virulent form in which the Nakba of 1948 continues to this day**

This is the historical and political territory *The Almond Tree* tries to travel. The novel has two broad plans: one is to recount the years of suffering by the Palestinians; and the second is to show "the way to peace in this troubled region" by forging links between the two sides in "conflict". This may seem a worthy motive; but as all readers and writers know, the motive is only as worthwhile as the text.

The novel begins with a long litany of sufferings; but throughout, resistance is absent, except as caricature. Just as Golda Meir famously said, "There are no Palestinians" to explain away the Zionist tenet of "a land without people for a people without a land", this novel seems to say that there is no struggle among the Palestinians, except for a few misguided, warped, violent individuals who stand in the way of "leaving the past behind" and moving on toward "peace". The novel simply does not face up to the fact that if it is about Palestine, it has to be about the last bastion of colonialism — a particularly virulent form in which the Nakba of 1948 continues to this day. If you make Palestine merely another "troubled" place where the two sides can negotiate as if they are on equal ground, it is possible to create a story where peace comes with collaboration. The past and present can be laid aside because the future means neither a Palestinian state nor an Israel in which all its citizens are equal. It means "moving ahead" and normalising the essentially abnormal relationship between coloniser and colonised. It also means feeding into the myth that democracy, and the very identity of the Israeli state, is "normal".

It's not surprising then that Corasanti has been accused of normalising Israel, and Israelising the Palestinian story. Palestinian writer Susan Abulhawa, author of *Mornings in Jenin*, wrote in *Al Jazeera* that to want to expose "injustice" through fiction is fine. But "when coupled with racist assumptions or lack of emotional comprehension of a people's culture, the result is often muting of already marginalised voices, theft of their narrative, stripping of their agency, and caricaturising of their humanity."

Corasanti's response to this review (http://mondoweiss.net/2013/12/corasanti-palestinian-suffering.html) is telling:

> Ask yourself, what is more powerful, one hundred books written by the *victims* of oppression describing occurrence after occurrence of loss, hardship and suffering or one book described as *Kite Runner*-esque and predicted to be one of the best sellers of the decade by an author perceived to be a member of the ruling, oppressor class that condemns the unjust, cruel oppression by the *ruling class* and extols the virtues and the legal and moral rights of the subjugated class?... Just look to the criminal justice system of any country for guidance in this matter. It's well established that the confession of the accused party is always more powerful, more persuasive than the complaints of a *victim*." (Emphases mine.)

As long as the Palestinian story is one about voiceless victims, the oppressor's narrative may indeed be more "powerful". Corasanti wants to show us how a "Palestinian and Israeli could overcome obstacles and work together to advance humanity". She does this by contrasting the benefits of collaboration and the futility of resistance.

Fiction, despite appearances, or the author's protestations, is deeply political. And this is inescapable when writing about the oppressed past and present of a people, and their hopes for the future. ■

Atonement

Helium

By Jaspreet Singh

Bloomsbury India, New Delhi, 2013, 290 pp., Rs 499

ISBN 978-93-82951-72-8

STUTI KHANNA

Jaspreet Singh's *Helium* is an important novel. At its centre is the horrific brutalisation and massacre of innocent Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination in November 1984 — one of the distressingly frequent shameful episodes of organised mob and state violence that have scarred our 'secular' nation in recent years. In that alone the novel does something well worth doing, something that has not been done enough, perhaps cannot: forcing us to confront the horror, the horror of the things we are capable of doing to one another. The 1984 pogrom against the Sikhs – all Sikhs – in retaliation to Indira Gandhi's assassination by her two Sikh bodyguards, has not been written about as much as it needs to: fiction and cinema have, for the most part, chosen not to dwell upon this ghastly episode, while the legal machinery continues to hedge the issue as well its perpetrators, some of whom are high-profile politicians and bureaucrats still in active service. As a creative literary construct, however, I found the novel wanting, and somewhat disappointing. The drifting, angst-ridden protagonist around whose journeys, inner and outer, the book is structured, lacks definition and ultimately fails to be compelling. The same weakness extends to the book as a whole: it is unable to draw together its own multiple evocations – history, memory, science, art, guilt, passion – and ends up floundering without being able to offer a clarity of line, voice, or vision.

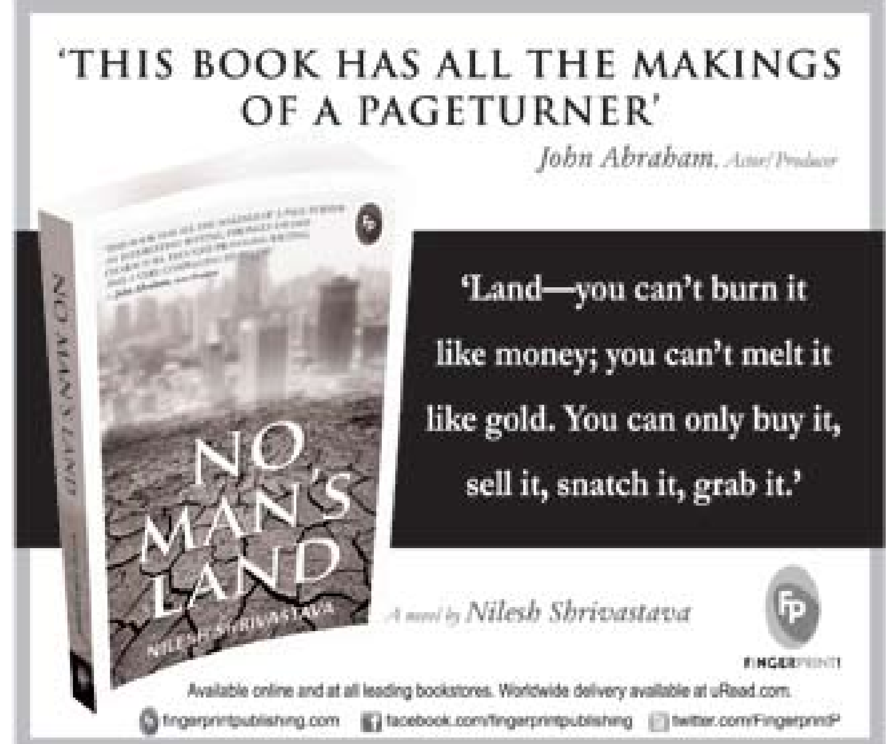
Structurally, *Helium* is arranged along a familiar trope — that of return to the homeland, to the father and the past that the protagonist has long ago run away from in an attempt to escape his own guilt. Facing the demons of the past becomes necessary for the disaffected narrator-protagonist in order to be able to live, and love, in the present. That this past is defined by the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 in which the protagonist's favourite professor at IIT is burnt to death before his eyes, is a courageous and significant choice made in the narrative. His father's – and to some extent his own – complicity in the murder of his professor is a fact he must face and come to terms with. Atonement takes the form of searching for Nelly, the professor's wife with whom he has also, as a student, had an affair — one that was cut short abruptly by the riots and the Professor's murder. After the double tragedy of losing her husband and young daughter in that genocide, Nelly has retreated to the Shimla hills, living a quiet life as a librarian-archivist at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies. Traumatised by the very thought of visiting Delhi, "the wounded city, the psychotic city" again, she is yet hopeful of starting an oral history project, interviewing survivors of the 1984 massacre and documenting their stories. In that sense, both Nelly's proposed project and the novel as such seek to redress the near-silence and fog of obfuscation around the systematic barbarity of those two or three days following Indira Gandhi's death.

The loose, meandering narrative structure does not, however, fully work. There are abrupt transitions from one thought to another, which refuse to be recuperated by the technique of stream of consciousness — they are simply sudden and inexplicable. A meditation on the Golden Temple and Indira Gandhi's hubris – Operation Blue Star – is followed immediately by a comprehensive list of the books arranged on Nelly's bookshelves (p 64). Speaking of books, there seems to be an almost anxious attempt by the narrator to establish his erudition. Lengthy lists of 'important' books inhabiting the bookshelves of characters abound, frequent references are made to various art-works, without it ever being clear what they are adding to the narrative. See, for example, this, worth quoting in full:

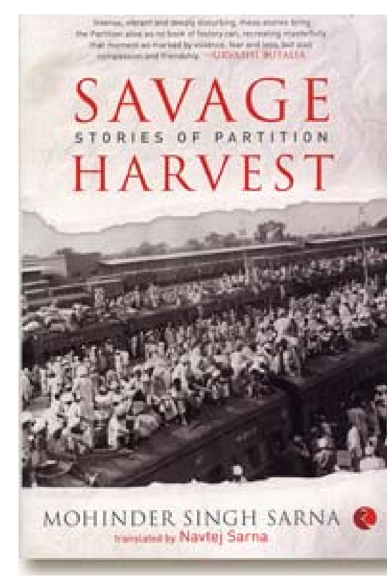
> On the train to Shimla a strange image had flashed in my mind. A little girl more or less like Red Riding Hood was playing with a predator of a bird. […] Now and then the little girl stared at a painting by Amrita Sher-Gil. But the wolf stared at the girl with murderous rage. To protect herself, the girl entered the painting … Little Red Riding Hood walked slowly and safely into the labyrinths of raven- coloured hair, confessing strange theories about her 'wicked' grandmother. Something trembled at the edge of my hallucination. *Three Women*, the painting, never fails to stir me. Three women, three 'saviours', enduring what comes from outside the frame, and the bigger pain woven or braided within. Big bird-like eyes averting the surveyors' gaze, vividly coloured dresses, perfect locks of black hair. The longer one stares at those delicate faces, this one thought precipitates: those three must be out of their minds. Moving backwards or forwards or sideways offers little help. Whenever I encounter reproductions of the painting in art magazines and even in newsprint I get the feeling that perhaps I, too, must be out of my mind. (p 53)

Such gratuitous references are accompanied by several infelicities in the writing itself, which often comes across as laboured and over-wrought, with a sentence-structure that can be clumsy. To pick one from several examples: "As I was replacing the book on the shelf two tiny photographs fell out of the pages. Like perennial migrants, the photos were impatient and keen to reveal the twists and turns of their odyssey" (p 66). Further, the photo "for some strange reason reminded me of Chardin's *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, […]". The reference appears once again without any narrative justification, without adding anything to the narrative, or to an understanding of the narrator, except itself as reference. Other laboured, clumsy sentences abound. In Shimla, at the venue of the Hindu Party's annual meeting, "there was a huge security cordon, the circle of heavily armed guards refused entry. Come after the conference is over, they barked, staring, as if my left hand was a cathode and my right hand an anode and my body all set to hug and explode a senior Hindu party leader" (p 88). A woman with "voluptuous calves" mysteriously pops up at regular intervals in the novel, with little more to offer the protagonist or the story than the aforementioned calves (p 20, p 106, p 181). There are instances at which the narrative seems over-keen to display its familiarity with post-structuralist theories: "The gap of years has not even helped determine the 'why' of my troubled relationship with Father. […] to move ahead, it is essential to venture near the interstitial spaces of language. I must unravel the primary mechanism(s) of the problem." Statements such as these have, to my mind, no place in a novel, unless there is a good narrative reason for them. For a creative work has the ability, the prerogative, even, to deploy language as well as the spaces between/within it in a way no other kind of writing can do. It is the doing, however, rather than the telling, that is the onus on literature. Singh's novel 'tells' us these things instead of 'doing' them, in what comes across as somewhat forced attempts to be theoretically savvy and with it. As also in the name dropping, and the longish descriptions of works of art that do little more than describe those works of art.

Perhaps the novel's biggest weakness is that it fails to find its voice. Generically, while existing within the space of a work of fiction, it seeks to trouble the boundaries of that space by not just the fact of being based upon actual events, but by setting itself in and constantly referring to 'real' spaces – IIT Delhi, Cornell, IIAS Shimla, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the Rock garden in Chandigarh – complete with their photographs. There are also photographs of people – meant, one presumes, to be photographs of the characters – Professor Singh as a young boy, Nelly. (More puzzlingly, there are pictures of Nehru astride a horse, of long-dead people petrified in volcanic ash at Pompeii, of a pair of hands, presumably of the composer Rachmaninov of whom the narrator happens to be thinking.) The narrative tone shifts from journalistic and documentary to existentialist and hallucinatory. The attempt seems to be to dissolve boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and imagination — as well as leap over that other great divide, that between science and art. The narrator is after all a scientist, a student of rheology, fascinated, like his professor before him, with the 'noble' gas helium, after which the book has been named. Primo Levi and his *The Periodic Table* become the appropriate guiding spirits of this attempted marriage of so-called opposites. The attempt is undoubtedly interesting, and worth undertaking. In this instance, though, it seems to fail, mainly owing to the lack of a central confident voice. ■



The new Taj Mahal



Savage Harvest: Stories of Partition

By Mohinder Singh Sarna; translated by Navtej Sarna

Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2013, 249 pp., Rs 295

ISBN 978-81-291-2487-6

I ran into the young Englishman again as I stepped out of Rawalpindi station. We had travelled in the same compartment from Amritsar to Lahore and got along very well, despite our differences of age, country and community. Occasionally we had got lost in our separate reveries but whenever we emerged from them, we had begun to talk like old friends.

The Amritsar–Lahore Express on which we'd travelled had restarted the rail connection between India and Pakistan after about eleven years. Much had happened in these eleven years. Two wars had spilt blood needlessly on the soil of the subcontinent, opening up fresh cuts even before the wounds left by the Partition riots had healed. Then the Simla Agreement was signed. Prisoners of war returned home. The taut strings that held our hearts eased a bit and calls for friendship began to be heard on both sides. Then the embassies opened, and one blessed morning the Amritsar–Lahore Express performed its maiden journey as the vanguard of friendship and cooperation.

