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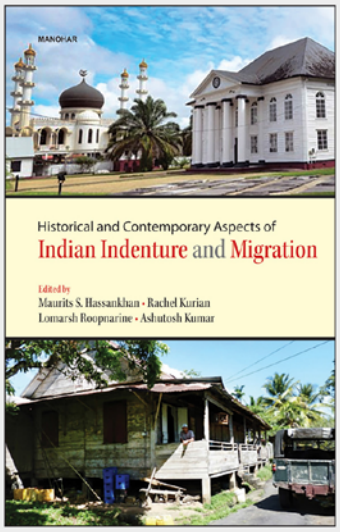

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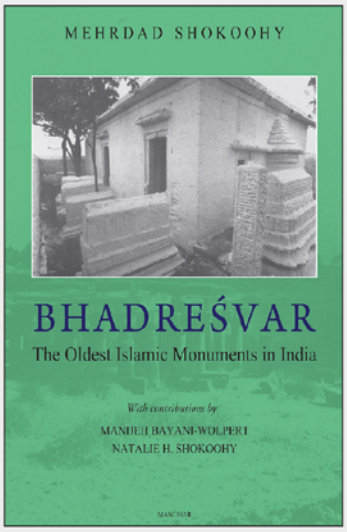

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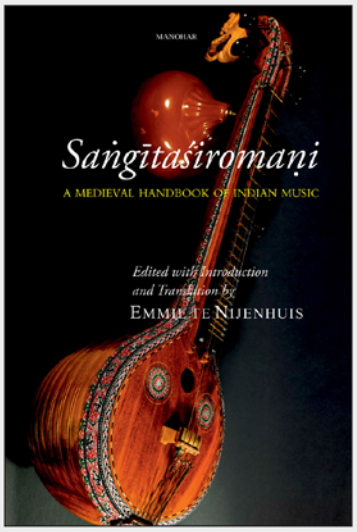

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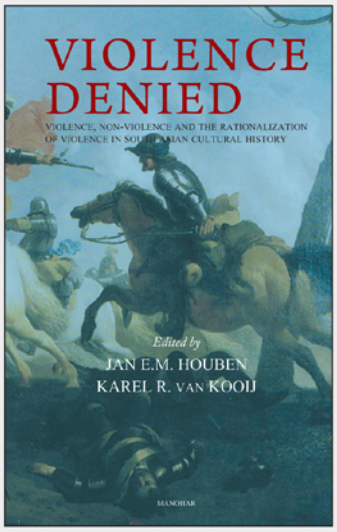

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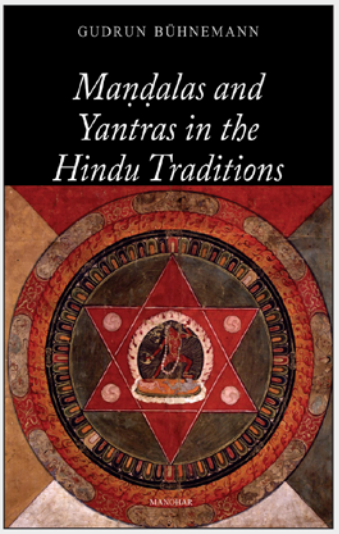

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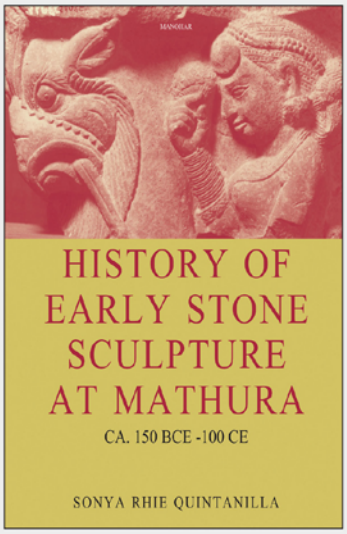

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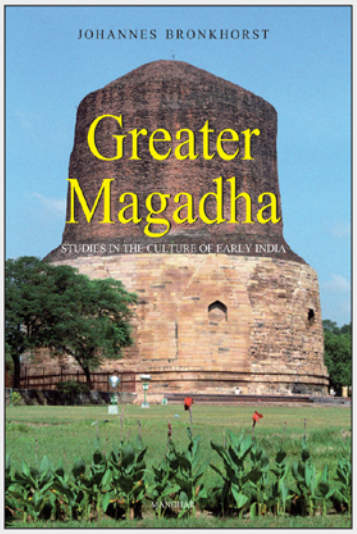

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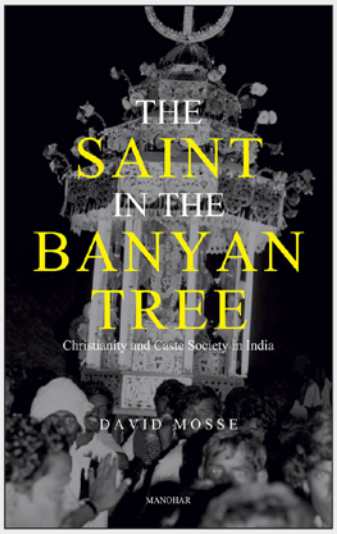

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Alternation of Tradition and Innovation Over Millennia

Smita Agarwal

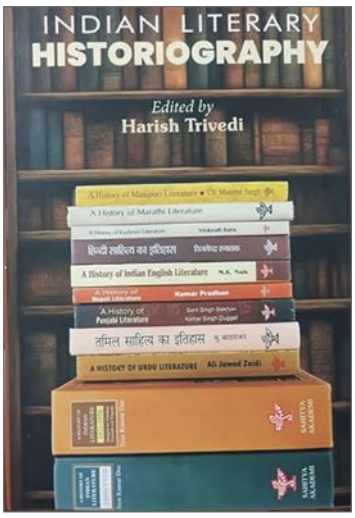
INDIAN LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY
Edited by Harish Trivedi
Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2024, pp. 485, ₹ 600.00

I hope, by now, this book has been acquired by all libraries as it is an important contribution to the study of Indian literature. The essays throw open debates that lead forward to more investigation into the rich mine of the histories of literature produced in the important languages of India. As always, the Sahitya Akademi must be lauded for its valiant effort towards the scrutiny and documentation of dense and difficult material, and the Editor and the contributors for their knowledge, skill, and above all, dedicated intellectual labour.

The volume originates from a conference on the subject organized by the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, held at Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, on 28-29 September 2015. However, the Editor had the insight of inviting other essays also in order to 'ensure a fuller and more balanced representation of the various Indian languages'.

The book is in two parts. Part 1 considers the conceptual and theoretical frameworks and Part 2 consists of essays on the important languages of India like Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Bangla, Marathi, Gujarati, Konkani, Hindi, Maithili, Urdu, English and Khasi. Each essay is by an eminent scholar whose range of knowledge and intellectual and academic rigour make the book an asset. Moreover, each piece is followed up by a detailed 'Works Cited' illuminating the way for further research and scholarship.

In his substantial and in-depth Introduction, Professor Trivedi has explained with clarity and precision the overlap and differences between History and Literature, and has laid before us 'the Mill-Macaulay-Macdonell Mockery' that had such a debilitating effect on indigenous scholarship in this area. Almost all the essayists praise the grand achievement of Sisir Kumar Das, who created his own model for Indian Literary Historiography with the two volumes, *A History of Indian Literature: Volume VIII 1800-1910: Western Impact: Indian Response*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991 and *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956 Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995. Given that India has so many oral and written productions in so many dialects and languages, it soon becomes clear to the reader how challenging it is to hope for a single, formulaic model and how pertinent each essayist's viewpoint is. Harish Trivedi outlines the contributions of Indian scholars like Sibesh Bhattacharya, Romila Thapar, Vasudeva Sharan Agarwala, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Sujit Mukherjee, CM Naim, AK Ramanujan, GN Devy, Ipshita Chanda and others.



In 'The Making of Literary Historiography: Two Histories of Bengali Literature', Indra Nath Choudhuri examines histories of Bengali literature by Dinesh Chandra Sen and Sukumar Sen. Choudhuri argues that both these histories nullify a strongly held position in the literary circle that in the history of literature, the upper-class Hindus had an upper hand and excluded texts of lower social groups and Muslims. Choudhuri goes on to say, 'There has been...an unending tension between people of upper and lower stratum of society, between Hindus and Buddhists at the early stage of the growth of Bengali language and literature and later between Hindu and Muslim culture, but any literary efflorescence by any community was not ignored by these two legendary historians.' This comment reveals, how much like dancing in the rain, the attempt at literary historiography can be in India and how charges of subjective exclusion and inclusion are raindrops that must be dodged constantly.

K Satchidanandan attempts to answer, 'Is an Indian Literary History Possible? The Limits of Indian Literary Historiography'. Just as there are many Ramas and many Ramayanas, if, such is the case for a single text, one can imagine the diversity of the whole of Indian literature 'recited, narrated, performed and written in hundreds of languages'. And so, the scholar must 'redefine' their understanding of literature received from colonial literary historians. Satchidanandan argues for a shift from an 'orientalist conceptual apparatus' in order to do justice to our literary historiography. This long essay is a must read as it courageously, authentically and systematically tries to rationalize through the immense problems and suggests

> And so, we come full circle to Sisir Kumar Das, the premier explorer of India's linguistic space, who, even when he knew that 'the writing of literary history itself is an unfashionable exercise today,' went ahead and did just that!

alternative models as the way forward.

Gopal Guru's passionate 'Understanding Dalit Literary Historiography' ignites the mind with new knowledge and vibrant ideas. We become aware that Dalit literary historiography cannot follow the same route as others. First of all, it is a new entrant in the field. Secondly, autobiography, which is rarely considered history, is an important aspect of Dalit writing. Thirdly, individual history and societal history are inextricably intertwined as Dalit literary writings combine literature, history and philosophical insights. Upper caste literary figures laid down the rules for literariness. Even the vernacular literary imagination dictated terms to lower caste writers leading the Dalit writer to ask, 'Which language should I speak?' Gopal Guru discusses the moral significance of literary expression in Dalit writing and the negative quality of their language that theorizes their experience of humiliation. Dalit literature does not want to imitate but intends to subvert the established literary canon and even though it is a new entrant, the history of Dalit literature may be traced back to the 14th century with the emergence of Dalit saints. The essayist ends with the assertion that, as canon formation is not the aim of Dalit literature, this historiography will have to be dealt with differently as, at the moment, 'they have a limited aim and purpose of announcing their arrival at the literary domain if not establishment.'