The young Englishman and I were among the 151 passengers who had boarded that train. With bursting hearts and moist eyes, a large and happy crowd had seen us off at Amritsar station. Another crowd had been waiting at Attari station, laden with good wishes. There was a crowd outside, and a crowd within: a crowd of yearnings that the handful of passengers had brought with them. There were fathers who were going to meet their sons after years, grandmothers who were going to see grandchildren born in the last fifteen years for the first time and brothers who treasured within their hearts the intense desire to see their sisters, nephews and nieces. America and Canada had become accessible, while this country just across the Ravi may as well have been on another planet.

My eyes had been yearning to see this land across the Ravi. When the train left Attari station, a strange sudden ache rose in my heart. There was a large stretch of uncultivated land between Attari and Wagah that belonged to neither India nor Pakistan. This was what is called 'No Man's Land' in the language of international relations, a place to which no man can lay claim. But what if roses could be planted on this land, roses of a thousand colours and a thousand varieties? Yellow, touched with the first ray of dawn; white, unspoilt virgin white; crimson, like some bride's festive dupatta; and then those roses that can only be seen in dreams. There was a valley of flowers in the Himalayan heights; if only another valley of flowers could bloom between Attari and Wagah, a unique fragrance would spread through the subcontinent.

The young Englishman's question had woken me from my scent-filled reverie. He wanted to know why I was going to Pakistan.

'I'm going to see the city of my dreams,' I replied. 'Rawalpindi, where I was born, in whose lanes I spent my childhood and youth.'

'I, too, am going to Rawalpindi,' he said happily. 'From there I will go to Murree.'

'It's a fine hill station, Murree,' I said, glowing with childhood memories.

'I am going to see my grandfather's grave there. He was Colonel Smith, commandant of the 7th Baloch regiment.'

'It is touching that you have such regard in your heart for your grandfather. Evidently, the new generation in the West has not forgotten to respect its elders.'

'I was only going to see the Taj Mahal. But before I departed my grandmother insisted that I should also visit Pakistan and put flowers at my grandfather's grave.'

'How nice that you should have such regard for your elderly grandmother's wish.'

The welcoming crowd at Lahore had been larger than the crowds at Amritsar and Attari. We were to change trains at Lahore, and in the process we lost each other and the young Englishman ended up in another compartment. But I ran into him again as I stepped out of Rawalpindi station. He waved and smiled as he put his bags into a taxi. He told me that he was going straight from the station to Murree.

I didn't take a taxi but hailed a fine Peshawari tonga instead. I wanted to enjoy the beloved lanes and streets of my city properly from the back of the gently swaying tonga. I asked the driver to stop and wait for me at the last turning in Raja Bazaar, then I stepped into the shoe shop that used to have a board announcing 'Flex Shoe Co.' but was now called 'Frontier Boot House'.

On seeing me, the owner of the shop, who had been sipping his tea, started and stood up. He was wearing a white cotton salwar and a silk kameez with silver buttons. He was fair-complexioned with a full face and thick lips, and his receding hairline made his forehead look unnaturally broad.

'Today I've come to this shop after about twenty-eight or twenty-nine years,' I said as I sat down on the cushioned bench. 'I would like to meet Abdul Rahim sahib.'

A shadow passed over his face as he replied, 'My father has passed away.'

'May Allah grant heaven to his soul,' I said by way of condolence. 'You look like your father. When I saw him last, he must have been about the same age as you are now. When I stepped in here I was almost certain that it was him sitting here, as if these twenty-eight years had not passed, as if time had come to a standstill at this shop.'

'I'm delighted to meet you,' he said. 'My name is Sabir Hussain. And yours?'

I told him my name and began to take my wallet out of my pocket. 'Actually I've come to repay an old debt. In August '47, I bought a pair of shoes from your shop and promised to pay on the first of the following month. But before that date, I had to leave the city.'

His mouth fell open and he glanced disapprovingly, first at me and then at the money in my hand. When he was able to speak again, his voice betrayed his emotion.

'You're no stranger to this shop. I would be highly obliged if you put the money back in your wallet.'

'How can that be? I've carried the burden of this debt on my conscience for so many years. I want to be free of it.'

'But I cannot take this money. If my father had been alive, he too would not have accepted it.'

Somewhat embarrassed, I put the money back into the wallet.

His face eased and he said, 'Now tell me how I can serve you.'

Glancing at the worn-out shoes on my feet, he continued, 'Size eight, I'd say. I've got a fine Italian shoe in kid leather in size eight.'

Despite my remonstrations, he made me wear the shoes. They were such a marvellous pair, gripping my feet so perfectly that I couldn't have taken them off even if I had tried. I had been searching for such a pair for many years, but had been unable to find it anywhere in Delhi.

'These I will pay for. You'll have to accept money for these.'

'Certainly, but not in money. With love. This pair was not intended for sale. It was meant to be a gift for a loving customer like you.'

I saw that an assistant had brought in a tray with tea, a cake and pastries.

'If you want to pay for the shoes, then you can do so by accepting this tea, which Shafiq has already brought without my asking,' said Sabir Hussain.

After finishing tea, I hugged Sabir Hussain and Shafiq in farewell and invited them to visit Delhi. I told the waiting tonga-driver to take me straight to Teli Mohalla, where my childhood friend Abdul Sattar used to live.

Rawalpindi's Teli Mohalla was famous not for its oil-dealers, as its name would suggest, but because of its spinning tops. What wondrous things these were can only be realized by those who have spun them in their childhood. To others it may seem an exaggeration that those spinning tops, the round ones and the flat ones, would spin for at least fifteen or twenty minutes with a single pull of the string. They would appear to be perfectly still for ten minutes or more, almost as if they had fallen asleep, when in fact they would be spinning at their fastest. There were five or six families of Muslim artisans in Teli Mohalla who would fashion these tops out of rosewood blocks on their lathes, fix steel needles in them and decorate them with German colours.

I had loved these tops since my childhood and, though I hadn't played with them after my schooldays, I had always praised them sky-high to my children. One major reason behind my close friendship with Abdul Sattar had been the fact that his father and grandfather were master artisans whose spinning tops were impossible to beat. I would often stop in Teli Mohalla on my way back from school and spend hours watching Abdul's father and grandfather create their colourful marvels at the lathe.

When I reached Abdul Sattar's house, I saw his grandfather busy at the lathe where a beautiful round spinning top was taking shape.

'*Salaam aleikum*, Grandfather.'

The old man lifted his head from his lathe and I realized my mistake. It was not Abdul Sattar's grandfather but rather his father, who had grown as old as his own father in the last thirty years.

'Do you recognize me?'

The old man stared at me through his thick spectacles. From the glassy look in his eye I could make out that he'd probably had surgery for cataract.

'No,' he said softly, shaking his head.

'I am Sattar's classmate. I used to come to your house as a child.'

I saw darkness descend over the old man's eyes. He switched off the lathe and motioned me to sit down on a cane stool with his trembling hand.

'Where is Sattar?' I asked.

The old man looked at me once. Then his eyes began to wander in all directions. His eyes fell on the half-finished spinning top and he started the lathe again. It was as if he had forgotten all about my question and, in fact, my existence.

Finally the spinning top popped out of the lathe like a seashell from the mouth of a serpent. He hammered a brass nail into its smooth body and placed the shiny red top in my hands.

'Where is Sattar?' I repeated my question.

He shook his hand as if to say, 'He isn't here any more,' and looked down at the ground. Something broke inside me, and I got up from the stool and sat in front of him.

'What are you saying?' I asked, putting a hand on his shoulder. 'Doesn't he live with you? Has he abandoned you at this age?'

The old man raised his finger towards the roof. An abyss opened up inside me.

'Sattar has gone to Allah. In the battle of Chhamb in '71. People say he became a martyr. Whatever, as long as it pleases God.'

I sat stock-still for a long time holding his trembling hands in mine. I couldn't say a word in the face of his bottomless grief.

Then the bamboo screen over the back door moved and a boy of about fourteen came in. He had wide innocent eyes and curly hair. For a moment I felt I was a child again and Abdul Sattar was standing in front of me.

'All he's left me as a legacy is this boy,' the old man said. 'May Allah grant him a long life.'

I got up and hugged the boy and kissed him on the forehead. On my asking, he told me that his name was Sayadat and he was studying in class nine.

That night I ate at the house of Abdul Sattar and slept there.

The flat roof was bathed in moonlight. Staring at the faint stars I was lost for a long time in memories of the old days. I must have fallen asleep sometime after midnight. As soon as that happened, Abdul Sattar came and stood next to me. Both pockets of his jacket were stuffed with spinning tops. We roamed around Paharganj bazaar and bummed around Khari Baoli and Chandni Chowk, but there was no place for us to spin our tops. Finally we began to spin them on the platform of Delhi railway station. A crowd of coolies and passengers formed a circle around us. Abdul Sattar tried all his tops, the flat ones and the round ones, but my shining red top beat them all. Soundly defeated, Abdul Sattar said,

'Never mind! Even a dog behaves like a lion in his own lane. Come some day to Teli Mohalla in 'Pindi, and I will take your measure.'

I had come today to Teli Mohalla in 'Pindi, but the man who was to take my measure had himself vanished many years ago.

The next morning I took Sayadat with me and roamed around the bazaars and lanes, the gardens and walkways of the city. It was late afternoon when I found myself outside the house where I'd been born, and where I'd spent the first twenty years of my life. Knocking on the door, I experienced a strange feeling, as if at that moment someone was knocking on the door of my heart.

An elderly man opened the door, and I was struck at first sight. The prayer beads in his hand, his white beard, his dress and his personality all pointed to his decent and God-fearing nature.

'You!'

He couldn't say anything more than that, so startled was he to see a turbaned and bearded man standing at his door.

'Yes. I've come from Delhi to meet you.'

He kept looking at me in silence.

'Yes, I have come to meet you,' I repeated in a hesitant tone, 'and to see this house of yours where I have spent my childhood, teenage years, college days and my youth.'

'Your name?' he asked.

I told him my name.

'You are a poet,' he said.

'No,' I replied. 'I mean, yes. In a way. But how do you know?'

A mysterious smile appeared on his lips as he continued, 'You're welcome. Please do come in. This is your own house.'

A grey-haired woman peeped in from the bedroom and then vanished behind the door.

'Shabir's mother!' the old man called out. 'Come see! A poet has come to visit us from Delhi.'

'What are you saying?' I pleaded, nearly frantic. 'I'm not a poet or anything. Not of any standing. Nobody knows me as a poet.'

The mysterious smile appeared again on his lips, and he said, 'We know.'

By this time the lady had tidied her loose hair and covered her head with a thick muslin dupatta. I joined my hands in greeting and bowed towards her as she stepped out into the courtyard.

'May you live a long life, son,' she said, both her hands raised in blessing.

I don't know what magic there was in her blessing that my eyes filled with tears.

A young man of about twenty and an innocent-looking girl of sixteen or seventeen emerged from the other room. The young man stepped forward and shook my hand. He was a fair and goodlooking youth, with an air of clean freshness about him.

'That's my youngest son, Naeem,' the old man said. 'He is studying for his MA. And this is my granddaughter Naheed, the daughter of my eldest son Shabir. He has a business in Chakwal, but she stays with us. She is doing her Senior Cambridge at the Convent School in the cantonment. And meet him,' he said to them. 'He is a poet from Delhi and the real owner of this house.'

I was slowly realizing that the elderly man was bent on dragging me through the thorns that day. Naheed was greeting me. I saw that her face was like a bright lotus and her eyes had the glow of a narcissus. She looked towards me and smiled in a manner that reminded me of my daughter.

'On seeing them,' I said, 'this house seems doubly lit up.'

'There, you see, you have spoken like a true poet,' the old man said, 'even as you remonstrate against being called one.'

I stayed silent. If he was happy in calling me a poet, I didn't want to snatch that joy away from him.

'Come then.' He led me by the hand to what had once been my bedroom. 'Let's put the evidence of your poetry into your own hands. We have guarded your possessions for many years. Today God has given us a chance to return it.'

What I saw upon entering the room was nothing short of a miracle. The books I had bought thirty years ago were arranged in a very orderly fashion in my bookcase. Their firm bindings and golden titles showed that someone had taken care of them lovingly and not let even a speck of the dust of negligence settle on them.

Shabir's mother picked out a key from the bunch hanging from the corner of her dupatta and opened the bookcase. On the bottom two shelves lay a treasure trove of Punjabi books, tracts, magazines and newspapers. These contained the writings of Bhai Vir Singh, old issues of *Khalsa Samachar* and *Phulwari*, and editions of Bhai Charan Singh's newspaper *Mauji*. My father had gathered together this literary and cultural storehouse, and it was from poring over it that I had developed an interest in writing in Punjabi.

The old man was speaking. 'When we came ravaged from Amritsar to this house, we found it ravaged too. Only these books remained, and they too were strewn, upside down, half-open all over the floor. The looters might have gone through each book in the hope of finding hidden currency notes. Whether they found them or not I don't know, but they left the books behind. These books held no value for them.'

Naheed said, 'Grandfather, those who value books aren't capable of looting another's house.'

My lips were silent, but my hand spoke to bless Naheed.

Shabir's mother took a notebook with a brown plastic cover from the middle shelf and started wiping it with her dupatta even though it was already spotless. Then, handing me the notebook she said, 'Here, son, here's your poetry.'

I began to cry. This was the manuscript of my first poetry collection. Most of the poems were from my college days.

The old man patted my back and said, 'Now let's have some tea.'

When we went into the other room to have tea, I saw an even bigger miracle. Our family photographs were still on the wall—just as they were hanging when we had fled the house. We had missed these photographs so much over the past thirty years. Among them was one of my grandfather in a golden frame, which had been especially dear to my father.

My eyes were going from wall to wall, and my head was spinning. I couldn't get a hold on myself for a long time. All I wanted was to be alone somewhere and cry to my heart's content.

In the evening when I went to Abdul Sattar's house to pick up my baggage, his father handed me a heavy khaki cloth bag. I saw that it was full of spinning tops in every colour.

'What's this?'

'For your son, a gift from 'Pindi.'

'I only have one son. What will he do with so many tops?'

'Never mind. May God give him a long life.'

I was to catch the night train. Sayadat saw me off at the station. When I changed trains at Lahore station and boarded the Lahore–Amritsar Express, the young Englishman was sitting in the same compartment as before.

I asked after his grandfather's grave. When he had finished telling me about it I said, 'It just so happens that I visited a grave too.'

'Which grave?' he asked with some surprise.

'The grave of India–Pakistan enmity.'

Seeing disbelief in his eyes I continued, 'Yes, yes, I'm telling the truth. I have seen this enmity buried with my own eyes. And that day is not far when we will construct a new Taj Mahal on the grave of this enmity in the valley of flowers between Wagah and Attari.'

■

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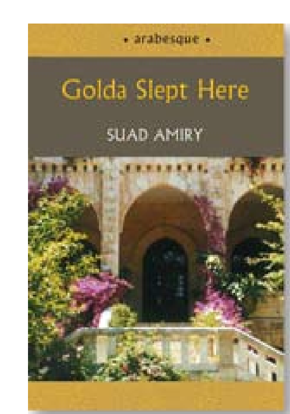

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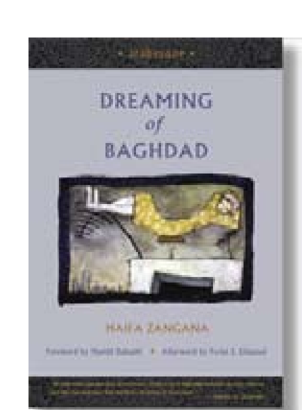

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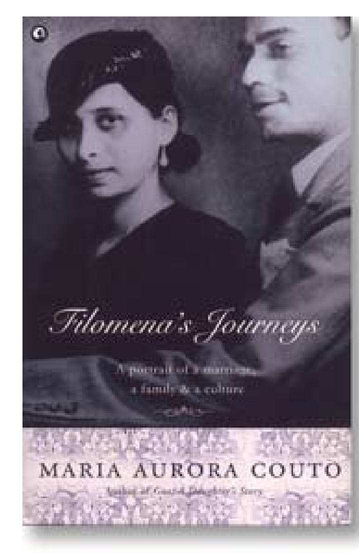

Filomena's Journeys: A portrait of a marriage, a family & a culture

By Maria Aurora Couto

Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2013, 290 pp., Rs 495

ISBN 978-93-82277-04

SHASHI DESHPANDE

The two beautiful pictures on the front and back covers of the book seem to convey the essence of the story told within the covers. The young woman on the front cover is looking at the camera with a shy sideways look, a look which belies the poise and the sophistication she otherwise shows. Contradicts too, the firm line in which the delicate lips are set. In the picture on the back cover, the same woman, much older, is laughing heartily, released, it seems, from whatever had inhibited her earlier, giving a hint of the journey she has travelled in the years in between.

Filomena's Journeys is Aurora Maria Couto's second book. Her first, *Goa: A Daughter's Story* (Viking/Penguin, 2004) was a remarkable book, which, through a mingling of personal and family histories with the larger history of Goa, gave the reader a picture of a Goa most of us did not know. A Goa, that, through long years of Portuguese rule, was set apart, both from British India and the areas ruled by local rulers. *Filomena's Journeys* has a much smaller canvas, being the story of Maria Couto's parents and their marriage. Yet this book, too, by combining the story of two people and their marriage with the history and culture of Goa, goes way beyond the just personal.

It is hard to write about oneself, about one's family. Harder still to see one's parents as people, to enter that prohibited sacred space of our parents' marriage. For the truth is that all families have their secrets, dark rooms which have been kept firmly closed. Yet, like she did in *Goa* … when she unflinchingly told the painful story of forced conversions in Goa, here, too, Maria Couto opens the door to the dark rooms in her family; she tells the truth about Filomena's father's death, a man lying in "an unmarked grave", she speaks openly of the alcoholism that destroyed a family, and of the gradual disintegration of a marriage. Her great strength is the manner of narration — she is never just telling, she is probing, questioning, trying to understand. And by knitting the story together with memories, surmises, conversations, both real and imagined, and documented facts, Maria Couto goes way beyond the story of two people and their marriage. Her careful detailing of the two families, Filomena's and Chico's, makes it as much a story of contrasts as of conflicts: Chico belonging to a class of people used to inherited wealth and prestige, "not conscious of hardships and deprivation in their own backyard". And Filomena's family, a rural one, where "women's lives were connected to the rituals of the Church and the agricultural calendar". Chico, a pampered and indulged child; Filomena, who lost both her parents very early, responsible and hard working. This is also the story of contrasts in Goa, of class and caste differences in a feudal society, of those who were afraid that the end of Portuguese rule would mean that they would lose the distinctive culture that Portuguese colonisation had given Goa and did not want to be part of the new independent India ("Liberation! It was invasion") and of those who fought for liberation.

In telling the story of her parents' marriage, Maria Couto often eschews the personal and speaks of herself in the third person as "Chico's/Filomena's oldest daughter", keeping herself in the background. The only time she comes out of the shadows is when she speaks of what living in Dharwad, a small town, did to the family, to her especially, opening out a larger world to her than she would have seen in Goa. Otherwise, she achieves a rare objectivity. A remarkable example is the way she brings back a memory of cruelty and violence, telling the story through the eyes of the frightened child she was then, giving an impressionist picture of anger, raised voices, broken plates and blood and of children cowering together fearfully on a bed. The author's objectivity does seem to desert her at times. "Why should he deserve understanding?" she asks, speaking of the father. Then quickly adds, "If she (Filomena) had compassion for him, how can her daughter not?" Her comment, "Chico is a mystery to be lived, rather than a problem, a tragedy to be explained," is indeed a compassionate one.

Though this is the portrait of "a marriage, a family & a culture", there is no doubt that this is really Filomena's story. She is the heroine of it. Orphaned early, she married a man full of promise, a man who belonged to one of the elite families of Goa. And yet within a short time their life together began falling apart and she had to take on the entire responsibility of the growing family. Maria Couto's unstinting admiration of her mother is always controlled, preventing the book from becoming a hagiography. There is the way she speaks of Filomena's decision to move away from Goa, to settle down in Dharwad for the good of the children's education and for Chico as well — a decision she took despite Chico's violent rejection of the plan. She went alone to Dharwad to check out the place, went on ahead with all the luggage to set up house, and then went back to bring the children. Something very unusual for that time when women rarely travelled alone, almost never without a male escort. Yet this is stated by Maria Couto in a remarkably matter-of-fact manner, as if it was the norm for any woman, and no great achievement.

When Maria Couto wrote *Goa* … Goa, it seemed, had found its ideal chronicler. Now, with her second book, Maria Couto has invented an entirely new genre, a mixture of memoir, biography and history, resulting in a fascinating tapestry of human lives and relationships, showing, almost as an aside, how human lives are impacted by historical events. Her painstaking research about the places Chico and Filomena lived in – Raia and Margao – about their families and family connections, about the way they lived, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, gives us a clear picture of their lives. Thankfully, the book does not sag under the weight of the facts it carries, though at times the reader, wanting to go on with the story of Filomena and her Chico, may find some of the details, like the lists (of the food eaten and the music played at parties and during weddings) a little tedious. So too the plethora of families and their names, which at times tend to leave the reader a little confused.

Feminism has questioned the invisibility of women in history. Virginia Woolf, speaking of the Elizabethan woman, says, "One knows nothing detailed, nothing perfectly true or substantial about her. History scarcely mentions her." This is true about all women everywhere and at all times. And though it would be unfair to speak of feminism in the context of Filomena's life, or of her daughter's account of it – that was, after all, another era, it was a different world – there is no doubt that Maria Couto gives us certain truths about women's lives: of the difference in the way girls and boys were educated, of the loneliness of the wives of migrant men who went out of Goa to earn money, of women who lived privileged lives but were unable to cope with a changing world, of women like Filomena's mother, who brought up her grandchildren after her daughter's death, as also managed the land that gave them their livelihood. Apart from its undoubted literary value, there is no doubt that in writing this book, and bringing one woman's life out of the shadows, Maria Couto has given us a glimpse of how the chronicling of women's lives can fill a large empty space in history. Long back, Isak Dinesen wrote a short story 'The Blank Sheet', about Princesses, whose marriage sheets, with the bloodstains which declared their virginity, were publicly displayed. Only one sheet stood out among all these stained sheets — a sheet which remained white and pure, giving rise to various surmises about what that Princess's story could have been. There is no doubt that books like Maria Couto's *Filomena's Journeys*, whether it was the author's intent or not, try to do away with the blank sheet and give women their legitimate place in history. ■

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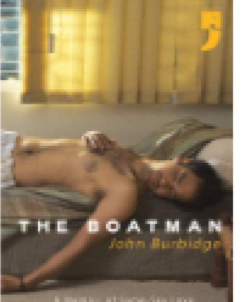

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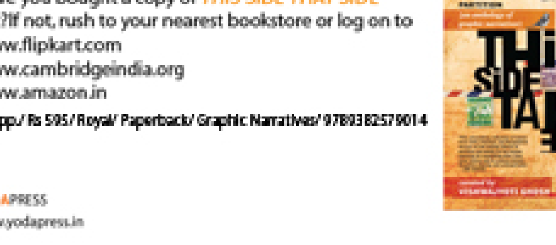

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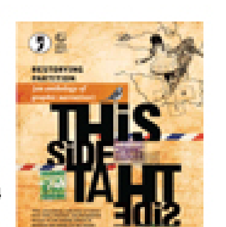

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The subaltern studied

Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth-century Britain

By Lucy Lethbridge

Bloomsbury, London, 2013, 385 pp., Rs 499

ISBN 978-1-4088-4270-6

PROTEETI BANERJEE

Two months ago, a friend posted as her Facebook status: 'Housekeeper threatening to leave. Beloved nanny just up and quit. Fridge, washing machine and dishwasher all blow up at the same time.' I was to be reminded of this message while reading Lucy Lethbridge's *Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth-century Britain*, a detailed account of domestic service, with all its rules, quirks and desperation, in 19th and 20th-century Britain and the erstwhile British colonies of India and Africa.

Lucy Lethbridge's well-written, vibrant account of domestic servants, and their role in keeping the comfortable, well-ordered life of middle- and upper-middle class Britain running, will be familiar to those among us brought up on a diet of British fiction – Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie, PG Wodehouse, Ngaio Marsh – and those entertaining 'Cookies' and 'Nannies' and butlers and parlourmaids who peopled those pages. Lethbridge's account, however, is a world removed from the air-brushed, happy characters whose sole joy lay in cooking delicious goodies for perpetually hungry children, tidying a house, or rescuing their hapless masters from myriad "scrapes": *Servants* presents the (often unrealised) hopes, dreams and aspirations of those invisible presences "below stairs", responsible for keeping the British home, and by extension the British way of life, running smoothly while their "employers held on to their gentility".

As a sociological treatise, *Servants* is iffy, not because of shoddy work but because of lack of detail. Structured into various periods of British history and social change – late-19th and early-20th century; World War I and the societal flux it brought in its wake; domestic life in the colonies; the pre-war in-migration of fleeing Europeans and Jews; and the irrevocably changed society (and status of women) that led to a complete transformation of the household after World War II – the book tells the story of a society in transition, not in the usual politico-economic terms, but in those of the sub-surface, unacknowledged tradition of domestic service. But the problem with this subject is located precisely in its invisibility. Belying the promise of its title, the book is not quite able to provide a "downstairs view" of British society; on the contrary, the view remains firmly entrenched in the "upstairs", outside the "green baize door". While Lethbridge's research is undoubtedly detailed (as evidenced in the exhaustive Bibliography at the end), the quotes she employs from various domestic servants – butlers, cooks, kitchen maids, gardeners – do little to flesh them out. Each one is individuated and unswappable in real life, in the book, however, they remain, until the end, interchangeable voices — the Other.

The only servant – a word today outmoded, replaced with the politically palatable 'domestic' – who stands out is Alice Osbourn, who was housekeeper /administrator for the Baldwins at Rectory Farm House in the tiny village of Taplow, in Buckinghamshire in southeast England. Alice's cryptic *carnet de vol* (Lethbridge calls them "journals" or "diaries", and they are neither), which she began keeping from 1906 and which Lethbridge returns to often, lists the disciplined day-to-day running of Walter Baldwin's businessman's household (he ran a family paper mill, and thus inherited entitlement, though not a title), provides a glimpse into rigidly-classed Edwardian life (even as Old Britannia itself was being consumed by suffragettism and industrialisation), and – through Rectory Farm House's increasing troubles at finding (and keeping) good servants – an insight into the slow but drastic upheavals in British society. Osbourn is also unusual in that she is among the few (in Lethbridge's account) who develop a *non servus* relationship with their employers. Affectionately called "Obbs" by the family, she grows close to her beloved young charge, Daphne (whom she later unconventionally refers to as "Daph", or 'Old Daph") — enjoying evenings at the cinema, convivial drives and shopping spells with the adult Daphne when she, like so many "modern" young British women, buys a car in 1926. Going by Lethbridge, Osbourn is a rare anomaly: in general, servants had to remain "invisible and inaudible while going about their work", as "gentlemen fifty years ago did not care to see her [the housemaid] often". They were relegated to "their own warren of sculleries, washhouses, attic bedrooms … kitchens, pantries, larders and storerooms" (p 20). So disconnected were the worlds of family and servitor that sometimes the latter were not even addressed by their baptismal names. Footmen, for instance, might have generic names. Margaret Thomas, a former cook, tells Lethbridge, "In one house they were William and another Henry, and where there were three, the first was John, the second William and the third was always Henry" (p 47). Employers "controlled the historical record" of servants, so that, since the employers interfaced between servant and state, even their officially documented lives were "rendered indistinct" and hazy: Alice's designation changed with every census, from "nursery governess" in 1901 to "cook" a decade later, despite her role remaining the same; but, mystifyingly, she went from 21 years old in the 1901 census to 37 in 1911, "which would mean that she had aged a miraculous sixteen years in a single decade" (p 12).