In 'Shifting Paradigms of Literary Historiography: Malayalam Literary History in the New Millennium', Professor EV Ramakrishnan compares and contrasts various old and new Malayalam literary histories to throw up some arresting points like, the earlier canon having ignored a large number of Christian and Muslim writers considering them not literary and traditional literary histories having failed in recognizing translation as an important sub-system of literature. The discussion leads up to edited volumes of micro-history that appeared around 2000 that managed to usher in change by bringing into play tribal culture, Vedic culture, fashion, women's writing and even ballads sung by the pariah community. This excellent essay ably explores the field to reveal how decolonization, modernity and globalization gradually transform and extend the scope of the writing of literary history in Malayalam.

The title of Ipsita Chanda's work itself reveals what the scholar shall argue for in 'Proposing Plurality as a Frame for the Historiography of Indian Literature'. She posits an 'integrative view' which embraces 'the co-existence of a number of language-cultures' and their inter-literary condition.

Radhavallabh Tripathi in his comprehensive 'Decolonizing the History of Sanskrit Literature' shows us through examples how an awareness of the history of Sanskrit literature was present in the indigenous literary traditions of Sanskrit itself even before Rajasekhara of 10th century AD. He discusses the Orientalists, as well as the indigenous scholars of Sanskrit to point out the misconceptions and errors created by a Eurocentric and colonial mentality and moves on to propose his model of the *Udbhavakala*, *Sthapanakala*, *Samriddhikala*, *Vistarakala*, and the *Adhunikakala* for envisaging the growth of Sanskrit literature.

GJV Prasad's 'Tamil Literary Historiography: Dating Identity' is a sharp analysis of Tamil nationalism privileging Dravidian antiquity, the clash between Tamil and Sanskrit amplified by the assessments of Christian Missionaries and the grave problem of the dating of vital texts. Despite the Sahitya Akademi's 3 volume history of Tamil Literature (1972), Prasad feels that there are literary histories yet to be written that will include more philological, archaeological and historical research.

'History and Historiography of Telugu Literature' by Elchuri Muralidhara Rao lets us know that the history of Telugu literature constitutes a tradition of over a thousand years. While during its early emergence, Telugu seems to have drawn heavily upon materials from Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil, its literature and literary tradition was heavily influenced by Kannada. Muralidhara Rao laments how texts have disappeared, folk compositions lost, works are languishing in a state of inattention and disregard and there are some 200 masterpieces 'that we have piteously learned to live without'. The scholar makes up for the absence of a 'Works Cited' by giving us a compendium of Telugu texts and literary histories from ancient, medieval and modern times within the essay itself and ends by stating that the 'problem of relatively conservative structures' of literary historiography in Telugu in comparison with the 'progressive and radical transformation of the genre elsewhere is to be reconciled positively in the days to come'.

'Critiquing Literary Historiography in Hindi: Paradigms and Practices' by Avadesh Kumar Singh is informative and displays a wide reading. It gives us a history of the development of Hindi as a language and discusses how the trend of historiographies began in it. Acharya Ram Chandra Shukla's *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas* is considered to be a groundbreaking text, and subsequent historiographies seem to be its variants with some clearly

Dalit literature does not want to imitate but intends to subvert the established literary canon and even though it is a new entrant, the history of Dalit literature may be traced back to the 14th century with the emergence of Dalit saints.

displaying an 'anxiety of influence'. Dr. Singh discusses the works of Ram Kumar Verma, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Namvar Singh and Suman Raje, among others, to cover a period from, say, 1600 to about 2003. I was glad to learn that it was Allahabad University that first offered Hindi as a subject in its Department of Sanskrit and Indian Languages in 1887. The author's erudition makes him infer some salient points like the 'beauty of historiography lies in its provisionality and dynamic process'; historiography is 'neither absolute criticism nor absolute history'; 'translation ... has been a victim of literary discrimination'. Lastly, by citing the example of Dr. Nagendra's edited histories, the author supports the view that 'collaborative historiography' in Hindi can work 'without diluting the spirit of literature or historiography'.

In her essay 'The Unbearable Lightness of Indian Literature in English: Questions in Historiography', Malashri Lal is inventive and engaging while putting forth her ideas. I am sure, some scholar is soon going post a riposte to the author's observation: 'Indian Literature in English has occupied an uncertain but exciting space in refusing to build any self-definition or attempting to forge an organic relationship with India's regional literatures. It has, in other words, lived its existence in a state of sublimity.'

Professor Lal compares and contrasts six histories of Indian writing in English published from 1962 to 2011, analyses their methodologies and suggests that 'we have ... seen that there are no traditions deriving from the literature of England nor any radiating from India's vernacular languages that have their own intricate lineage and influences. Yet Indian literature in English has enjoyed a compelling position through some outstanding works—sporadic, unrelated, unique. Why attempt a conventional historiography?'

And so, we come full circle to Sisir Kumar Das, the premier explorer of India's linguistic space, who, even when he knew that 'the writing of literary history itself is an unfashionable exercise today,' went ahead and did just that!

Smita Agarwal is the editor of *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* (Rodopi/Brill, 2014) which is an elliptical historiography of Indian Poetry in English.

After-lives of Texts and Their Contexts

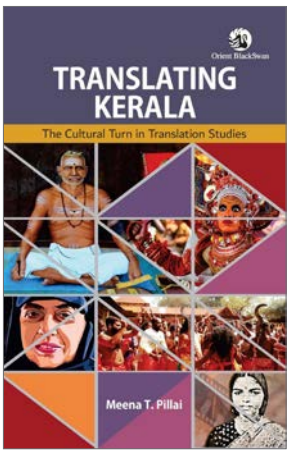
EV Ramakrishnan

TRANSLATING KERALA: THE CULTURAL TURN IN TRANSLATION STUDIES
By Meena T. Pillai
Orient BlackSwan, 2024, pp. 182, ₹ 500.00

Translation Studies as a discipline is yet to gain recognition in India despite its multilingual traditions of literature, and translation practices dating back to the first millennium. Of late, literary translation has gained greater visibility as translated Indian fiction has won international acclaim, winning the Booker and JCB awards. Yet, we are nowhere near a country like Turkey where Translation Studies occupies a pride of place in the Humanities curriculum. Bogicazi University of Istanbul has a Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies with over thirty faculty members. If Turkey produced a Nobel laureate like Orhan Pamuk, it is mainly because of its investment in translation studies creating a vibrant culture of translation.

Meena Pillai's book, *Translating Kerala,* attempts to trace the traditions of translation in Malayalam with reference to their role in shaping new social imageries and literary practices. Though translation has a long history in Malayalam dating back to the 14th century, her focus is on the trends from early twentieth century onwards. In the course of the nine chapters, Meena Pillai addresses a range of subjects from the cultural turn in translation to questions related to gender, the subaltern, postcolonial writing and popular culture. It was through translation that Malayalam contested the hegemony of Sanskrit and Tamil, in its formative period. Its engagements with foreign languages such as French, Russian, Spanish and German helped Malayalam to widen its literary horizons and decolonize itself. However, with globalization setting the cultural agenda of our times, publication of their works in English translation by an international publisher has become a coveted priority for Malayalam novelists.

Translation of the world classics into Malayalam figures in the first two chapters prominently. The



translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* by Nalappat Narayana Menon during 1925-27, marked a turning point in the evolution of modern Malayalam novel. It came at a moment when Malayalam fiction had exhausted its initial creative momentum, and had fallen into a rut. Meena Pillai discusses the context of the translation and the nature of its reception in Malayalam, without going into the textual dynamics of the translation. Menon made no concessions to the reader's unfamiliarity with the alien tradition, and rendered the English original into a robust Malayalam idiom that could draw a new generation of readers into the affective turbulence of its layered narrative. His literal translation expanded the vocabulary and the narrative repertoire of Malayalam. Hugo's humanist vision echoed in Kerala in multiple ways, through further retellings of the novel and its adaptations to several mediums including the film. As we are currently observing the centenary of this translation, an introductory essay of this kind is highly relevant.

The translation of Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* stirred the Malayali imagination in the post-1980 period, though its translation into Malayalam lacked the literary merit of the kind we associate with the works of Garcia Marquez. The third chapter, 'Translating Culture' has the subtitle, 'Is Gabriel Garcia Marquez a Malayali?' The first part of the chapter traces the role of translation in the making of Malayalam literary tradition, with some random examples which do not add up to a comprehensive picture. The observation, 'Translation is a voracious activity in Malayalam, but this untrammelled appetite, coupled with the lack of efficacy of the intellectual tools of Malayalam literary criticism to review or assess the process and act of translation, leads to a state of literary dyspepsia' (p. 45), does not take into account the fact that translation studies is a recent development even in the West, and has much to do with the post-structuralist breakthrough in theory. The reasons for the Malayali's obsession with Latin American literature are complex and can be the subject of a separate study. The popularity of Latin American literature has led to the proliferation and promotion of shoddy translations. The author rightly observes that 'these market-oriented translations are governed by short-term goals', and the market strategies have much to do with 'the political and cultural dimensions of power relations' (p. 47).

The chapter on 'Gender and Translation' has very little to offer by way of insights into the translations of women writers of Malayalam. At the outset, the reasons for the neglect of feminist theory in Kerala, despite its progressive politics and emancipatory social movements, are discussed at length. Pillai rightly argues that the subversive potential of translation to undermine the primacy of the prevailing patriarchal order may have prompted such lack of concern for feminist theory. The new generation of highly talented translators which includes J Devika, EV Fathima, Jayashree Kalathil, Shahanaz Habib and Sangeetha Sreenivasan has been sensitive to the representation of gender relations in Malayalam. The only literary work the author takes up for detailed discussion is Nithyachaitanya Yati's translation of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* by Simone de Beauvoir. It fails to convey the basic tone of the text, as the author's masculinist gaze distorts Beauvoir's radical world view. The other text that figures in the chapter is a popular film, *Chandupottu* which captured the fault lines of Kerala's gender politics in its slapstick comic mode. The ambiguous sexual identity of the main character enables the film to take on the performative aspects of gender roles from multiple points of view. The author's interpretation of the film is rich with insightful observations on the masculinist cultural politics of Kerala. Much of the discussion of the theory of camp, however, appears far-fetched.