As a sociological treatise, *Servants* is iffy, not because of shoddy work but because of lack of detail. The problem with this subject is located precisely in its invisibility. Belying the promise of its title, the book is not quite able to provide a "downstairs view" of British society; on the contrary, the view remains firmly entrenched in the "upstairs", outside the "green baize door". While Lethbridge's research is undoubtedly detailed, the quotes she employs from various domestic servants – butlers, cooks, kitchen maids, gardeners – do little to flesh them out. Each one is individuated and unswappable in real life, in the book, however, they remain, until the end, interchangeable voices — the Other

While indoors servants were privy to their employers' most intimate moments, the "invisible line between familiarity and over-familiarity" was never crossed even in the most congenial relationships. (The camaraderie between Wodehouse's much-loved Bertie Wooster and his butler, protector and confidant, Jeeves, exists firmly in the realm of fiction.) Rosina Harrison, a lady's maid and constant companion, remembers: "My opinions were never sought or given on her music, or the people we met or on anything that was personal to either of us, nor did I expect it or miss it at the time" (p 119). Even when the British feudal order began the slow – and still unfinished – process of desuetude in the years preceding World War II, some large, traditional country houses stubbornly enforced strict separation, even down in their air-raid shelters:

> In one large country house, air-raid arrangements in the spacious network of cellars were organised along strict lines of precedence: "First cellar: for the elderly owner and her guests …. Second cellar: for female servants …. Third cellar: for chauffeur, boot-boy, gardeners and stray neighbours...". (p 252)

These cellars were furnished keeping in mind the social status of their putative occupants, but this one, writes Lethbridge, quoting from another book, came with "an electric bell connected with the first cellar in case owner should wish to summon masculine moral support ..."

The rigid hierarchy was not the sole preserve of the employing classes, however; the stratification percolated downstairs. The butler, who presided over the service hierarchy, was always addressed as "Mr" by the other servants; in the servants' hall, he

> sat always at the head of the table: when carving the Sunday roast, he would serve first the housekeeper, as his equal in the servants' hierarchy, then move down the ranks to the odd man, the scullery-maid and the hall boy. (p 52)

Unlike in Osbourn's case, in landed estates and aristocratic families, upward mobility was a real possibility among servants; most butlers had worked their way up from being hall boys or footmen. In middle-class households, however, in the stringent years after World War I, domestic help was downsized to the charwoman — and the 'char', on the lowest rung of the ladder of servitude, couldn't dream that "scrubbing, scouring and mopping is a means of 'bettering' yourself, for the char could never progress upwards, but was stuck forever … with the drudgery of her work". (p 232)

In Lethbridge's account, this starchy hierarchy found a resonance in the servants in British households in colonial India:

> … Indian nations (sic) had a tradition of complex hierarchies and a rigid caste system that proved to be highly compatible with British traditions and social order …. An aristocratic household in Delhi was run with the oiled efficiency of the English country house, its retainers the necessary cogs in the vast machinery of the home. (pp 102-03)

But this is a simplistic take on

domestic service in India — it ignores one major societal differentiator: that, in contrast to the inviolable separation between master and servant in England, servitude in Indian households, while subject to the vagaries of feudalism and paternalism, permitted a kind of *emploi sympathique* that sometimes spanned generations and joined entire families. As those of us who have grown up in bustling households people by the latest generation of family retainers know, in India Lethbridge's "necessary cogs" often cross over without fuss from servantry's place to that of much-loved family member — the keeper of the housekey. But the English memsahib was, naturally, uncomprehending of the "complicated web of transactions" that could exist between servants, and between servants and tradespeople; suspicious of her staff, she often acquired a reputation for being "a shrill harridan". Nonetheless, life in the colonies, with its armies of deferential servants, ended up spoiling the British irrevocably. Having got accustomed to being waited upon minutely and "ruined forever for hard work", returning colonials and their families found the transition difficult, given the changing domestic service scenario and their meagre pensions "that could barely stretch to a cook and parlourmaid".

Deference was just one of the many things in short supply in post-war Britain. War-work, and the financial and psychological independence it brought, instilled in women – for whom "going into service" had previously been the only option – new confidence and aspirations. For many, though, the changes were fleeting: they were forced to return to domestic service, "because in a post-war economic depression there was simply no other work available to them", and because "women of all classes were encouraged to give back their jobs to former servicemen and concentrate instead on creating the nurturing, comforting home that had made the war worth fighting" (p 150). But changes stayed: some of these women returned a very different class of servant from the earlier ideal of the obedient, decorous, invisible maid. Joyce Storey, who reluctantly went into service in a grocer's household, soon rebelled:

> This is the last time in my entire bloody life I will ever be on my knees with my nose to the ground, for I belong up there with my eyes to the light, and walking upright and tall. (p 154)

Competition arrived in the early 1930s, when a British domestic recruitment agency opened a branch in Vienna, leading to an influx of Austrian and German maids, meaning that British households were no longer dependent on the dwindling supply of English maids. Although the Ministry of Labour, keen to encourage more British girls into service in the middle of an economic depression and high unemployment, placed restrictions on the free entry of German and Austrian domestics, these were lifted by 1933 in the light of the political situation in Germany. In 1936, the number of incoming foreign domestics was 8,849; a year later, it was 14,000. In 1938, after the horrific events in Germany of *Kristallnacht*, block visas were issued to all women prepared to take up any domestic work. Unfortunately, the contacts necessary to obtain a domestic job, and the paperwork required for entry visas effectively excluded most working-class refugees. In effect, Britain became home to middle-class German and Austrian professionals who, unaccustomed to running their own households, were now being pressed into domestic service in British homes — where, given who the nominal enemy was (nobody doubted that there was a war coming), were viewed with suspicion and embarrassment. Lethbridge mentions the "unthinking anti-Semitism" that greeted these "sad-eyed newcomers with their histories of loss and terror", their loneliness in a strange country and their painful realisation that most British people just didn't want to know about the Nazi problem.

Lethbridge liberally peppers the book with anecdotes, some of them entertaining, especially those highlighting the utter helplessness of the British mistress when it came to the simplest housework. The British suspicion of and reluctance to adopt labour-saving appliances is amusingly ironic: the Industrial Revolution might have started in their backyard, but why use a boiler or put in central heating when there are three servant girls to carry the hot water and light the fires? Indeed, servants themselves marvelled at their employers' disdain for "new-fangled" machines, and proper lavatories with flush loos: "The gentry were not altogether fussy in their habits … I've known them go past a lavatory to get to their bedrooms to use one of those things [chamberpots]." Besides, as the many Woosters must have known, these appliances needed servants to operate them and were always in danger of blowing up. That embodiment of English femininity, Mrs Caroline Miniver, the fictional character created by Jan Struther, who made her first appearance in *The Times* on 6 October 1937, complained about irritants familiar not only to her readers, but to all of us: "Everything went wrong at once; chimneys smoked, pipes burst, vacuum cleaners fused …. Nannie sprained her ankle, the cook got tonsillitis, the house-parlourmaid left to be married …. (p 221)" — a litany of woes uncannily similar to the one that opened this review.

Research can often be a double-edged sword — it never is really enough, but one usually never knows when to stop. Even more relevant: should one publish every minutia of one's research? Especially bothersome in this book is that it doesn't anticipate the readers' obvious curiosity: for instance, Lethbridge tells us that the various ranks of servants not only ate separate from one another, but also had different foods according to rank. Since the lady of the manor wasn't likely to be interested in servant hall victuals, who did, indeed, daily draw up their menus? Also, Lethbridge never mentions in either the Notes or the Bibliography, where Alice Osbourn's "journals" are to be found. Are they part of archival material, or have they been published in a scholarly text?

My biggest issue with *Servants*, though, is one of engagement: it is an ostensibly objective but involved examination of social change in Britain through the study of master-servant dynamics. But if this is a part of subaltern studies, it is neither studious enough nor subaltern enough. ■

All in the family

Nony Singh: The Archivist
Text by Sabeena Gadihoke and Aveek Sen
Dreamvilla Productions, 2013, 114 pp., Rs 1500 (HB)
ISBN 978-93-5126-859-8

TRISHA GUPTA

Nixi [Dayanita] on her way to study at the National Insitute of Design

Nony Singh is not a professional photographer. Born in 1936 in Lahore, she happens to be the mother of one of India's most feted professional photographers, Dayanita Singh. The photographs that have been collected in *The Archivist* were taken for personal pleasure, either by Nony Singh, or of Singh – or members of her family – by others. *The Archivist* is thus an archive of Nony Singh's life. At one level, then, the book's pleasures lie in its closeness to the form in which most middle-class people in the 20th century grew up looking at photographs — the family album. But this is no standard family album. It does contain the expected portraits of sisters, parents, children and husbands — but it is the departures from expectation that give *The Archivist* its piquant quality.

Singh's wedding, for instance, makes the requisite appearance, but not in the form of the usual *shaadi* photo, the husband and wife with faces framed in tight close-up. Instead we get a full-length image of the newly wedded couple, taken from an angle, with a scattering of wedding guests seated on the carpeted ground around them. But Singh's face as she stands beside her husband is hidden completely, her head bent under the heavy gota-edged veil of her *lehnga*. The only part of the young bride not swaddled in yards of heavy fabric are her hands, held up to her chest in a clasping gesture that echoes that of her husband beside her.

The bashful bride of that 1960 picture would perhaps seem less carefully constructed if the book had not placed her next to a photograph from 1961, the year after Singh's marriage. In the second image, Singh looks out at us without the slightest trace of shyness, one insouciant finger in her mouth, having just tasted whatever's just been cooking on the *chulha* in front of her. There is a relaxed, almost tomboyish air about her, perched sideways on a chair in an open verandah, wearing a loose white kurta-pyjama that one speculates might belong to her husband. Her hair is in a long loose single plait, somewhat rumpled, like her clothes. One dangling foot has escaped the slipper meant for it. A bicycle is parked behind her, and something about the picture's sense of *in medias res* makes one imagine she might get up any moment and ride off.

Nony Singh's very particular persona – whimsical, playful, sensual – is imprinted upon most images in *The Archivist*. The book is full of moments of impersonation, of dress-up. The first person to have been subjected to Singh's staging instinct was likely her mother, Mohinder Kaur. The first photo she ever took was of her mother at a 1943 picnic on the way to Koh Murree: a picture of feminine grace, her eyes lowered, her crinkled dupatta draped over her head just so. The other image Nony created of her mother is a stark contrast. In perhaps the most astounding image in the book, Mohinder Kaur is dressed in drag. And not just any drag — with a false moustache and a policeman's baton, she is to play her IPS officer husband.

The easiest person to dress up was, of course, herself. In a series of images from 1951 to 1955, the teenaged Nony poses in different costumes: a khaki uniform with a toothbrush moustache, a full-length white dress befitting of a nun, in a burqa. A decade later, the desire for playacting is transferred to her daughters. Nixi (Dayanita) and Nikita appear in frilly frocks, but also as a Maharashtrian woman, as Sita, Mother Mary, an angel, a gypsy. Sometimes the same costumes and props appear over the course of the years: the jewellery worn by Nixi "as a Kashmiri girl in the wheat fields of her father's farm" (1966) reappears on her sister Nikita a decade later, "as a princess from the Arabian Nights, Modern School, New Delhi". Sabeena Gadihoke's short biographical piece in the book tells us that the photographer, looking back at the Arabian Nights image, "is satisfied with the 'Arabian' face veil but feels that Nikita's ornaments are distinctly Kashmiri". Her investment in her daughters is expressed in the imaginative stitching of clothes and in the careful staging with which these images are produced. The photographs are a record of their childhood, but also of Nony's motherhood.

Nikita dressed as Queen Victoria, New Delhi, 1968

Another persistent inspiration for Singh's images is the cinema. Her sister Rajman poses for her "like a village woman", her sister Guddie appears as "Sophia Loren in Srinagar". In one of my favourite pictures, Guddie looks out into the distance: her hands folded in her lap, dupatta slipping off one shoulder. There is a stillness to her and yet a certain yearning restlessness to the image, whose origin becomes clearer when you read Singh's caption: "After secretly watching Gone with the Wind, I asked Guddie to pose as Scarlett O'Hara". What is remarkable is that unlike so many of the other pictures here, 'posing as Scarlett O'Hara' does not involve dressing up. No pert little bonnet or tight-waisted ball-gown or Mammy-like figure is needed to be Scarlett. It is the feeling that is sought to be emulated — though Guddie's dreamy-eyed gaze into a possible future seems quite different from the childish determination with which Scarlett sets out to shape hers.

That hankering for the cinematic image is something that Gadihoke's essay speaks to when she talks of film magazines as the place where film-goers "learnt to recognize star poses and gestures". "With three single aunts and four sisters, it was a family dominated by women and they all loved the cinema," writes Gadihoke. But "Nony's father was strict, and access to magazines and films was restricted." Similar stories abound in many upper- and middle-class Indian families: I grew up hearing of how my grandmother and her sisters sneaked out to watch films without telling their disapproving father (and later, my equally disapproving grandfather). Clearly, it was hard for even the sternest disciplinarian to completely keep films out of the home.

The cinema is, in fact, one of the ways in which the rather privileged world of Nony Singh's book – picnics in Koh Murree, holidays in Srinagar, cousins who go to Doon School – overlaps with the very different India that emerges from another recent book-archive of portrait photographs: *Artisan Camera*, Christopher Pinney's tribute to Suresh Punjabi's 1970s studio photography from the small town of Nagda in Madhya Pradesh. Of course, the largely lower-middle-class men who come to be photographed in Studio Suhag model themselves on Hindi film heroes: the alcohol-soaked lover, the bidi-smoking gangster, the white-suited, sunglasses-wearing businessman all appear. Nony's cinematic referents, though she tells us she loved Nargis, Meena Kumri, Nimmi, Madhubala and Dilip Kumar, are as often as not from Hollywood: Sophia Loren, *Gone With the Wind*.

At a more fundamental level, Punjabi's images are of people for whom the constricted, constructed space of the studio was the only photographic space available, while Nony Singh's subjects seem to roam freely through the world, with her camera being allowed into almost intimate moments. Striking among such images are the Kasauli photograph of her sister Rajman, "newly married and in a romantic pose" (balanced rather beautifully on her husband's lap), the image of a male cousin, bare-bodied on a rock in the Lacchiwala river, Dehradun, and the 1979 one of Dayanita looking stunning in "the halter her father had forbidden her to wear, except for the photograph".

But as always, that assumption of freedom, and of the camera as mere documenter, is too simple. The photograph of Dayanita in the halter is one stark instance of the camera being allowed to see what the rest of the world was not. In two images from 1960 we see Nony herself dressed in a way that perhaps only the camera could be privy to: first in an off-shoulder top and shorts, and then midstream in the same Lacchiwala river, only her bare shoulders visible above the water's surface. In another, from 1955, we see three young women sitting on the branch of a tree, with Nony's caption: "Climbing trees, though great fun, was not meant for girls those days. I asked them to sit on the tree to make an unusual picture." All these images are real — but their reality is the creation of the camera.

Nony Singh, 1960

During the making of the book *Artisan Camera*, Pinney writes, he discovered that most of the original negatives of Suresh Punjabi's full-length photographs contained all the 'noise' of the studio, the part that had been cropped in order to produce the centrally framed human body that was all that was considered to be of interest to the customer, or to Suresh. When Pinney made fresh prints from the negatives, he was thrilled to be able to restore the "silent Brechtian margin" that had been sitting there, "awaiting recovery". Fascinatingly, Dayanita Singh, describing her adult 'discovery' of her mother's images on the book jacket of *The Archivist*, describes a very similar process: "Many years later, I had contact sheets made of all her work. I saw how much the lab had cropped off each image. Printed in full frame, they turned out to be stunning images. They were more about the backdrop and the setting, rather than about her children." Having read these words, one starts to wonder what the angel and gypsy would look like without the other child in fairy wings being led away by the hand in the background, or whether Nixi as Sita would work without the creeper-covered trellis and straw-covered shed behind her. I'm not certain I agree with Dayanita Singh's last claim. To me, Nony Singh's images seem very much about the people in them. But of course, most of all, they are about herself. ■

Wierder, wilder and more wondrous

Unnatural Creatures

Stories chosen by Neil Gaiman

Bloomsbury, London, 2013, 462 pp., £12.99

ISBN 978-1-4088-4544-8

ANITA ROY

Early on in this collection of the bizarre, the strange and the impossible, we are introduced to a character called Sir Henry Mandifer, a man who, having made pots of money as a writer, had "taken to spiritualism" and was at the top of his game. On his way to investigate another intriguing piece of paranormalia, he congratulates himself that this particular call had come from a straight-laced, prim and proper old school friend who, in the normal course of things, wouldn't stand for such nonsense. "It only showed you," Sir Henry ruminates, "that the tidiest lives have nothing but quicksand for a base. The snuggest haven's full of trapdoors and sliding panels, unsuspected attics and suddenly discovered rooms." No wonder Neil Gaiman chose to open his selection of stories with this particular one. I suspect Sir Henry is a man after his own heart — possibly wielding a stake to shove through it.

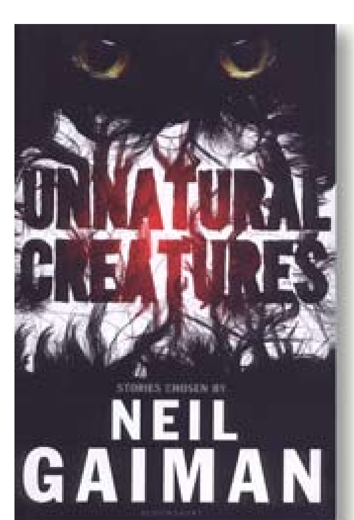
With multiple awards, bestsellers and a bibliography as long as your arm, Neil Gaiman is something of a cult figure. There's a reason why on the cover of this particular book, his name is about two-hundred times larger than the words 'stories chosen by'. It's not actually *by* Neil Gaiman, see, but the publishers clearly hope that by the time you've realised that, you'd have opened it, and been seduced by the deliciously baroque typography – each story is prefaced by a black page, designed like an invitation to the funeral of someone terribly posh – and are already reaching for your wallet.

And the book is, definitely, worth buying. The title page beckons you like a moustachioed impresario into his freakshow: "The Museum of Unnatural History Presents... a number of unnatural creatures along with several other creatures who are either unlikely, impossible, or do not exist at all." It's a great ploy: a kind of 'enter if you dare' threat that pulls the reader in.

Sixteen stories, a mix of previously published and new, by 16 writers, some long-dead (E Nesbit, Saki, Frank R Stockton, Anthony Boucher), some very much alive (the youngest, E Lily Yu, a mere 23 years old), with a fairly decent gender ratio (9:7 to the boys). Taken together the whole thing is reminiscent of the display cases of exotic or marvellous curios: the precursors of the modern museum. Open up this particular cabinet and you'll encounter mermaids and wolf-men, hamadryads, phoenixes and unicorns — not to mention (because you can't: it's unspellable) the nameless blob of the first story.

Gaiman clearly had a lot of fun putting this anthology together. He's a big fan of James Thurber's *The 13 Clocks* (1950), which he says "may be the best book in the world", and selected a story inspired by Thurber to include in this collection. Samuel R Delany's 'Prismatica' (1977) shares the same sing-song, poetic syntax of Thurber's classic. He echoes Thurber's trope of repeating phrases, almost like an incantation – "a wizard so great and so old and so terrible that you and I need never worry about him," for example – and also has a wonderfully Thurberesque ear for onomatopoeia (*onvbpmf, glumphvmr, fuffle*).

E Lily Yu's story, 'The Cartographer Wasps and the Anarchist Bees' might read like an Orwellian parable of masters and slaves, but the real delight in the story is the imagery. Take this, from the opening section: "In this way it was discovered that the wasp nests of Yiwei, dipped in hot water, unfurled into beautifully accurate maps of provinces near and far, inked in vegetable pigments and labelled in careful Mandarin that could be distinguished beneath a microscope." Fleeing from the map-plundering humans, the wasps make off in a boat,



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"provisioned with fallen apricots and squash blossoms" to establish a new colony. The tale unfurls, much like the wasps' maps, in miniature such that the reader is left gazing up in wonder at the stained glass windows made of bee wings in the wasps' council chamber.

Frank R Stockton was an American humourist whose children's stories stood out for their refusal to moralise and sermonise, but who used gentle humour to explore human foibles and flaws. In this collection, 'The Griffin and the Minor Canon' (first published in 1885) tells the tale of a lonely Griffin and a gentle clergyman who strike up a strange and tender friendship in the face of the townsfolks' fear and prejudice. It opens on an entrancingly fairytale-like note: "Over the great door of an old, old church which stood in a quiet town of a far-away land there was carved in stone the figure of a large griffin." When the real Griffin, a huge and fearsome-looking creature, with talons and wings, a wickedly sharp beak and a long, curling tail, gets to hear about his likeness on the church, he decides to pay a visit — much to the consternation of the townsfolk. Echoing the old 'Beauty and the Beast' fairytale, we are left wondering who is more monstrous: the creature or the humans?

Gaiman's own contribution to this collection is told in characteristic swashbuckling style. Here's how he introduces it: "Lightning bugs, dolphinfish, dung beetle, unicorn flank steak... the intrepid members of the Epicurean Society have eaten every kind of animal. Or have they...?" What follows is a Rabellaisian quest by a coven of adventurous eaters: Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy, "big enough for three men, who ate enough for four men and who drank enough for five"; Professor Mandalay "small and twitchy and grey as a ghost (and perhaps he was a ghost; stranger things have happened)"; Virginia Boote, the food critic, who "had once been a great beauty but was now a grand and magnificent ruin"; and Jackie Newhouse a direct descendant of "the great lover, gourmand, violinist and duelist Giacomo Casanova". With a cast of characters like this, you could hardly fail to enjoy the tasty spread, and Gaiman falls too like a man starved of language and sinks his teeth right in with some deliciously chewy sentences. Reminiscing on their past conquests (including flash-frozen mammoth and Patagonian giant sloth, not to mention panda-steaks), Newhouse at one point sums up their motley crew: "We have become cosmonauts exploring undreamed-of worlds of delectation and gourmanderie." It's such a meaty and satisfying tale, you end up feeling pleasantly stuffed and in need of a good old burp.

As in any collection, there are some stories that work better than others, not all will be to every reader's taste. Apart from Gaiman's own story, I'd particularly recommend E Nesbit's charming 'The Cockatoucan' (1900) which made me want to immediately go back and re-read her children's classics starting with *The Five Children and It*, to enjoy again her inimitable Edwardian style. In this story, as in many others of this particular genre, the child at the heart of it is locked in deadly battle with adults who Think They Know Better: "Matilda was quite right in believing that savage children do not wear frocks that hurt. It is also true that savage children are not overwashed, overbrushed, overcombed, gloved, booted, and hatted, and taken in an omnibus to Streatham to see their Great-Aunt Willoughby. This was intended to be Matilda's fate."

The stiff upper-lips of Nesbit's tale make a nice counterpoint to the drawly Americanisms of 'Or All the Seas With Oysters', sci-fi author Avram Davidson's tale set in small-town America some time in the early 1960s. It's full of 'doggone it's and 'well, I guess so's and the contrast between Ferd and Oscar's hokey dialogues and the sinister behaviour of some of the bicycles, coat hangers and paperclips that are lying around, is rather delightful. Here's a telling snippet:

"Maybe they're a different kind of life-form. Maybe they get their nourishment out of the elements in the air. You know what safety pins are — these other kinds of them? Oscar, the safety pins are the pupa forms and then they, like, *hatch*. Into larval forms. Which look just like coat hangers. They feel like them, even, but they're not. Oscar, they're not, not really, not really, not…" He began to cry into his hands.

It's of course impossible to do justice to all the stories in this collection, but the publisher's description of James Thurber's *The 13 Clocks* would do just as well for Gaiman's *Unnatural Creatures*: it is a work of "dark and delicate whimsy for all ages". Buy it — mainly for the reason that this collection of stories weaves together so many delicious elements: the macabre, the fantastical, the lyrical, and occasionally the downright silly. But buy it also because the proceeds will go to the very fantastic non-profit organisation, 826DC which was set up by novelist Dave Eggers to foster students writing skills. With any luck, the book will help the real Museum of Unnatural History, at the 826DC headquarters in Washington DC, to restock the bottles of unicorn farts in their gift shop, and do whatever it is that they so brilliantly do to make life a little wierder, wilder and more wondrous for the kids (and their parents) that pass through. ■

The other side of darkness

The Hundred Names of Darkness

By Nilanjana Roy

Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2014, 313 pp., Rs 495 (HB)

ISBN 978-93-82277-77-4

SHALINI MUKERJI

For many readers, *The Hundred Names of Darkness* (*TNOD*) will fulfill the prophecy that *The Wildings* augured, for Nilanjana Roy's sequel revels in journeying, storytelling and the immensities of the universe, and it's as spirited in celebrating freedom, the bonds of friendship and community, the familiar as well as otherness and the courage to imagine a path/life other than the one you know.

Still others could find in *TNOD* the cautionary wisdom and affirmation packed into the Delphic maxim 'Know thyself', for, set in a winter of dislocation and difficult choices, the plot concerns the coming of age of the green-eyed kitten Mara and the shuffling fledgling Hatch; the twist in the tale hinges on creatures realising their potential and upon the hope that even a worm will turn.

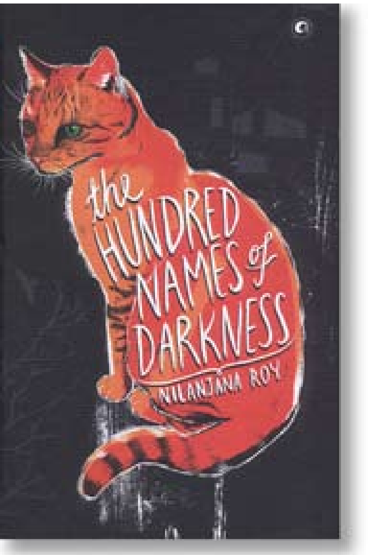
But all "Bigfeet" (humans beings in Roy's parlance), whether they love animals or are indifferent to nature, will find themselves more circumspect, less urbane, while glossing over our (in) human impact on the world.