The chapters, 'Translating Subaltern' and 'Autobiography as Translation' deal with translation in the context of autobiographical narratives. Nalini Jameela's autobiography has two versions in Malayalam, and Devika's English translation departs from these two in tone and treatment. None of these versions were 'written' by Nalini Jameela. Each of these narratives constructs a different 'subject' out of her experiences as a sex worker. Meena Pillai shows how they foreground the 'problematic of mediated autobiographies', by unveiling the ideological imperatives that inform each version. The subjectivity of Nalini Jameela remains 'oppositional, radical and heretical' in all the three versions. The author characterizes Devika's translation as 'gynocritical' which is 'undertaken with the conscious aim of studying the female experience and constructing a female framework

> The idea of 'Translating Kerala' seems to essentialize the region into a stable and static entity, based on a small sample of assorted texts. Kerala has to be conceived as an evolving, fluid, pluralistic category which looks beyond its political borders into the wide world of criss-crossing linguistic and cultural pathways.

for the analysis of women's writing' (p. 93). Further, it is theoretically better informed and is able to highlight 'the intersection of class and gender and the double marginalisation of the sex worker, both as a woman and as a poor labourer' (p. 90). The complex role played by 'writing' in the subaltern autobiography raises several issues of subjectivity and agency which cannot be resolved within the ambit of the theory of translation.

Kamala Das was aware that she was writing in a language which typecast women and rendered her invisible. Her *Ente Katha* in Malayalam differs in many ways from *My Story,* the dynamics of translation between them necessitating an in-depth study of the politics of power in a gendered society. Pillai argues that Kamala Das's struggle to repossess the body 'lost in translation in the symbolic language' transforms her autobiography into a subversive text that knocks down 'the patriarchal ideological base of Kerala' (p. 119). Her writing is seen here as the first instance of a woman attempting *ecriture feminine* in Malayalam, 'rationalising the irrational, moralising the immoral and eroticising women's desire' (ibid.). The chapter discusses at length how Madhavikutty/Kamala Das is engaged in the struggle to articulate her irreconcilable selves that clash within, even as every attempt at self-expression becomes a confrontation with the dominant male-centric discursive regimes of Malayalam and Indian English.

CK Janu's autobiography, *The Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* has been translated into English by Ravi Shanker based on the original Malayalam, which is 'written' by Bhaskaran as told by Janu. The intractable problems of mediated narratives complicate the reading and interpretation of Janu's life story. Her subjectivity cannot find an abode either in standard Malayalam or in Indian English. The orality of her discourse is inseparable from the teleology of her political struggle. The urbanized Indian has no access to its interiors. The chapter, 'Translating the Popular' has some interesting observations regarding the cinematic version of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's novel, *Chemmeen.* The author remarks that 'the trope of the female body is at the centre of problematics of translation/adaptation from novel to film in *Chemmeeen.*' The last chapter, 'Translation as Adaptation' deals with two Malayalam films, *Nirmalyam,* and *Agnisakshi,* the former based on a short story by MT Vasudevan Nair; the latter being a film adaptation of a well-known novel by Lalithambika Antarjanam. The author finds *Nirmalyam* extending the revolutionary potential of the original short story, while the cinematic adaptation of *Agnisakshi* purges the radical critique of the entrenched patriarchy of the Brahmin community in Kerala presented in the novel.

As can be seen from the above discussion, many of the essays are concerned with films or adaptations of literary texts into films. The theoretical premises of such intermedial translations demand a separate set of theoretical postulations, different from those of literary translation. The idea of 'cultural translation' is inadequate to meet this challenge. As a result, the individual essays do not become part of a central argument on the nature of translation practices in Kerala. There is no reference to the translation practices dealing with translations from Indian languages like Bangla, Hindi, Marathi and Kannada into Malayalam which have formed the bulk of translated literature in Malayalam. The idea of 'Translating Kerala' seems to essentialize the region into a stable and static entity, based on a small sample of assorted texts. Kerala has to be conceived as an evolving, fluid, pluralistic category which looks beyond its political borders into the wide world of criss-crossing linguistic and cultural pathways.

EV Ramakrishnan is an English-Malayalam bilingual writer, poet and literary critic from Kerala. He has received several awards including the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for Literary Criticism and the Odakkuzhal Award. He was the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for 2023 for his literary study, *Malayala Novelinte Deshakaalangal*.

New vs. *Adhunik*: Locating the Modern in Odia Literary Culture

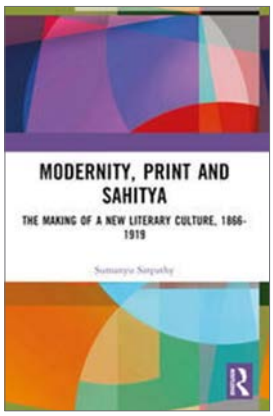
Himansu S. Mohapatra

MODERNITY, PRINT AND SAHITYA: THE MAKING OF A NEW LITERARY CULTURE, 1866-1919
By Sumanyu Satpathy
Routledge, London, 2024, pp. 238, ₹ 1295.00

A Fakir Mohan Senapati short story named '*Aja Nati Katha*' (1915) treats the reader to a charming and light-hearted chat between a grandson and his maternal grandfather. The grandfather is miffed by a printed publication in what he thinks is a 'government gazette' whose veracity he is unable to check. On being told the printed write-up is a modern story, and, that it is published in *Sahitya*, which is a 'literary periodical' and not a government document, he is totally mystified. What follows is a long and lively dialogue between the two in which Ganapati takes it upon himself to introduce to the old man the new kid on the block called 'sahitya'. Though not sacred like the '*pothis*' and 'puranas' which the old man has grown up listening to all his life, this new writing is the fodder that print delivers in ever greater numbers for the delighted consumption of a newer generation. The old man is left profoundly shaken in the face of such an overture. The cheeky young man, and through him the author, have succeeded in making an eloquent and spirited plea for '*adhunik* Sahitya'.

Sumanyu Satpathy's book is an extended and sustained meditation on the three counters that the short story just named plays around with, namely '*adhunikta*' or modernity, '*chhapa*' or print and 'sahitya' or literature. Unlike Fakir Mohan's short story, which presents only the tip of the iceberg by deploying the three terms in their then prevalent significations, the book sets out to historicize them to recover a fuller picture. It studies the full panoply of their manifestations in a literary culture that took shape in Odisha in the mid-nineteenth century through the joint agency of print and other crucial markers of modernity that came with the British colonial rule.

The book undertakes a historiographic recollection of Odisha's early literary culture and the linked print-public sphere, the like of which has been unavailable until now. The archival work of Satpathy builds on the work of many stalwart Odia scholars such as Natabara Samantray, Gaganendra Nath Das, Sudarshan Acharya, Debendra Kumar Dash and others, thereby producing 'a larger map interweaving these numerous and exclusive studies' (p. 20). The scholarly investigation cuts a broader swathe and runs considerably deeper. The digitization of the archive by the Bhubaneswar-based Srujanika has a role to play in this. Satpathy gratefully acknowledges its founder Nikhil Mohan Patnaik for 'having digitised vast repositories of obscure books and periodicals' (p. xi).



What gives the book its cutting edge, however, is the well-thought-out interpretative perspective that considers the subject of Odia literary modernity from multiple standpoints, thus providing a polyphonic picture of the phenomenon. The fact that the book is done in English redounds further to its credit, for this enables the local story to take its place under the sun and alongside other publicized stories of modernity in the Indian bhashas. Together these stories add up to a narrative totality of Indian literature in its diverse bhasha output. It is a matter of profound satisfaction that the Odia strand that was missing has now been written into existence for a national and global audience.

Satpathy makes visible the enormous social and intellectual churning that gave birth to a modern literature for the Odia nation or *Utkal Sahitya*, to put it in the resonant coinage of that time. The following statement is a pointer to the nature of this churning and the actors/characters involved in this, namely print, periodicals, and language and territory-based identitarian struggle of the Odia people against Bengali sub-colonialism: 'Much of the impulse for creating a competitive body of Odia literature came from the perceived threat to Odia language and the ideology of Odia nationalism, a kind of local nationalism that ultimately and willy-nilly merged with pan Indian nationalism' (p. 187). The book draws the line at 1919 because from this point on the trajectory of Odia literature was more or less identical to that of other major bhasa literatures. The spotlight on the fifty years prior, the tumultuous years of 1866-1919, is then put for a reason, which is to identify what is unique and distinctive about the first phase of Odia literary modernity. The story of how Odia literature has evolved and contributed to debates around Odia identity since 1920 can be gleaned from Lopamudra Tripathy's study, 'Literature and the Politics of Identity in Orissa, 1920-1960' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis submitted to School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999).

The case the book presents in its five exfoliated and closely argued chapters can be very briefly outlined. The arrival of print in Odisha and its ownership by the local elite was a momentous event. It led to the creation of a public sphere as newspapers and periodicals began to

appear with a fair degree of regularity. The periodical press thus became the conduit for a community, beleaguered by a devastating famine and by Bengali dominance, seeking to improve its prospects and to safeguard its language and territory. Utkal Sahitya took its initial rise from the war over school textbook production, with Odia writers like Radhanath Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati and Madhusudan Rao coming out with Odia textbooks to displace the ones in Bangla.

The efforts of Odias were aided and abetted by highly-placed officials in the British administration, John Beames, the Collector of Balasore, being in the forefront of the pro-Odia campaign, spearheaded by people like Gourishankar Ray, the editor of the first weekly Odia newspaper, *Utkal Dipika*. For several decades the political sphere and the literary sphere developed independently of each other, running on parallel tracks as it were. In 1903, however, the two spheres merged in response to the deepening existential crisis. The external manifestation of the merger was the simultaneous birth in 1903 of Utkal Sammelan (Union) and Utkal Sahitya Sabha, marking the convergence (p. 57) between the political entity ('*jati*'/'*desh*') and literary entity ('sahitya').

Meanwhile, the exposure to European education made the local elite acutely receptive to modern ideas of progress, development, reason and scientific temper. The centuries-old indigenous aesthetic was not going down without a fight either. In a fascinating chapter, Satpathy traces in great detail the clash between the ancient (*prachin*) and the modern (*adhunik*) over '*ruchi paribarta*n' (change of literary taste), as it unfolded in the pages of newspapers and periodicals. *Utkal Dipika* and *Indrdhanu* were pro-Upendra Bhanja, an 18th century poet and a monumental figure among the *prachin* poets, whereas *Bijuli* was a votary of Radhanath Ray, the preeminent *adhunik* poet. The next big push towards the creation of a modern Utkal Sahitya came from the sub-nationalist struggle for the unification of the Odia speaking tracts and the corresponding need to imagine the Utkal race as a moral community through lamentation over its past glory and exhortation to revive it in the present. The meaning of Sahitya saw a further extension, with literary work being conceived as a *seva* (service) and the litterateurs cast as *sevaks* or servants of the Utkal land.

It is a very sketchy summary indeed and doesn't do justice to the book's highly nuanced and richly layered presentation. For the benefit of the lay reader, it can be said that out of this welter of conflicting forces and ideas came the decisive turn to modernity in Odia literature. The new literature was not only of Utkal; it was also for Utkal, as the overwhelming number of periodicals born between 1873 and 1897 bore the name of 'Utkal' (*Utkal Darpan*, *Utkal Madhupa*, *Utkal Sahitya*, to name some of the most promising ones). It was 'a new kind of newness' (p. 8, p. 169, p. 171) for which the existing words were felt to be inadequate. Satpathy sums this up in two beautifully compressed statements: 'In order to augment and strengthen the new Utkal Sahitya, they drew on European models even while following traditional practices so as to be able to take cognizance of and accommodate the *adhunik*. In the process, words like *navya*, *nutana* were subsumed and superseded by the new term, *adhunik*, as a qualifier for a number of nouns: *sikhya*, *chikitsa*, *sabhyata*, *sanskruti*, *yug*, and also eventually, for sahitya' (p. 167).

The book then explores a hybrid literary modernity. Satpathy steers clear of the twin perils of 'nativism' and 'anglicism' in mapping the East-West encounter. His argument insistently focuses on an 'in between space'. As against one popular version of the encounter as 'cultural resistance' (JK Nayak, cited in p. 37), he points out the inescapable fact of collusion: 'Yet we cannot ignore the many crucial ideas and opinions of colonial administrators and scholars and those of Bengalis (supportive or hostile) that shaped the Odia political and linguistic agenda and action' (pp. 37-38). He favours, therefore a 'culture-specific reading with a site-based focus' (p. 168). This enables him to be flexible. Thus, if he can, in one instance, see an Odia critic's rasa-theory driven reading of the realist fiction of Fakir Mohan (*Mamu* or *The Maternal Uncle* in English translation) as an act of reassertion of traditional aesthetics, he can, in another instance, welcome the move from the oral and scribal world of pre-colonial Odisha to a secular, caste-neutral space of modernity as progress. There are numerous other instances in the book of this dual awareness.

Before concluding, it is worth making just one quick point. There is one aspect of the meaning of 'sahitya', as conveyed in Fakir Mohan's story with which this review began, which does not seem to be factored into the ensemble of meanings clustered under the rubric of 'sahitya'. This is the positing of an intermediate realm of fictionality in which a literary composition like the modern short story trades. This is a delicate realm wedged between the cold factuality of print and its equally chilling opposite of falsity. The book recognizes many advanced features of the literary discourse in Utkal's literary infancy such as 'the intertextuality of the novel form' (p. 89). Fictionality is only a short step from which, and it would have been nice to have been on board with it.

Modernity, Print and Sahitya is a wonderful book. Its masterful reconstruction of the 'moment of the modern' in Odia literary culture justly calls for Odisha's pride in its own past. And a resurgent past is the precondition for a robust engagement with its present and future. *Modernity, Print and Sahitya* will remain unsurpassed in the field of Odisha Studies for quite some time.

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Gagan Gill–Spiritual Seeker, Poet and Philosopher

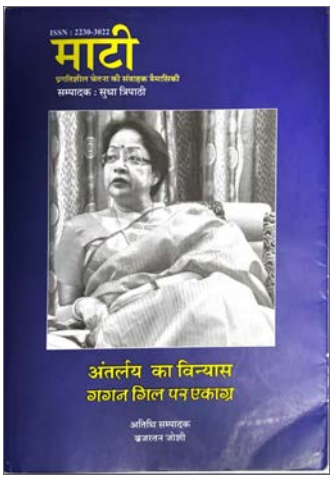
Kopal

MAATI: ANTARLAY KA VINYAS, GAGAN GILL PAR EKAGRA
Edited by Sudha Tripathi. Guest Editor: Brajratna Joshi
Little Bird Publications, New Delhi, Issue 20, 2023,
pp. 561, ₹ 300.00

Maati is a quarterly magazine of liberal progressive thought in Hindi and is published with the support of Raza Foundation. Under review here is its twentieth issue concentrating on the writer-poet Gagan Gill. Gagan Gill has had a four decades long literary career in which she has been an editor, translator, journalist along with publishing her poetry, prose and travel writing. She has been conferred the Kedar Samman, the Sanskriti Samman and the Hindi Akademy Sahityakar Samman. Wife of renowned writer Nirmal Verma, Gagan Gill's writing shares with him modernist and spiritual sensibility.

The special issue is divided into five sections. The first section titled '*Vichar Vyuh*' establishes the thematic concerns in Gill's writings and tethers the broad debates in her ideational universe. It has nineteen articles covering the range of her writings. The second section contains seven interviews. Most are compilations of older interviews given elsewhere that have been translated into Hindi from English or transcribed from recordings.

The third section has a good selection of her writings covering four different forms while providing a taste of her writing style, concerns and themes. There are thirteen poems covering all five of her poetry collections published till now: *Ek Din Lautegi Ladki* (1989), *Andhere Mein Budh* (1996), *Yeh Akanksha Samay Nahin* (1998), *Thapak Thapak Dil* (2003) and *Main Jab Tak Aayi Baahar* (2018). Particularly compelling are her prose musings including philosophical and theoretical reflections on poetry and poetics, where she beautifully unfurls the lyrical in prose and its formal connections to poetry. It is followed by her personal reminiscence of Samdong Rinpoche, her Buddhist guru. This section ends with a keynote address given by her at a conference on travel writing. It reads like a lyric essay, rich with philosophical musings on multiple aspects of travel—geographical, spiritual, sometimes in search of knowledge and sometimes in search of power. She argues that travelling does not take the shape of a cultural endeavour until it opens a dialogue with the place and other travellers prior to travelling to that place. She considers a valuable travelogue to be one where the memories of people and memories carried by the place, both conjoin at a point. She sees travel and travelogues as opportunities for self-reflection on our collective cultural identities. Following this line of thought through travels of Hieun Tsang, Al Biruni, Alexander Cunnigham and many other travellers from the past and present, she ends not surprisingly with the question of the interior self of the traveller that receives creative energies from the travels, changing him forever. While the fourth section has other writers' reminiscences of Gagan Gill as well as poems written for her, the fifth section titled '*Samaahaar*' is a compilation of another twenty-five essays on Gill's writings sharing broad similarities with the first, and as such doesn't seem very different in its intent as well as execution. These two sections together form the bulk of the issue.



> For Gill, literature is not simply a reaction to external realities but a means of engaging with an ongoing, often unconscious, inner dialogue—one that parallels the ceaseless monologue of meditation. Writing, then, becomes a way of validating these internal experiences, a process through which the abstract gains form.

The most prominent identification of Gagan Gill's writings by commentators has been her Buddhist belief system. Several essays have engaged with this aspect of her writing commenting on her spirituality, her philosophical bent of mind and her meditative approach to the world. Radhavallabh Tripathi identifies the foundations of Gill's writings to be the Buddhist principles of acceptance of suffering, searching the reasons for suffering, tearing off the illusion of craving and the concept of impermanence of the world. He notes that she belongs to the long

intellectual tradition in India that after Buddha centres on suffering. Gill has written many poems on girls and girlhood but the girl we see in her writings is not from the Sringara tradition. This girl is contemplative, thoughtful and often engaged in silence. While the *theris* from ancient India left the world of suffering and entered the Sangha and poetry for liberation, Gill enters poetry replete with suffering of the world. Tripathi places Gill in the line of women poets writing on suffering—from the *theris* to Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Meera Bai—noting her differences from them. He finds that the possibility of living on their own terms without surrender to anyone emerged for women poets fully only in the twentieth century and it is in Mahadevi Verma that we witness such deep expression before Gill.

Shampa Shah describes Gill's writing as *vipassana* prose, envisioning it as the prose of a spiritual seeker—patient and wise; of a poet—balanced yet dense; and of a woman—kaleidoscopic and richly textured (p. 87). Ashwini Kumar calls her a poet-philosopher after Hananh Arendt who celebrates natality of hope and possibility. Narmadaprasad Upadhyay has mastered the contextualization of Gill's travelogue *Avaak* in the history of Indian travel writing whereas Ranjana Argade embarks upon a rich, close analysis of the text noting that in Gill's travel writing, interiority is primary. There is a constant movement from the external to the internal.

The interview section is very useful in expanding upon her poetics. Gill's writing is often discussed in terms of its refusal to be easily categorized in conventional literary and political frameworks. In her interview with Anamika Anu, she challenges the idea of writing as protest, instead describing it as 'a substitute for what is not (present) in life'. For Gill, literature is not simply a reaction to external realities but a means of engaging with an ongoing, often unconscious, inner dialogue—one that parallels the ceaseless monologue of meditation. Writing, then, becomes a way of validating these internal experiences, a process through which the abstract gains form. In positioning literature as an act of inner witnessing rather than external confrontation, Gill underscores its contemplative, even spiritual, function—an idea that resonates with the larger Buddhist-inflected poetics of her work.

Gill identifies the core of her writing practice to be her curiosity and engagement with the inexpressible. Her attempts to put in words experiences of the self that resist easy expression result in experimentation with new forms as well as her personal idiom. For her, language both sustains and exhausts; much of life remains outside the linguistic framework, yet articulating one's existence in words becomes a way of making sense of it. Gill questions whether the discovery of new idioms and linguistic structures is a conscious resistance to authority or a spontaneous result of contemplation.

Gill acknowledges the paradox of language—while much of life resists articulation, language remains a means of rationalizing one's existence. She describes the experience of non-words, of what remains beyond linguistic expression, as both exhausting and life-giving. This tension, she suggests, is fundamental to both writing and being, as the greatest truths always lie beyond words.