TNOD returns us to the same clumsy, thoughtless Bigfeet world that Roy alerted us to in *The Wildings*, only, it's harsher and more directly in conflict with the stray and homeless on the streets. In the winter that's come, Nizamuddin's clan of cats, along with the pigs, cheels, babblers, street dogs, bulbuls, mice and other wildlife, need to scavenge for food in a shrinking habitat circumscribed by "high rooftops of the forbidding new buildings in Nizamuddin proper" and "frozen iron bars of the gates that blocked off many of the colony's roads".Lives are lost to traffic, asphyxiating smoke from bonfires of rubber, refuse and dry leaves, poisoned traps, dog catcher vans and other meanness as a neighbourhood sterilises itself. Southpaw turns cat-burglar (and falls into danger); Beraal, Hulo and Katar, like the Dargah cats, slip around lanes they once strutted through, lean shadows of themselves. They need Mara to show them a way out, since her extraordinarily long whiskers lead her on incredible journeys from the comfort of her basket (a bit like how internet clicks take us elsewhere), and the cats need her to roam further than their paws can carry them. Except, Mara, a year older since we met her last, still hasn't been outside, hasn't really met the clan and is terrified by the world at large. An accident changes all this. Mara crashes into wheels spinning towards her, encounters snarling dogs and unexpected mutt-headed devotion; has a run-in with the warrior mongoose Kirri who admonishes Mara to act more like herself; is counseled by other senders special like herself; pits her wits against a 'thuggery' of bandicoots whose oiliness will make your skin crawl and whose overrun of burrows might bring on a comparison with how humans indiscriminately build and tunnel across open spaces, "the way the yellow ropes of ambarbel, the strangling creeper, would sometimes cover and then choke a tree". Along with the other wildings, Mara too faces a stark winter of being hunted, hungry, homeless and homesick.

Roy's narrative pleasures in an elemental world; as when Kirri asks Mara on her first night out in the world(unutterably bereft and lost), if she can pad past her fears:

> ... Your Bigfeet must be good people; but do you not miss your own kind? Does your blood not sing to you to climb the trees and race along the rooftops, to challenge every other young queen who claims this park as territory, to find a tom of your own to mate with under the silver moonlight?

Cheels thrill you with their daring, joyous flight and *TNOD* creates such a fierce, glowing moment when Tooth recalls his and Claw's mating,



The tortoiseshell traveller cat, whose stray adventures Beraal comforts Mara with one long, cold winter's night, is the core of *The Hundred Names of Darkness*. It's travellers' tales that hold you most in thrall. The heart of the book lies in the textures of travel it brings alive and the wanderlust it taps into, crystallising beautifully the enchantment of elsewhere that both travel and stories entice us with and, not least, the degrees of kind(ness) layering our world that Roy's narrative invites us to consider

that the next time you hear a pair of cheels calling, you'll but hear Joycean affirmation:

> ... and from behind the clouds, bursting out and upwards at a speed that almost froze my beak, my mate answered! "Yes!" she cried, "yes, I will, yes."

There are the Goan interludes with the formidable sender from Paolim, Magnificat, fierce huntress, queen of the roofs, who thrills to the "silver and blood fragrance" of battles, hunts and fishing. In fact, like any fantastical adventure worth the telling, *TNOD* begins with cat and cobra stalking each other across red-tiled rooftops made slippery by rain. This "dance" as Roy likes to phrase her face-offs between predator and prey or between ancient adversaries, fascinated by the brutal ethics of survival, is what Mara must learn.

And there's the curious cat that, Mary Poppins-like, stays someplace until the wind changes:

> Once, there lived a cat who liked to follow her whiskers: when they twitched at the breeze, when the scent of something new and strange murmured to them from the back of the east wind, her paws would twitch too, and she would go where her whiskers and paws carried her.
>
> When the spring winds spoke to her of fish with silver mouths and fat juicy bellies to be found in the frog-speckled silt of the mangrove forests, her paws took her to a river boat, a light, lean craft, whose planks she warmed for the length of the summer.
>
> When the summer sun of the river deltas walked its fingers through her fur, whispering to her of the rains that drummed on the red tile roofs of Goa, the plump crabs and frogs that swelled the paddy with their croaking, the cat listened to the sun's whispers. Soon she was stowed safely in the back of a truck, perched high on its bales, sleeping snugly in the thick knotted coils of the ropes that trussed its cargo, sharing the truck drivers' milk and meat until they had reached the other coast, where the skies roared and the dark clouds lay with their full bellies pressed against the green land.
>
> When the monsoon rains slowed, the last of the rain and the wind caressed her ears, and she heard about the friendly house-stoves in the mountains, where there was always room for another cat or three… She found a berth in a train… The bearers on the train made her a pillow from some old torn sheets, and let her curl up to warm her belly on the flasks of tea when they reached the colder slopes of the hills.
>
> ….And so it went on for many years; the cat's whiskers would twitch after the turning of the seasons, and the winds would rustle the names of far-away places until it had smoothed them into her fur, and her paws would uncurl and take her where she needed to go.

This tortoiseshell traveller cat, whose stray adventures Beraal comforts Mara with one long, cold winter's night, is the core of *TNOD*. You'll find that if the surprise and adventures of first paw-explorations and whiskered linking, or the bloodied drama of the battle with the ferals kept you hooked in *The Wildings*, it's travellers' tales in *TNOD* that hold you most in thrall. The heart of the book lies in the textures of travel it brings alive and the wanderlust it taps into, crystallising beautifully the enchantment of elsewhere that both travel and stories entice us with and, not least, the degrees of kind(ness) layering our world that Roy's narrative invites us to consider.

The puns are in place: a squawking parrot pair are called "Chancha" and "Meechi" (one word in Bangla, '*chanchameechi*' means noise/clamour); bandicoots answer to "Poonch" and "Mooch"; the naming of the cats locates a Jalebi at Chandni Chowk, Umrrow Jaan at Mehrauli, Spook at the embassy area, and His Excellency Billi Bunter Singhji (Diplocat for short) at the Delhi Golf Course. Roy has Tooth dismiss pigeons for what they are:"winged rats"; and the Golf Course has its pecking order of the peacock patrol led by Thomas Morand the rank-pulling, smug colonial cats devoted to their bundobast of permits and honorifics, and an incurably romantic kooky koel given to *shairi*. And yet, the magic of this cat-fable feels a little blunted, the story's pacing a trifle sluggish, because this sequel references the preceding story too often and labours over re-creating characters and providing context for first-time readers unfamiliar with the world of *The Wildings*. One wishes there were more of Prabha Mallya's chiaroscuros to animate the textures and emotions of Roy's world: tenderness, gore, whimsy, terror, curiosity, longing, homesickness, friendship, freedom, light and dark.

Quite a few readers (like me) might feel disloyal, as if betraying the clan, because we couldn't unreservedly delight in this world Roy creates as we did in her previous one. But like me, I'm certain they'll give thanks for the tortoiseshell fable cat who, seeking an answer blowing in the wind, ventures to the other side of darkness. And, in spite of her bloodied paws and her uncertainties, and the immensity of the unfamiliar, lets her whiskers reach out to befriend the night. For:

> The night hides more than predators until we know it so well that we can speak its many names without fear; and yet, we live most keenly under the wing of darkness. ■

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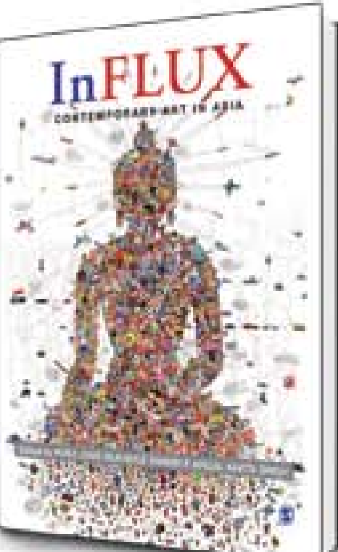

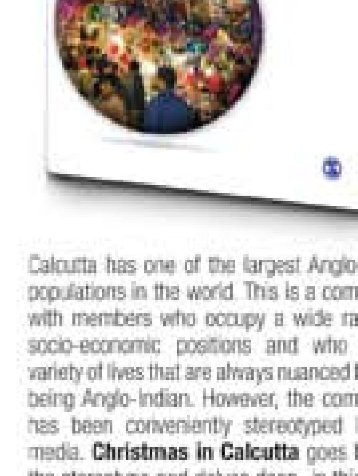

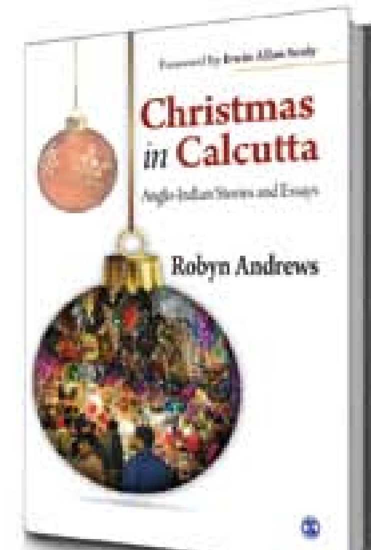

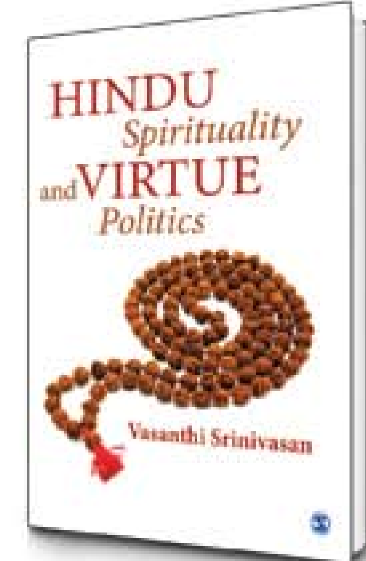

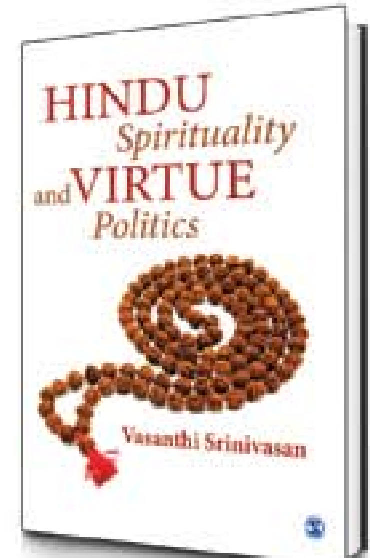

InFlux brings together essays by leading critics and curators to examine modern and contemporary art practice and its discourses in Asia. Covering diverse regions spanning China, India, Thailand, Iran, West Asia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Cambodia, the book examines their multiple modernities and the arrival of many Asias upon the contemporary art scene. Some centers have become celebrated in the international exhibition circuit and the art market, but there is also an Asia beyond their ambit, and the book throws light upon major and minor, established and emergent geographies of art..

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Paperback (978-81-321-1597-7)

Calcutta has one of the largest Anglo-Indian populations in the world. This is a community with members who occupy a wide range of socio-economic positions and who live a variety of lives that are always nuanced by their being Anglo-Indian. However, the community has been conveniently stereotyped by the media. **Christmas in Calcutta** goes beyond the stereotype and delves deep in this study of the Anglo-Indian community in Calcutta. The book comprises life stories, memoir pieces and essays on issues of contemporary interest. It is organised into four sections: Identity; Faith; Education; Community Care.

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Hindu Spirituality and Virtue Politics analyzes the writings of four distinguished thinkers of India: S. Radhakrishnan, Vinoba Bhave, C. Rajagopalachari and A. K. Coomaraswamy. The author argues that there are two distinct visions of how Hindu spirituality is linked to modern liberal politics. The first and more popular vision draws from Vedanta ideals and moves toward a tight fit between spirituality and politics. The second and alternative vision, present in the writings of these four thinkers, is what this book analyzes in detail. The book explores a subtler and more realistic fit between spirituality and politics.

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Recasting Caste examines the intersection of economic, political and ideological components of the caste system through a historical perspective. It shows that the caste system is actually grounded in a hierarchy of land rights and political power supported by religious and secular ideology. While the mainstream sociologists focus on ritual homogeneity and draw attention away from intra-caste inequality, thus portraying castes as internally undifferentiated, the author illuminates intra-caste differentiation by locating the roots of caste in economic and political hierarchy.