In her interview with Vipin Chaudhary, Gill describes writing as an encounter with suffering, arguing that true liberation comes only through squarely facing pain. This perspective shapes both her writing process and her broader worldview. She sees poetry as a space where immersion in suffering allows for its transcendence—art does not offer escape, but rather deepens our understanding of life. This, in turn, expands our sense of interiority, provided that our contemplative processes remain active.

Gill's political outlook aligns with this perspective. She asserts that 'nothing is apolitical today', and that literary criticism has heightened civic consciousness by exposing the internal contradictions, inclusions, and omissions within texts. For Gill, neither vocal expression nor strategic silence can position a writer on the 'right side' of history or morality—engagement must be more fundamental than that.

While the volume is an ambitious and comprehensive engagement with Gagan Gill's work, its sheer length—nearly 600 pages—makes it unwieldy. The repetition across essays and the overlap between sections could have been streamlined for a more focused and accessible reading experience. Nevertheless, the collection remains an important contribution to contemporary Hindi literary criticism. Gill's exploration of suffering, spirituality, and interiority resonates far beyond her own writing, engaging with fundamental questions about language, existence, and artistic expression. The discussions in this issue of *Maati* highlight the continuing relevance of such inquiries, making this an essential work for scholars and readers invested in modern Hindi literature.

She [Gagan Gill] considers a valuable travelogue to be one where the memories of people and memories carried by the place, both conjoin at a point. She sees travel and travelogues as opportunities for self-reflection on our collective cultural identities.

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Eloquent Echoes

Sudhamahi Regunathan

ILLUMINATING WORLDS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CLASSICAL INDIAN LITERATURE
Translated and introduced by Srinivas Reddy
Bloomsbury India, 2024, pp. 320, ₹ 799.00

TEN INDIAN CLASSICS
Foreword by Ranjit Hoskote
The Murty Classical Library of India, Harvard University Press, 2024, pp. 272, ₹ 599.00

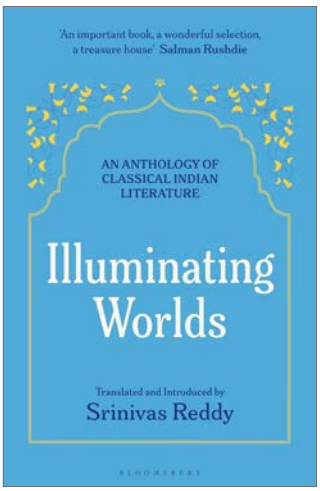
Hala, a Satavahana ruler of the 2nd century AD, remains in our memory not because of his military conquests or his superbly run kingdom (which it may have still been), but for his compilation of an anthology of some of the most beautiful Prakrit poetry. It is said,

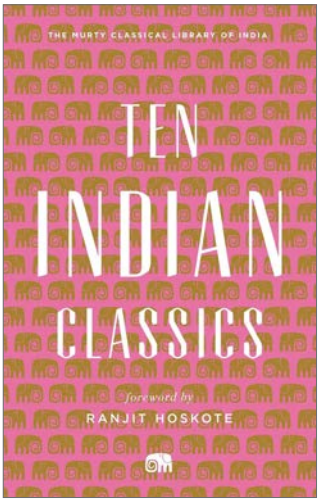
From out of ten million verses
Composed with literary skill,
Hala, who was sympathetic to poets,
Compiled just seven hundred.

I am sure Srinivas Reddy, who has compiled the anthology of classical Indian literature in *Illuminating Worlds*, would have faced similar angst as Hala did (the above verse is from the anthology), when he had to choose from the vast wealth of Indian literature. He, however, does say that he had a model to follow which was that of Vidyakara, an eleventh-century Buddhist abbot who compiled an anthology of over a thousand Sanskrit verses composed by some 275 poets and reasoned as follows:

From various master poets I shall compile
A priceless collection of charming verses
That grace the cultured voice of the learned
And turn the heads of great poets

It is definitely breathtaking to see the width of traditions he has managed to bring under the ambit of his compilation which he has translated himself. Translations are generally a source of joy as the translator is adding his or her enjoyment to the words of the writer and this one is no exception. In this compilation, there are translations from works in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil. There are samples from the Vedas, Upanishads, Buddhist and Jaina texts, not to mention the epics and even the *Pancatantra, Jatakamala* and *Kathasaritasagara* find a place. Even more interesting to note is that he has an extract from Valmiki's Ramayana and the *Paumacaru* of Svayambhudeva, the Jain story of the life of Rama. The merit of this collection lies in bringing together what is often viewed as 'different' traditions… they were all composed on the same soil, in a similar cultural ethos and share a lot of interaction, and this is borne out by the selection. The anthology has a section on terms which do not lend themselves to translation, like dharma, asuras, devas and so on.





Anthologies, as Srinivasa Reddy says in his introduction, are not meant to be complete or definitive…so when one reads the verses of *Gathasaptasati,* if one misses Amaru or even Bhartrahari, it is the resonance of the translation. The author draws a brief comparison between *Gathasaptasati* and *Ainkurunuru* which raises the experiences offered by the poems. Reddy's translation has a wonderful mix of restraint and ease so much so that he unselfconsciously captures the chuckle in a verse like:

High on a mountaintop
Where the short-stemmed nightshade sways
A cripple spies a giant honeycomb
And sits down beneath it…
He cups his hands, points them upward
And imagines licking the flowing honey.

For though my beloved
Shows me no love or favour
It thrills my heart
Every time I see him.

The Tamil of the above verse is not easy to understand, the subtlety is in fact easier to grasp in English (for a non-Tamil scholar)!

The tone changes appropriately while the ease remains, when he brings us the translation of passages/verses from

the *Acaranga Sutra* or the *Samannaphala Sutta*. Among the valuable inclusions are the passages from *Samannaphala Sutta* which talk about the six main philosophies that were existent in the Upanishadic times: *Akriyavada* of Purnakashyapa, *Ajivika* of Makkali Gosala, *Niyativada* of Ajit Kesakambala, *Eternalism* of Pakuda Kaccayana, *Anjnana* of Sanjay Belattaputta and Jainism of Mahavira.

The compilation has something for everyone, stories for those who do not wish for a very serious read. Little more serious are the passages from *Siva Purana*, *Devi Mahatmiyam* and *Bhagvata Purana*. And then there are the passages of profound wisdom from the Rg Veda to the Upanishads and poetry full of symbolism. The book ends aptly with the Bhakti tradition and such gems from them: *Paripatal, Tevaram, Tiruppavai* and finally Sankara's *Bhaja Govindam*.

The story of the creative mind in three ancient languages emerges in the sweep from the ritualistic worshipper of the Rg Veda to diverse interpretations of human life, God as a yearning, stories of God, stories of man with the finale being the devotional rendering, 'Worship Govinda…'. The ending is not only a logical progression of human thought; it also leaves us with the typical question facing a translator…does the word worship capture the ring of *bhaja* or should *bhaja* go into the category of untranslatable words?

Another anthology of classics titled *Ten Indian Classics* which brings together extracts from ten literary texts translated under the aegis of The Murty Classical Library begins by asking a similar question. This compilation contains translations from Pali by Charles Hallisey, from Sanskrit by Indira Vishwanathan Peterson, from Kannada by Vanamala Vishwanathan, from Telugu by Velucherry Narayana Rao and David Shulman, from Punjabi by Nikky-Gurinder Kaur Singh and Christopher Shackle, from Hindi by John Straton Hawley and Philip Lutgendorf, from Persian by Wheeler M Thackston and from Urdu by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. The foreword by Ranjit Hoskote says the selections span a period from sixth century BCE to nineteenth century CE and he poses the question, 'How do we find the optimal language into which to render these texts? By which I do not mean a satisfactory set of solutions within the parameters of an admittedly absorbent and flexible English, but rather, a subtle architecture of nuance, register, tonality, familiarity, and strangeness that forms a third linguistic space beyond the binary of source and target language.'

The focus therefore is on the method and nuances of translation. With competent translators, each section holds a surprise and a breath of fresh air, gathering voices from different times and sections of society. An enigmatic couplet by Mir Taqi Mir, an eighteenth-century poet from Lucknow, mirrors, interestingly, the sentiment of the *Ainkurunuru* from the earlier book as:

Although you never do so, yet I beg you, please look at me and look—
I long for you to turn toward me and look.

The typical Bulleh Shah retains his love for mankind even in the translation as he says,

I am not a Hindu, I am not a Muslim. I have forsaken pride and become unsullied
I am not a Sunni, nor a Shia. I have adopted the path of peace toward all.

Translator Christopher Shackle points out the similarity between this verse and Rumi's poem of similar nature.

The translated verses from *Therigatha* do set a meditative tone, with their simplicity and straightforwardness:

The name you are called by means hero, Vira,
It's a good name for you because of your heroic qualities,
You are a nun who knows how to know well…

Vanamala's translation of the story of King Harishchandra from Kannada reveals an empathetic and contemporary translator as she writes,

'Tugging at her sari, he demanded, "Where are you going, Mother? I am going with you." Wiping the tears from his cheek and cuddling him, she consoled him, "Don't cry my pet. I'll come back soon."'

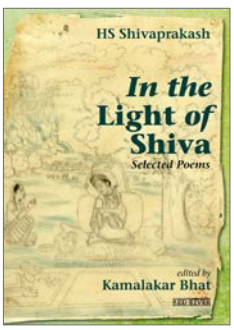
The power of an anthology which brings together such a varied fare lies in its ability to be able to transport the reader to the world of the author, that time period, that lingual ethos. Truly this volume scores as the verse from *Guru Granth Sahib* shows—

There is only One. Truth by name.
Creator Purakhu, without fear, without hate,
Timeless in form, unborn, self existent,
Recognized by the guru's grace….

Are you reading it as *Ik onkar sat naam*…?

Author and translator, **Sudhamahi Regunathan** is former Vice-Chancellor, Jain Vishwa Bharati Institute (Deemed University), Ladnun, Rajasthan.

Book News ***Book News***



In the Light of Shiva: Selected Poems by HS Shivaprakash, edited by Kamalakar Bhat, brings together the best of Shivaprakash's previously published and unpublished poems; further, a few poems translated by Manu Devadevan and Kamalakar Bhat are appended at the end.

Red River, 2025, pp. 310, ₹ 499.00

Portrait of Life in Karnataka's Malnad

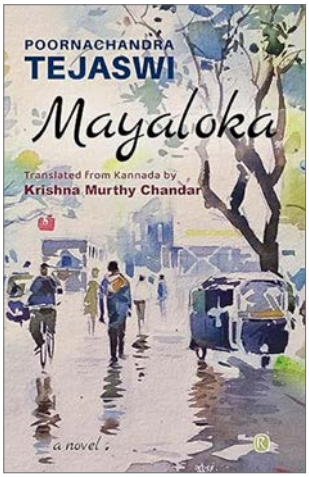
Cheriyan Alexander

MAYALOKA: A NOVEL
By Poornachandra Tejaswi. Translated from the original Kannada by Krishna Murthy Chandar
Ratna Books, 2024, pp. 368, ₹ 799.00

In 2006, Poornachandra Tejaswi, one of the titans of Kannada literature, published his deftly narrated novel *Mayaloka*. And now it has at last appeared in a faithful and superbly rendered English translation by Krishna Murthy Chandar, who taught English for three decades at Mysore University and is himself a gifted writer in Kannada. *Mayaloka* was the last major work by Tejaswi, who passed away in 2007. It is set in the heart of a region the writer knew like the back of his hand—the Malnad, the richly forested spine of Karnataka, formed by the great Sahyadri range of mountains, also known as the Western Ghats. Tejaswi's roots were firmly anchored in its soil. Growing up as the son of one of Karnataka's greatest writers, KV Puttappa (Kuvempu), Tejaswi quite naturally gravitated towards writing and soon emerged with a distinctive voice of his own.

Mayaloka could be characterized as a true slice-of-life novel in the tradition of social realism of the kind one finds in the works of such European masters as Flaubert, Zola and Tolstoy. In an admirably nuanced and credible way, the novel immerses us in the socio-economic and cultural ethos of rural Malnad by introducing us to a variety of characters, each with his or her unique personality and outlook on life. As they go about their everyday life, we the readers are drawn into their lifeworld, made up as it is of their inner and interpersonal tensions, their aspirations, their hopes and fears, their strengths and weaknesses, their struggles and jubilations, successes and failures, as well as the way they relate to the ever-present realm of nature, in both its benign and fierce aspects.

Tejaswi's shifts of tone, as he weaves back and forth between the numerous characters in this multifaceted novel, are truly noteworthy, encompassing quite a range of tonalities, from the empathetic to the satirical, from the matter of fact to the whimsical, from the celebratory to the acutely critical, and from the meditative to the humorous. Strewn all through the novel are moments of insight when some unpremeditated remark or thought or action arrests our attention and triggers reflection on one or other aspect of the human predicament, enabling us to hear what Wordsworth called, 'the still, sad music of humanity'.



One such moment occurs rather early in the novel. The narrator (a progressive and ecologically minded farmer with a passion for photography, a stand-in for Tejaswi himself) is angrily rushing to the office of the forest guard to lodge a complaint against some nomadic Hakki-Pikki tribesmen who have been setting traps for the Hundu Koli, a local wildfowl. The narrator, in stark contrast to the local paddy farmers who have secretly encouraged the Hakki-Pikkis in this venture, rues the loss of local fauna and is determined to have the poachers arrested. The forest guard, Nagaraju, hops on to the narrator's scooter and the two head straight to the tents of the nomads with the intention of threatening them with legal action. While Nagaraju harangues the tribal elders, the narrator peeks inside some of the tents:

> In the middle of this, I took a good look at their tents. Bones, skin and feathers of small animals and birds were scattered around. Also lying there were some Hundu Kolis with their feathers plucked out. It was a ghastly sight. They had dug a small pit in the ground to serve as a makeshift hearth. Over the fire was a dented, misshapen vessel in which some rice or *ganji* (gruel)—one could not say which—was boiling. Three kids with snotty noses sat there watching all the goings-on with wide-eyed innocence. Seeing their torn clothes, their emaciated bodies and their sad plight, my anger vanished. Their fate was not very different from that of the fast-disappearing wildlife. I felt quite disgusted with myself for thinking of taking action against them.

Such luminous moments of insight, introspection and self-awareness make for a richly rewarding reading experience. They highlight the grey zones in the moral and sociopolitical terrain that the narrator and a whole host of his fellow-citizens from the twin villages of Uralli and Makkigadde must traverse daily as they struggle to keep their rather tenuous lives and livelihoods on an even keel.

The novel impresses us with its plenitude of human life. The portraiture is particularly engaging. There are representatives from every social class and caste and from at least three religions. There is the garrulous Annapanna,

with his ambitious plan for a bumper chilli harvest, exploiting the labour of the barely sober barber Bhandari Babu, who is always looking out for supplementary income to support his drinking habit. Ikbal Sami, the blacksmith of Makkigadde doubles as operator of the pump that supplies water to the twin villages. Then there is Karate Manja, a Dalit who drops out of formal education to learn Karate and becomes a jack of all trades and local handyman. Prakasha, 'the owner, editor, reporter, all-in-one of the *Prakashavani* newspaper', is ever on the prowl looking for newsworthy events, and is not above triggering clashes (between the local chapter of the Raitha Sanga, the farmer's union, and the staff of the electricity board, for example) to generate content and increase sales. John Bettaiah runs a cycle shop and is the go-to person for all things mechanical and transport related. Among the women characters there are Fatima, the feisty *bajji* maker, and the shrewd and manipulative Bayamma. And then, there is Mari, the narrator's dog, with whom the novel opens. These are just a few of the many denizens of the place, all so convincingly drawn. They include eccentrics, tricksters, honest do-gooders, raconteurs, political types, activists, leaders and followers. By the time one reaches the end of the novel, one is left with the feeling of having met a whole lot of real people, each with their own distinctive qualities. The only regret is that there are not enough women characters.

Mayaloka also brings us face-to-face with nature in all its aspects. Bird life, in which the Malnad region is particularly rich, is one engaging strand. Wild boars, peacocks, foxes and snakes flit across the novel's pages from time to time. Ecological fragility of the region and the struggle for sustainable agriculture in the face of dwindling water resources are also addressed in the pages of the novel. The region is subjected to the vagaries of climate change, with the pendulum swinging from a punishing drought in the first part of the novel to an equally disruptive spell of torrential rain that causes landslides and floods at the end of the novel.

The denial of reality by those engaged in an illusory, insincere and self-serving brand of politics and trade-unionism is also highlighted in the novel, giving credence to its title, 'Mayaloka' (the world of Illusion).

A special feature of this novel is the numerous illustrations that it is sprinkled with. These are unique in that they look like pen and ink drawings with rich shading but are actually photographs (taken by Tejaswi himself) morphed into these charming drawings. They feature different facets of Malnad life, both human and animal, and form a fascinating subtext that complements the written text, truly a visual treat for readers.

This English translation by Krishna Murthy Chandar of a Kannada masterpiece is an important addition to the growing corpus of good translations of works by great Kannada writers, past and present. It had long been a complaint that our writers in Indian languages were not getting the international attention they deserved, either because of lack of translations or because their works were poorly translated. No longer. This commendable translation of a Tejaswi novel, coming close on the heels of an acclaimed translation of a Kuvempu novel by Vanamala Vishwanatha published by Penguin, is reason for rejoicing. Ratna Books, the publisher of *Mayaloka*, deserves credit for bringing out this excellent edition. In these days of digital dominance, it is a subversive pleasure to handle such a well-produced tome.

Cheriyan Alexander is former Associate Professor of English, St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. He has written on literature and culture for academic journals, magazines and newspapers.

Suspense, Intrigue, and Social Commentary: Criminal Underbelly of Urban India

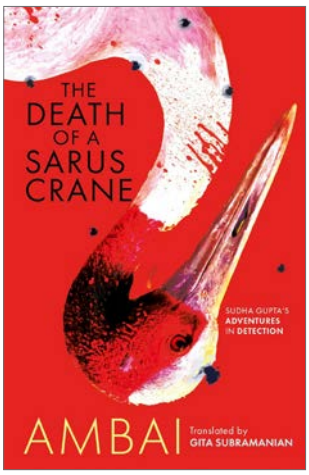
Jayati Gupta

THE DEATH OF A SARUS CRANE: SUDHA GUPTA'S ADVENTURES IN DETECTION
By Ambai. Translated from the original Tamil by Gita Subramanian
Speaking Tiger Books, New Delhi, 2024, pp. 192, ₹ 499.00

Ambai's *The Death of a Sarus Crane* is a modest collection of four short stories—comprising what the cover claims to be Sudha Gupta's Adventures in Detection. The generic trappings of detective fiction—a sleuth, a client, an expert mentor (Vidyasagar Rawte), a law enforcement officer (Govind Shelke), a crime or murder and a plot moving relentlessly towards a resolution—form a palpable framework for the action. Yet the investigations of the female detective can barely keep up with the masquerade that highlights recurrent social concerns—life in disparate pockets of Mumbai, issues of exclusion and marginality, migrant communities and divergent lives.

The feminist author CS Lakshmi, writing in Tamil, using her popular pseudonym, exposes in this oeuvre of short stories the criminal underbelly of urban India. Transgressing the conventional parameters of detective fiction, Ambai captures the ordinariness of everyday, middle-class existence through Sudha, the female detective and her assistant, Stella. As a private detective working from her home office, a partitioned portion of the veranda, Sudha undertakes investigations for suspecting husbands, or wives who want to keep an eye on their husbands, prepares dossiers and reports for business partners, evaluating mutual trustworthiness, or checks backgrounds of grooms or brides prior to a match being fixed. Rather mundane and undramatic.

Subverting reader-expectations of hard-core detective fiction, Sudha Gupta compromises on sheer objectivity to come across as a compassionate, socially responsible person. The titular story of the collection is framed by two schemes of domesticity—Sudha, Naren and their daughter Aruna, including their household helps share a relationship of camaraderie and stability, while Naren's researcher friend Kishen, Madhavi and two school-going daughters inhabit a home inscribed by fear, trauma and suspicion. Though the story guides us through the unravelling of a heinous crime, it focuses blatantly on social injustice, child labour and poverty. Sarus, a bright, underprivileged girl from a village community in Guriya, dreams of being educated, of becoming a scientist until her gender and vulnerability endanger her life.