2014 • 312 pages • ₹ 795
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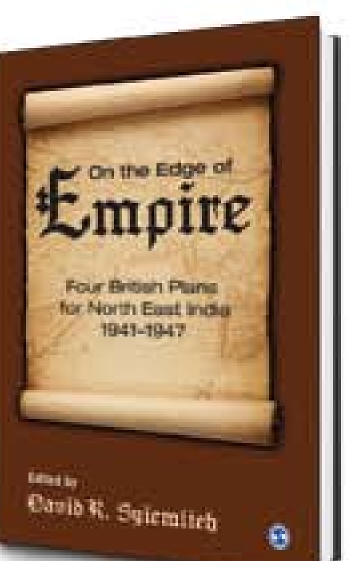

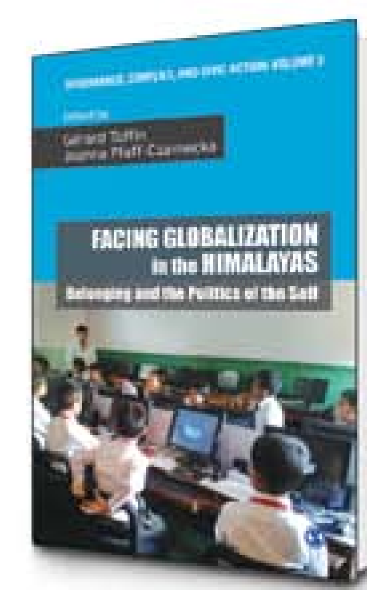

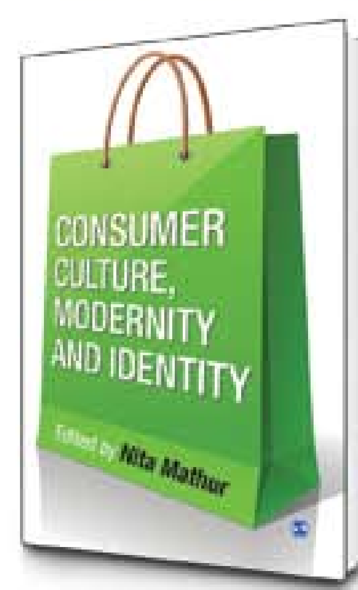

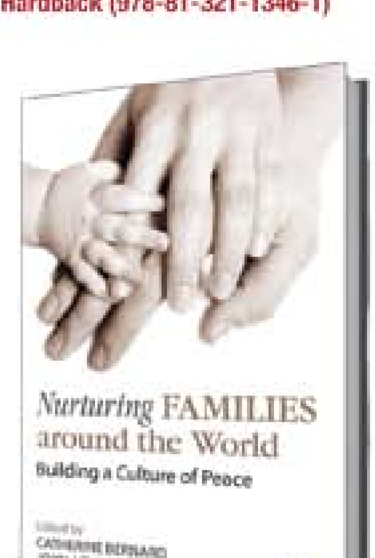

In the closing years of the British rule in India, a secret plan was conceived and discussed at the highest circles for a crown colony comprising the hill areas of North East India and the tribal areas of Burma. The plan could not be implemented largely because it came up for discussion in the closing years of the British rule over India. For too long, secondary references have been used in writing about these plans as the original documents were not easily available for research. **On the Edge of Empire** compiles the four British plans into a single volume. There is a connection between the four plans of Reid, Clow, Mills and Adams. All four were members of the Indian Civil Service.

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Facing Globalization in the Himalayas explores the complex relationships between belonging and globalization in the contemporary Himalayan world and beyond. Over the last decades, the interrelations at local, national, and global scales have intensified in historically unprecedented forms and intensity. At the same time, homogenizing global processes have generated parochial and vernacular reactions. This book is the first major study on this topic and a crucial contribution to the study of the current change within the Himalayan societies and their cultures.

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The internet way

The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age Of Amazon
By Brad Stone
Bantam Press/Random House Group, London, 2013, 372 pp., £12.99
ISBN 978-0-593-07046-8

NISHANT SHAH

'The Age of Amazon' is not just the title of a book, it is a retrospective on the history of e-commerce as well as a prophecy for the shape of things to come. In his meticulously reported book, Brad Stone takes us through the roller coaster ride of the 'Everything Store' that Amazon has become, building a gripping tale of an idea that has become synonymous to the world of online shopping in just over two decades. The book reads well as a biopic on the visionary lunacy of Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, as well as a gripping tale of how ideas grow and develop in the digital information age.

Stone is an expert storyteller, not only because of his eye for the whimsical, the curious and the enchantment of the seemingly banal, but also because of his ability to question his own craft. At the very outset, Stone warns us that the book has been compiled through conversations with friends, family and workers at employee, but not Bezos himself. This helps Stone separate the maker from the brand — unlike Steve Jobs who became the cult icon for Apple, Bezos himself has never become the poster child of his brand, allowing Amazon to become not only an everything store but everybody store. But it means that Stone's task was to weave together the personal biography of Bezos, his dramatic journey through life with the tumultuous and adventurous inception and growth of Amazon, and his skill lies in the meeting of the twines, which he does with style, ease and charm.

One of the easiest accusations to throw at a book like this is to state that it reduces the murky, blurred, messy and incoherent set of events into a narrative that establishes causes and attributes design and intention where none existed. However, Stone was confronted with the idea of 'Narrative Fallacy' — a concept coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his *Black Swan*, referring to the tendency of human beings to reduce complex phenomenon to "soothing but oversimplified stories". In fact, the challenge to not reduce the book to a series of connected anecdotes was posed by Bezos when Stone pitched the book to him. And what has emerged is a book about accidents, serendipity, risk, redundancy, failure charting the ineffable, inscrutable and inexplicable ways in which digital technologies are shaping the worlds we live in.

With the rigour and journalistic inquiry that Stone has displayed in his regular writings in *The Businessweek*, *The Everything Store* has stories which are as memorable as they are unexpected. Stone does a fantastic job of charting Bezos' life — from tracking down the lost father who had no idea what his son, who he had abandoned at age three, has become, to the chuckle-worthy compilation of Bezos' favourite quotes (Stone calls it his 'greatest hits'), the book is filled with pointed and poignant observations and stories that give us an idea of the extraordinary life of Jeff Bezos. But unlike the expected character creation of a mad genius, what you get is the image of a man who lived in contradictions: wedded to his internal idea of truth but also ruthless in his business policies which were predatory and competitive to say the least; a businessman who once wrote a memo titled 'Amazon.love' about how he wanted a company to be "loved not feared" but also used the metaphor of a "cheetah preying on the gazelles" in its acquisition of smaller businesses; a man who thought of himself as a "missionary rather than a mercenary" and yet built a business empire that embodies some of the most discriminatory, exploitative and stark conditions of adjunct, adhoc, underpaid and contract-based labour of our precariously mobile worlds.

Stone is masterful as he segues from Bezos' personal life and ambitions into the monomaniacal and turbulent trajectory of Amazon. Amazon is not a simple success story. It tried and failed at many things, but what remains important is how, it failed at the traditional way of doing things and succeeded at the internet way of thinking. So when Amazon failed, it was not a failure to succeed, but a failure that resulted because the infrastructure needed to make it succeed was not yet in place. Stone's narrative that effortlessly takes us through the economics, trade, policies, regulation, administration and struggles of Amazon, shows how it was a company that had to invent the world it wanted to succeed in, in order to succeed

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But the book is not a Martin-Scorsese-type homage to the scoundrel or the villain. While it is imbued with a sense of the adventure and the excitement that is a part of the dot com world; it is also patiently and pertinently critical of the horrifying work conditions that Amazon has to offer. Stone avoids the easy comparison with Jobs, but makes it unequivocally clear that Bezos had you going in and coming out. He pulls out a company joke that was quite popular in Amazon: "If you're not good, Jeff will chew you up and spit you out. And if you are good, he will jump on your back and ride you into the ground." Or as Stone himself suggests, that is the way the company is going to grow "until either Jeff Bezos exits the scene or no one is left to stand in his way". This policy of taking everything from its employees and channelling it to the relentless growth of the company accounts for not only the high attrition rate of top executives but also the growing controversies about work and labour conditions in Amazon warehouses and on-the-ground delivery services.

Stone's book does not go into great detail about the new work force that companies like Amazon produce — a work force that is reduced to being a cog in a system, performing mechanical tasks, working at minimal wage, and without the protections that are offered to the white collar high-level technology executives that are the pop-up children of the digital trade. Stone reminds us that behind the incredible platform that Amazon is, is a massive physical infrastructure which almost reminds us of the early industrial days where the labourer was in a state of exploitation and precariousness. And even as we celebrate the rise of these global behemoths, we might forget that behind the seductive interfaces and big data applications, that under the excitement of drone-based delivery systems and artificial intelligence that will start delivering things even before you place the order, is a system that pushes more and more workers in unprotected and exploitative work conditions.

All in all, *The Everything Store* is a little bit like Amazon itself. It is a love story of a man with his ideas, and how the rest of the world has shifted, tectonically, to accommodate these eruptions. In its historical retrospective, it shows us the full scope of the ideas and possibilities that inform Amazon, and thus the future that it is going to build for us. And with masterful craftsmanship, Brad Stone writes that it is as much about the one man and his company, as it is about the physical and affective infrastructure of our rapidly transforming digital worlds. ■

A Current of Blood
Namdeo Dhasal

navayana
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Translated by Dilip Chitre
ISBN 9788189059385
Paperback | 120 pages | 6.5 x 8.5" | Rs 180

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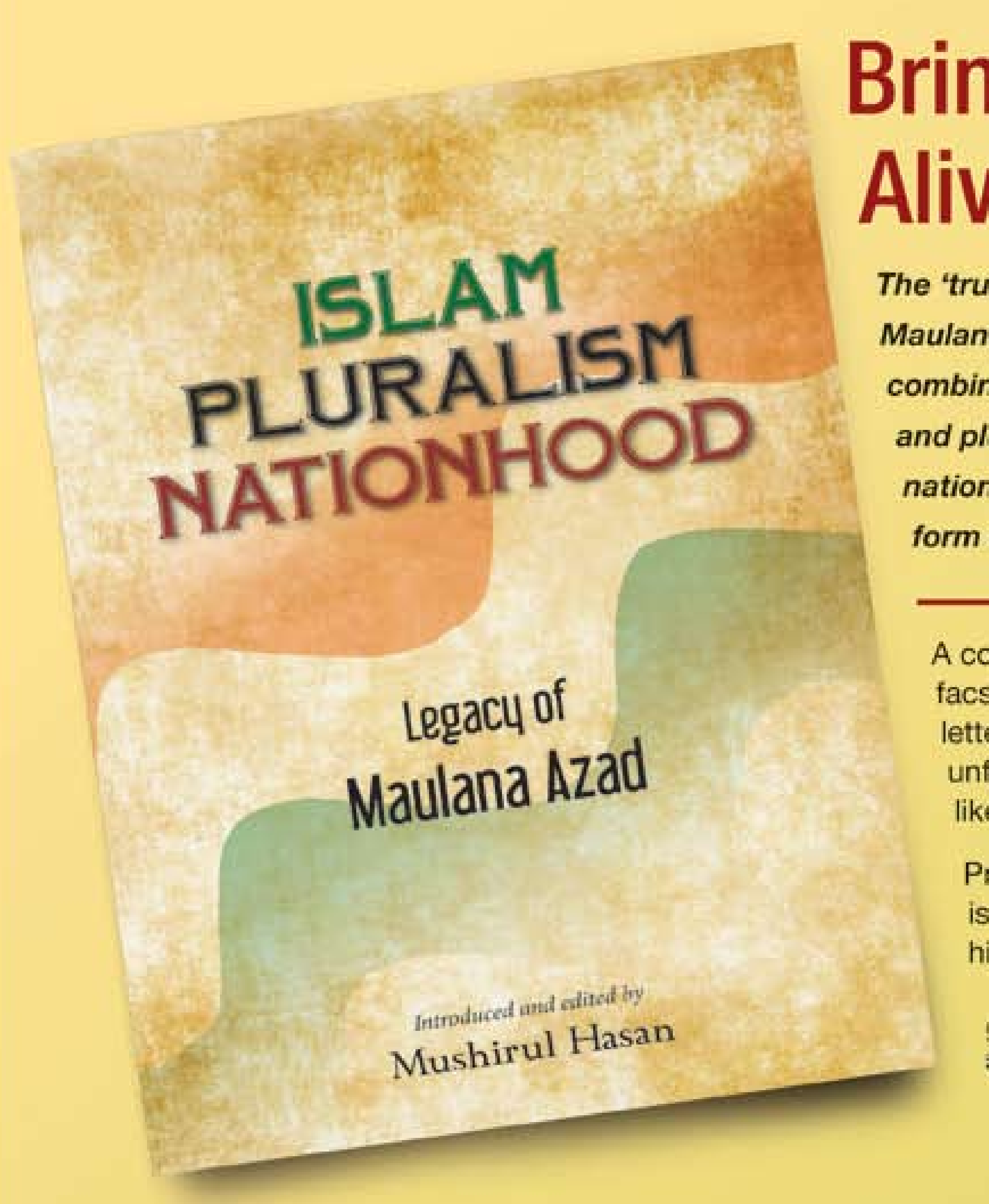

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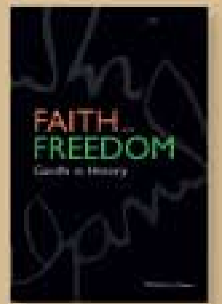

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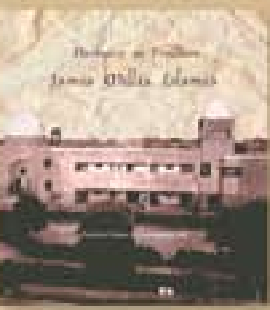
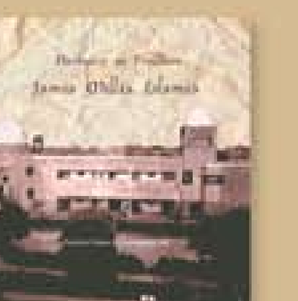

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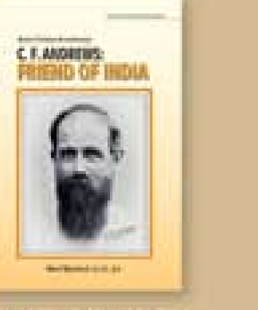

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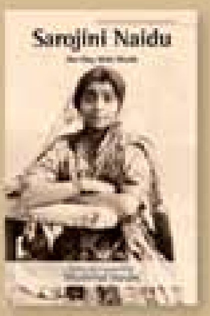

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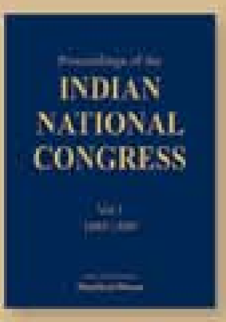

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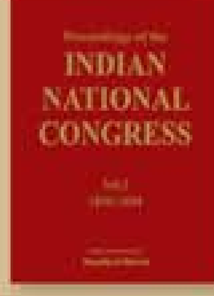

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On shallow ground

City Adrift: a short biography of Bombay

By Naresh Fernandes

Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2013, 155 pp., Rs 295

ISBN 978-93-822-7720-0

KARISHMA ATTARI

Bombay presents a winning muse for an author in search of a sweeping theme. It is a pulsating, populous, financial hub that happens to host the country's celluloid dream factory. Naresh Fernandes's biography is a short and engaging guide to the evolution of the city, from its origins as a set of tidal swampy islands (of dubious value as a dowry), to its current ironical existence as financial capital of the country, where one in five residents lives below the poverty line. There's undoubtedly enough material here for several tomes, yet Fernandes deftly sidesteps the call of the ponderous to select the events that most tellingly defined and continue to define Bombay.