In 'A Room Measuring 250 Square Feet', Ambai uses the tragic death of eighteen-year-old Anil Pawar and the frantic search for a relative to cremate him, to lever vignettes from the plight of transvestites in Mumbai. Sudha as a detective unravels the tangled strands within a closed community, commonly perceived as living on the margins of respectability. The core investigation however trails into narrative digressions about Stella and motherhood, Sudha's domestic routines, Rupali and her work in a Child Shelter Home, the home-grown philosophy of the Jogappas and Govind Shelke, the policeman's humanitarianism. Is this an indication of a break with convention or does this expand the limits of detective writing?

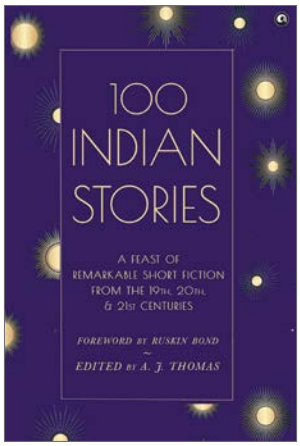
'Sepal' and 'Bun, *Maska* and Irani Chai' are journeys into the fragility of human relationships more than prying investigations into Mallika's attempted suicide or Isabella Pinto's property slipping out of her possession. The reader is likely to have the same question posed by Isabella Aunty to Sudha, 'What sort of detective are you?' She is not a Sherlock Holmes or a Hercule Poirot! A kind of lethargy overtakes the narrative flow, punctuated by gossip exchanged over cups of ginger or cinnamon tea; conversations that ramble into a myriad inconsequential but predictable details.

The translator, Gita Subramanian, adeptly captures the routine and the reiterative while the ambience of private and public spaces, the intersection of personal and the professional is evocatively translated from the original. It is difficult to classify the stories as crime thrillers with deep intrigues and exciting twists. The human-interest stories expose the pervasiveness of crimes like betrayal and treachery, caste and gender violence that often go unnoticed in the impersonal daily rush of life in Mumbai. Ambai finds her forte here in portraying aberrant mindscapes, thereby stretching the formulaic features of detective writing.

Jayati Gupta is former Professor of English, West Bengal State University, Barasat, and Fellow, Cultural Research, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, National Library, Kolkata 2015-2017. She is the author of *Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women, 1870-1940* (Routledge, UK 2020). She translates non-fiction from Bengali into English.

Introduction to *100 Indian Stories**

By AJ Thomas



Indian short-form fiction is singular. It is also unique in world literature as it has been created across dozens of languages over the last century and a half, all within the geographical boundaries of a single nation. In *100 Indian Stories*, perhaps the most ambitious attempt to showcase Indian short stories within the covers of a single volume, the reader will find one hundred glittering stories chosen from the bulk of the twenty-four languages recognized by the Sahitya Akademi (twenty-two listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution plus English and Rajasthani). The stories early in the list date back to the late nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, when some of the greatest names in Indian literature were beginning to come into their own; from that point onwards, stories from practically all the major phases in Indian literature (up to the present time) are represented as are most of the 'big' literatures as I call them (not 'major' literatures, as all our national literatures are equal in status).

My love for the Indian short story is of long standing. It began several decades ago when I began to read Malayalam short stories in periodicals and various collections and anthologies beginning in the late 1960s, and English short stories in the *Illustrated Weekly of India, Mirror*, and other magazines in the 1970s. This interest led me to focus on the short story for my academic studies. Beyond stories in Malayalam and English, my interest in the stories of our various national literatures was kindled as a result of my association with the National Book Trust's project, *Masterpieces of Indian Literature* edited by Dr KM George. In the early 1990s, I was the sole copy editor of this monumental undertaking based in Thiruvananthapuram. It was then that I grew familiar with the fictional works of most of the authors represented here. Over the next decades, my involvement with Indian fiction, and the Indian short story in particular, deepened as, from end-1997 onwards, I began editing *Indian Literature*, the 200-page, bimonthly English journal of the Sahitya Akademi. Over the nearly two decades I spent at *Indian Literature*, I read and published many of the masters of this literary form. This gave me invaluable insights into the Indian short story, of which there would at least be half a dozen on an average in each issue. My knowledge and admiration for short fiction grew when I was involved in another massive literary endeavour—compiling and editing material for the two-book, four volume, 1,700-page *Best of Indian Literature*, that brought together (along with poetry, drama, and critical essays,) the best short stories published in *Indian Literature* from its inception in 1957 until 2007.

It, therefore, gave me particular pleasure to be able to edit this volume of remarkable Indian short fiction for Aleph. We don't make any claims to the book being a comprehensive representation of all the great short fiction published in this country. Rather, what I have tried to do is present a wide selection of stories I have read and admired. As with all anthologies, there are stories that we have been unable to include as we were unable to track down copyright holders. Other masterpieces we were pointed to hadn't yet been translated or the translations I was able to find or commission were less than satisfactory.

What has given me great satisfaction is that almost 80 per cent of the stories in this anthology have been translated into English from various Indian languages in silken smooth translations. Many of the stories in this anthology that were originally written in English were first published in the twenty-first century, and a significant proportion of their authors are millennials. This reflects the rise in English education, and the consequent burgeoning of English-speaking communities all over the country. There are some other aspects of the evolution of the Indian short story that I was struck by in the course of editing this anthology. The reader will find that there are only a few stories by women writers in the book from the years before Independence. After Independence there was an exponential increase in the number of Indian women writers getting published across languages as the bonds of patriarchy loosened and women gained access to education, and opportunities that had been denied to them. Today, they have made their mark in many of the languages in which fiction is created—that trend is reflected in the stories found in this volume.

Other streams of literature, that started later than 'mainstream' literature, and evolved independently, with little support from the establishment, were Dalit and tribal fiction, especially short fiction in languages such as Marathi and a few other big languages. As with women writers, stories by Dalit and tribal writers make their appearance several decades (almost a century) after the short story made its appearance in Indian literature. Differently gendered writers were the latest to be published.

* Excerpted from *100 Indian Short Stories: A Feast of Remarkable Short Fiction from the 19th, 20th, & 21st Centuries* edited by AJ Thomas. Aleph Book Company, 2025, pp. 856, ₹ 1499.00. Courtesy: Aleph Book Company.

The stories in this book are arranged according to the date of birth of their authors, starting with Fakir Mohan Senapati, the oldest contributor to this volume, and ending with Aravind Jayan, the youngest; this was unavoidable as we were unable to pin down exactly when many of the older stories were first published, which would have been essential to have the stories appear in chronological order, based on their dates of first publication.

Before I wrap up this brief introduction, it's worth taking a quick look at how the short story originated and developed in India. Prose settled into modernity around the mid-nineteenth century, mostly through the promotional activities of Christian missionaries; thereafter, Western fictional forms and genres like the novel and the short story found their way into Indian languages, initially through translation as in the case of Malayalam. Indian writers began to be influenced by Western forms in the fiction they were creating. The earliest such story appeared in Bengali—'Modhumati' by Purna Chandra Chattopadhya, published in 1873—followed by stories in Malayalam (1891), Assamese (1892), Odia (1898), Kannada (1900), Hindi (1901), Tamil (1905), Urdu (1908), Telugu, (1910), Sindhi (1914), Gujarati (1918), and so on.

The ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity propagated by the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century had travelled to various parts of the country along with other trends and ideas from Europe. This was especially noticeable in Bengal in the early nineteenth century, and began to become visible in other regions a short while later. Although the ills of Western colonizers like the English and French can never be forgotten, the advent of modern European ideas did inspire people to push back against feudalism, caste discrimination, and other ugly features of Indian society; along with the part they played in social reform, Western ideas influenced the modernizing of regional literatures in their earliest stages of development. The short story, as a form, gained from this in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A few decades later, the socialist ideals broadcast through the Russian Revolution further built upon these earlier influences, and resulted in the Progressive Literature Movement that began in the mid-1930s, with Premchand as one of its luminaries. Stories of the poor, downtrodden, marginalized, and outcast sections of society found their way into mainstream literatures like Bengali, Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Urdu, Marathi, Hindi, etc. Socialist realism was the guiding spirit in this movement.

While there isn't enough empirical evidence or plausible studies to arrive at unimpeachable conclusions about the evolution of short fiction across languages in the Indian literary tradition, certain broad trends are discernible, as delineated above. In the seventy or more years since the origins of the form in the subcontinent up until the country gained Independence, writers focused mainly on social realism, nationalistic themes, social issues, and plot-driven stories. Then, in the various avatars of realism later, modernism began to make its presence felt. In the big literatures, this became manifest since the mid-1950s and gained strength through the succeeding decades leading to what I characterize as 'after-modernism' (the Indian variant of 'post-modernism' since this concept/style as understood in the West may not have relevance in our context). Satire had made its appearance early on, but it is only in the decades since Independence that there has been an explosion in the variety of themes, subjects, and forms to be found in Indian short fiction—crime, science fiction, absurdism, magic realism, expressionism, stream of consciousness writing, and much more.

In this book, the reader will encounter some of the finest examples of the various kinds of short fiction that were written in over a century by writers from India. It is my sincere hope that this selection will whet the appetite of readers to further explore the vast treasures that Indian literature has to offer.

AJ Thomas
Kaitharam, North Paravur
7 October 2024

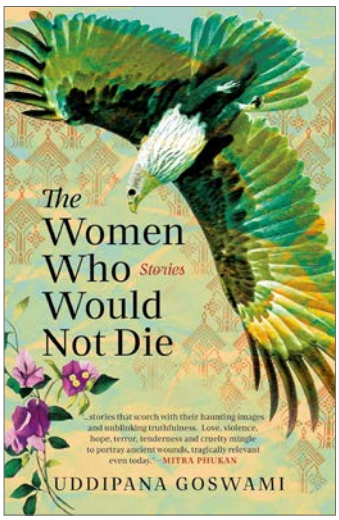
Between Oppression and Resilience: Stories from Assam's Fault lines

Parvin Sultana

THE WOMEN WHO WOULD NOT DIE: STORIES
By Uddipana Goswami
Speaking Tiger Books, 2024, pp. 207, ₹ 499.00

Uddipana Goswami's short story collection, *The Women Who Would Not Die*, provides a poignant and multifaceted exploration of life in Assam, a region marked by decades of socio-political unrest and ethnic tensions. Drawing from the lived experiences of individuals in conflict zones, the collection not only recounts stories of loss and longing but also critiques the structural violence embedded in both public and private spheres. Using a narrative approach grounded in realism and myth, Goswami interrogates questions of identity, marginalization, and resistance while offering a gendered lens on the nature of conflict and its pervasive effects.