Using lucid prose that, in the best journalistic style, is a whisper short of breezy, and never bogged down by detail, Fernandes is well aware of the challenges that come with attempting to write a biography of a city in one slim volume. He splits his narrative into two parts; there appears to be the shared assumption that despite the amusing minutiae presented in Part One, Part Two will serve weightier issues.

The first part is an origins and evolution story: a story of Bombay's almost mythic geneses. The Indian freedom movement as it made its way to Bombay, and Bombay's role in supporting Mahatma Gandhi is outlined. There are plenty of period particulars, retrospective ironies and a tallying up of the losses and gains of policy decisions over the years, particularly those with respect to the mill district as it developed into a "locality, the resonant word Bombayites use to refer to the web of relationships and institutions that makes a place home". Part One also mentions droll trivia such as philanthropist and China trader Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy in 1834 was the first person to serve ice at a dinner party, "though the Bombay Samachar reported a few days later that the host and many of his guests caught colds". Or that the abundance of East European women who worked as ladies of the night meant that the Kamathipura red light district would be known as "safed gully or white lane". However, the moment the last Englishman steps off the Gateway of India the sepia tone of the diminishing past is replaced by a harsher and newer reality.

Part Two opens with the great stain in the once cosmopolitan fabric of Bombay's story: the communal riots of 1992. This harsh reminder is just the first of many tragedies that Fernandes scrutinises in the chapters to follow. So the clever title that appears to serve the first part of the book is really an ironic reference to the conditions of the second. The city may have been reclaimed from the sea in the past but it is adrift and without sound policy and management.

Part Two looks closely at the kind of human rights violations that spiralled out from the Bombay riots. It also examines the gross violations of zoning laws and how attempts at land reform have been hijacked to starve the city of its few remaining opportunities for better development, whether in the city centre or elsewhere. The strengths and weaknesses of Bombay's hard-working citizens are summed up and the allegedly indefatigable "spirit of Bombay" is held up to enquiry, but it is the political corruption and deliberate communalisation of Bombay that earns the greatest ire.

Fernandes was a journalist on the beat during the riots and his account of the sights he has seen is well supplemented by his subsequent research. He quotes an associate professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in his work on the aftermath of the riots in recently Muslim-dominated areas like Mumbra, Jogeshwari and Dharavi, to conclude: "Space and identity have combined to become a deadly zone of exclusion." Bombay's Muslims are pushed to the peripheries while building societies in affluent areas accept only "vegetarian" residents or more categorically do not accept Muslim residents. The result is increasing ghettoisation of the city.

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***City Adrift* makes no play at being a definitive guide to everything that has to do with Bombay. It concentrates on fixing a sense of history to Bombay, even as it rejects the fierce Shiv Sena-type politicisation that went into it being renamed as Mumbai. The narrative's main thrust is to provide testimony to how the confluence between indifferent government agencies, corrupt politicians, land sharks, the selfish affluent and the "slacktivism" of the public have resulted in a city of greed cut off from its moorings and dangerously adrift without common cause and common ground**

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If it is not religion, then it is class that is proving another great divider and slum rehabilitation projects have a long way to go before achieving their purpose. It is chilling to consider that the average life expectancy of Bombayites can vary by as much as 13 years depending on which area they live in. The statistics are telling: "Since 1991, the proportion of people living in slums has almost doubled." Nearly half of Bombay's population of 12.4 million now live in shanties. Meanwhile, the prosperous choose to live in increasingly segregated lives in gated communities, where tag lines like "exclusive integrated enclave" promote the aspiration of living in a reconfigured high-class environment that is as much about the other-worldly facilities as it is about keeping out the real homogeneity of Bombay. The advertising spiel for a new housing complex in Wadala serves as a picture-perfect example of this near-secession from Mumbai with its line, "the eight island of Mumbai discriminates". The builders wish to be thought of as offering something exclusive and isolated from the general throng of street life. This form of "re-islanding" as Fernadnes calls it is bound to damage the fabric of the city that is meant to be inter-dependent as all vital cities are.

Its origins as a set of islands aside Fernandes notes: "Strangely, Bombay has few official monuments to its slushy foundations. But in the cartography of everyday life, the ocean is rarely far away. It sloshes around in the names of landlocked neighbourhoods like the fig tree creek of Umerkahdi, washes against the vanished pier of Bori Bunder and surges at high tide through the drainage nallahs of Null Bazaar."

City Adrift proceeds chronologically. Fernandes is correct in his persuasion that eavesdropping on conversations is the best way to understand a city. He pieces together fragments from the past until he gets to the present age, as though they are snippets of dialogue using various sources including articles, travellers accounts, scholarly papers, official chronicles, letters and other historical records. The result is a rather enjoyable ironical retrospective as chroniclers from the 17th century onwards protest at the kind of congestion and confusion that Bombay has traditionally wallowed in.

Policy and management have never really been partners in Bombay's growth story. "The city's layout as well as the regulations about land use and land sales, was conceptualized not to enhance the comfort of residents but to maximize commercial gain.... Even as an embryonic settlement of 10,000 people, Bombay has displayed a talent for vacillation that would persist all the way into the twenty-first century."

In short, Bombay has always been too dirty, too crowded and too haphazard. A relative of the author's who published a book in the 1920s on Bandra, (known as the 'queen' of the suburbs outlying Bombay) noted: "The housing famine is acute." Fernandes also describes his own family's past in Bandra as he sorts through "the eleven kilogram stack of letters and court petitions" that his grandfather had preserved in an attempt to get justice when his land was requisitioned; the story of how his grandfather's 1,715 square yard plot of farmland is swallowed up appears to be a part of how the farmlands of Bandra eventually came to be absorbed during the town's rapid urbanisation.

Fernandes's research into the literature available on early Bombay suggests that the city always struggled with its density and that it was a factor in how trade flourished. Even as early as 1673, a visitor remarks that the diversity of the town was staggering, "in which confusedly lived" a strange mix of people of all communities and nationalities, and Fernandes says, "Already, the incipient city carried the promise of equal opportunity that would make it different from any other settlement India had known. Tolerance was the hallmark of Bombay…" The ambition of allowing citizens to live "without fear or favour" as a feature of the new British law was one that Bombay followed. After all, this was Bombay, "India's most cosmopolitan city, an oasis of amity whose only business was business."

This situation would change as Fernandes ominously remarks in a build up to the communal riots when "it suddenly turned its back on its history in the 1990s". Bombay was reclaimed and reorganised for the credo of making money, but the turn of the century has stripped it of the cosmopolitan it held dear. The age of philanthropy and equal opportunity may well be past, and Bombay is witnessing the era of selfishness, greed and illegalities, where even the average citizen seems to accept that the law is to be interpreted "as per individual convenience".

City Adrift makes no play at being a definitive guide to everything that has to do with Bombay; there is little about Bollywood, barely a glancing mention of Bombay's distinctive street food and its multilingual traditions of theatre or other forms of celebratory and communal street culture. Each of these subjects could easily attract a biography dedicated to them. *City Adrift* does not pay attention to the increasingly discussed and pertinent women's issues. It concentrates on fixing a sense of history to Bombay, even as it rejects the fierce Shiv Sena-type politicisation that went into it being renamed as Mumbai. The narrative's main thrust is to provide testimony to how the confluence between indifferent government agencies, corrupt politicians, land sharks, the selfish affluent and the "slacktivism" of the public have resulted in a city of greed cut off from its moorings and dangerously adrift without common cause and common ground. There is an undeniable lament in the thought that one of the most iconic cities in the world has not stood up to its potential for greatness. Yet *City Adrift* curbs its exasperation, reigns in its angst and eschewing any sentimentalism – much like the city it talks about – keeps the narrative short, pithy and smooth. ■

Poet of the proletariat

NAMDEO DHASAL (1949 - 2014)

KUMAR KETKAR

Had he been an Indian writer in English, that hallowed class of littérateurs, Namdeo Dhasal would have acquired international acclaim. His poetry collections would be displayed in bookshops at airports. Some of his poetry has indeed been translated into English (including those translated by his friend, the late Dilip Chitre, in a book titled *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld, Poems 1972-2006*, published by Navayana in 2006) and other languages, but that is hardly enough to push him across the linguistic barrier.

He was a rebel, a revolutionary, an anarchist, a maverick and politically often unpredictable. He did not believe in the elitist notion of "art for art's sake" and often confronted cosy academics of literary studies. His searing poetry, essays, his speeches and newspaper columns railed against injustice, social discrimination, oppressive poverty, degradation of life and against patriarchal male chauvinism. He did so in a language that was explosive, if abusive, but so expressive and picturesque that it shattered the complacence of a stable middle class.

When Namdeo Dhasal appeared on the literary scene of Maharashtra, this middle class exercised absolute hegemony over language and style, metaphor and imagery. Sanskritised and decent, the words would neither hurt nor harm the upper class-upper caste sensibilities. Universities would hold seminars on the aesthetic use of metaphors in poetry. Subtlety of the subconscious and stream of consciousness provided the style as well as substance.

Namdeo Dhasal was not opposed to aesthetic expression and magnificent metaphors. He was not against elegance in style, nor did he shy away from exploring the deeper layers of mind. All his writing, though seething with anger, never once degenerates into mere abusive shouts and screams. Even those bursts of emotional upsurge acquire a sort of rhythmic and lyrical resonance. His poetry also delves into philosophy — sometimes existential, sometimes spiritual. But his spirituality is not of the 'other world' or transcendental universe. Rather, it is about making this very material world more meaningful, more compassionate, more profound through socially conscious selflessness.

He was deeply attracted to Marxism and Maoism – not today's Naxalism – because to him they provided meaning to his life. His untiring effort was to integrate Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's socio-philosophical thought with that of Karl Marx. He believed that the caste system could not be wiped out without some sort of cultural revolution. When he and his Dalit comrades launched the militant Dalit Panther movement in 1972, China was in the throes of its Cultural Revolution, while the Black Panthers movement and anti-war demonstrations were sweeping through America. The trigger for the American radical protest movement was Martin Luther King's "We Shall Overcome" 1968 march and the youth anger against the vicious war in Vietnam which had spilled on to campuses and streets. Those were the days without instant communication: no cell phones, no Facebook, nor Twitter, and yet the whole world appeared enveloped in a hyper-transformational mood. The radical youth was against capitalism, neo-imperialism, consumerism, racism and particularly White supremacy.

Like the Black Panthers, the Dalit Panthers too were angry, frustrated, directionless young boys – and some girls – taking on the mighty establishment. The Dalit Panthers movement was a kind of cultural revolution within the Republican-Ambedkarite movement. The senior leaders of the Republican Party of India had become complacent, having made compromises with the system — and were ageing. The youthful rebellion within the Dalit community and the party created a wave of sorts from which emerged the radical leadership of Namdeo Dhasal. But the revolt was expressed more through literature than politics. That itself was a rare phenomenon in the politics of Maharashtra.

Dhasal was born to a Dalit family and was a Mahar by caste — the same caste as that of Ambedkar. Ambedkar had emerged as a saviour, as a torchbearer for revolution, as an icon, as a messiah, who had transformed not only the lives of the 'Untouchables' but the very political discourse. Dhasal was devoted to Ambedkar and his philosophy, and yet he was open to all other philosophical and political ideas. He could easily embrace Marxist ideas and did not consider that Marxist philosophy contradicted Ambedkarism. It is truly amazing that a boy born in a poor, oppressed community, which suffered all the disgusting indignities of the social curse of untouchability, could rise above all these limitations and emerge not just a rebel poet who practiced protest as a profession, but one who considered humanism as a guiding principle of his life.

Dhasal's mind was open to ideas and his politics was open to various forms of activism. He studied Existentialism and Liberalism, followed Che Guevera and even Indira Gandhi. His association with Shiv Sena has been condemned, but few really understood why he did that. He insisted that the sons of the proletariat were attracted to the Shiv Sena. It was necessary to engage with them and not despise them as the communists did. His approach was different: it neither endorsed fascist chauvinism nor opposed progressive ideas. One can differ with him, but he thought that Balasaheb Thackeray represented the anguish and aspirations of the Marathi proletariat. He also said in an unabashed manner, when it had become politically and intellectually unfashionable to do so, that Indira Gandhi's actions were pro-people, pro-poor.

It is not easy to separate Dhasal's poetry from his politics, to disentangle his philosophy from his attitude – even his style and content were at a perfect tangent.

I knew him when he was in his early 20s and continued to interact with him well into his 60s. I argued with him, fought with him, differed with him and yet, could never stop admiring him for his verve, liveliness and intellectual creativity. ■

Namdeo Dhasal in his village Pur-Kanersar. Photograph by Henning Stegmüller/ Courtesy Navayana

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