Goswami resists romanticizing or essentializing the lives of tribals and Adivasis, avoiding the trope of the 'noble savage' often found in narratives about indigenous communities. Instead, she critically engages with the processes that perpetuate their marginalization. Stories such as 'I Thought I Knew My Ma', 'I Don't Love Sam', and 'Colours' illustrate how systemic hierarchies denigrate these communities. At the same time, Goswami questions the modes of assertion employed by marginalized groups, particularly when they adopt forms of resistance that mirror the violence and exclusivity of the structures they oppose. For instance, 'Colours' exposes the apathy of the Assamese middle class toward the plight of Adivasis, revealing how marginalization is often reinforced by indifference within ostensibly progressive spaces.



The cyclical and dehumanizing nature of violence is a central theme in the collection. Structural violence refers to the ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals by preventing them from meeting basic needs. In 'Sin and Retribution', Goswami revisits the 1983 Nellie massacre from the perspective of a perpetrator, unravelling the layers of dehumanization that lead individuals to commit acts of extreme brutality. The story critiques the inherent futility and moral erosion of communal violence, emphasizing how both victims and perpetrators are trapped within the structures of hate and fear perpetuated by historical injustices and political opportunism.

Militarization is another critical lens through which Goswami's work can be understood. The concept of the 'militarization of everyday life' highlights how prolonged conflict normalizes violence and embeds it into the fabric of society. This theme is powerfully captured in 'This is How We Lived', where Goswami portrays how years of armed conflict in Assam have desensitized society to violence. The rape and murder of Bogi Bai reflect how women's bodies are weaponized in conflict, serving as sites of domination and humiliation. Similarly, the mythical title story, 'The Women Who Would Not Die', critiques the state's role in perpetuating extra-judicial killings during Operation All Clear in 2003. By blending myth and reality, Goswami underscores the ways in which state violence disrupts lives and perpetuates cycles of grief and anger.

The gendered dimensions of violence are a recurring motif throughout the collection, inviting an intersectional feminist reading. Goswami's stories explore how militarization exacerbates the vulnerability of women, both in public and private domains.

The gendered dimensions of violence are a recurring motif throughout the collection, inviting an intersectional feminist reading. Goswami's stories explore how militarization exacerbates the vulnerability of women, both in public and private domains. In 'Write', 'Romola' and 'Body, Bones and All', the narratives delve into domestic violence and familial abuse, revealing how the normalization of violence in society infiltrates intimate spaces. In 'Body, Bones and All', the cyclical nature of violence is starkly evident as the perpetrator, himself a

Through its exploration of conflict, marginalization, and gender, *The Women Who Would Not Die* aligns with the broader discourse of postcolonial feminism, which critiques both colonial and patriarchal structures of power.

victim of military brutality, perpetuates abuse within his family. Similarly, 'Beloved of Flowers' highlights intergenerational trauma caused by sexual abuse within families, illustrating how silence and denial enable cycles of harm.

The collection also interrogates the societal cost of suppressing truth for the sake of preserving honour and justice. Kuxumpriya, an elderly woman is left to care for her daughter's 'illegitimate' child, a haunting reminder of the sacrifice women are forced to make in the name of social respectability. The final story, 'Never Got Written', shifts focus to the personal struggles of a single mother and the writer attempting to balance societal expectations with her creative aspirations. This narrative serves as a broader commentary on the gendered labour of care and the structural barriers that hinder women's autonomy and professional growth.

Through its exploration of conflict, marginalization, and gender, *The Women Who Would Not Die* aligns with the broader discourse of postcolonial feminism, which critiques both colonial and patriarchal structures of power. Goswami's stories reflect the intersections of ethnicity, class and gender, emphasizing how these axes of identity shape individuals' experiences of violence and resistance.

Goswami's work is a testament to the enduring human spirit in the face of systemic oppression and loss. By weaving together themes of identity, resistance, and resilience, *The Women Who Would Not Die* transcends its regional setting to address universal questions about power, agency, and the costs of conflict. This collection is a vital contribution to the literature of conflict zones, offering a deeply theoretical yet profoundly humanistic account of life on the margins.

Parvin Sultana teaches Political Science at Pramathesh Barua College, Assam.

Parvin Sultana's review of *Song of Our Swampland* by Manzu Islam was carried in both the February and March issues of *The Book Review*. The error is regretted.

'The Fallen City': Gutted Once Again

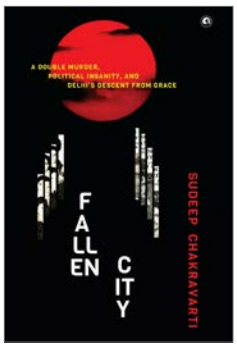
Payal Nagpal

FALLEN CITY: A DOUBLE MURDER, POLITICAL INSANITY, AND DELHI'S DESCENT FROM GRACE
By Sudeep Chakravarti
Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2024, pp. 248, ₹ 799.00

Delhi is a city ravaged and resurrected many a time in the course of history. Sudeep Chakravarti's *Fallen City*, the first full length book about the gruesome murder of Geeta and Sanjay Chopra in late August 1978, presents another instance of this phenomenon. On 26 August 1978, Geeta left from home to go to All India Radio (AIR) for a recording, accompanied by her younger brother Sanjay, but they never returned. The siblings were abducted and murdered by Billa and Ranga, with whom they had hitched a ride to reach AIR; the perpetrators of this heinous murder were subsequently arrested, tried and finally hung in Tihar Jail. The horrific crime is placed against the backdrop of the turbulent political climate of Delhi from the late 1970s to early 1980s. *Fallen City* is about the murder of these two teenagers, but in the process, it presents an exposé of the murky depths to which the city has fallen.

Historian and columnist Sudeep Chakravarti combines journalistic reportage with instances from history in the *Fallen City*. He bases his work on several archival records including numerous newspaper articles, books and magazines. This includes the book *Black Warrant: Confessions of a Tihar Jailer* written by Sunil Gupta, former superintendent of Tihar Jail, and Sunetra Choudhury, a journalist; it has recently been made into a seven-part series by Netflix. Where the narrative remains hinged on reportage as the primary method, the historian's eye brings to the writing candid social and political detailing of the time. Mention of historical details such as the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975, the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, the subsequent assassination of the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the military coup against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, 'a co-architect of Pakistan's genocide against East Pakistan in 1971', the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, 'swept from power by bands of rampant Islamists' present a glimpse of the political situation in South Asia during the 1970s.

Fallen City delineates a Delhi soon to be marred in more ways than one. Chakravarti faithfully recreates the decade of the 1970s, with references to 'Thums Up',



'Gold Spot', 'Limca', 'Double Seven', '2-in-1s—part cassette recorder, part radio'; the world was not yet globalized. Delhi's 'signature ornamental trees'—the amaltas and the jacaranda find mention alongside the commonplace neem and jamun. The Ambassadors and Fiat cars, the imported Mercs and Chevrolets smacked of power and the entitled flaunted the line, 'Do you know who my father is?' 'Political insanity' of the time was seen in strict measures enforced during the Emergency—Indira Gandhi's 20-point Programme coupled with Sanjay Gandhi's 5-point Programme (mentioned as the 4-point Programme in the book). It resulted in Indira Gandhi's defeat in the elections of 1977 and the rise of the Janata Party. With the imposition of the Emergency in India, something had gone terribly wrong in its nucleus; its democratic ideals had received a jolt—'On the day Geeta and Sanjay Chopra died, deliberations of the Justice JC Shah Commission probing the excesses of the Emergency arrived in public domain.'

In the chapters that follow, the sequence of events is traced. The hunt for the children continued and they were finally discovered three days later by a milkman on the Upper Ridge Road. The narrative presents dispassionately the postmortem and other forensic details; an insight into forensic science of the time is provided. In the reconstruction of the events on the fatal day, it comes to the fore how the good samaritan, Inderjeet Singh Noato, had followed on his scooter the Fiat car in which the siblings had hitched a ride. As Noato lost the car, he rushed to the nearby police station to inform them of a possible untoward happening. However, as the police began to question him, he referred to it as a 'relationship problem' and left. Information and accounts are corroborated by newspaper reports. Questions were raised in the Parliament and politicians expressed their distress urging for immediate headway in the case.

Students responded with protests at the Boat Club, 'the capital's gathering place for protests': 'Several thousand students from schools and colleges across Delhi poured into the space facing the massive Lutyens-era edifices that flanked Rashtrapati Bhavan…the largest contingent arrived from Lady Shri Ram College… They were joined by students from several colleges… Janaki Devi, Satyavati, Mata Sundri, Delhi College of Engineering, Jesus and Mary College.' Shivaji College students walked to the Dhaula Kuan police station 'to register their anger, their horror'. Students from the schools like the Convent of Jesus and Mary and Modern School also participated in these protests. As pressure mounted, the police intensified their investigation and identified 'Billa' and 'Ranga' as the killers. The former excelled in stealing cars for kidnapping, murdering people, and changing number plates to escape; the most recent episode being the killing of two Arab nationals, for which the Bombay police was chasing him. Conjecture had it they were in Bombay (now Mumbai). But as chance would have it, their entry in the Kalka Mail through the window of a train compartment, full of army personnel did them in; the army people identified them and handed them over to the crime branch. The arrests of Billa and Ranga intensified the disquiet in Delhi. Billa and Ranga confessed, each blamed the other for Geeta's rape and the double murder; the rape could not be forensically verified due to the 'decomposed state of the body'. However, a month later both retracted their statements. Extracts from confessional accounts have been provided in the book. Defense lawyers made repeated appeals, but all petitions were rejected and they were eventually hung in Tihar Jail in 1982. The macabre incident of 1978 is placed against an array of several unsolved murders of the time—the murder of 6-year-old Kiran, 50-year-old Nagarajan, 32-year-old Ajinder Kaur, mother of three, pregnant with a fourth child, double murder of the Mehra couple and others. The funeral of the siblings, the floods in Delhi, the death of Jomo Kenyatta, the President of Kenya, Prime Minister Morarji Desai's invitation to Pakistan's dictator Zia-ul-Haq are all strung together by time.

Chakravarti extends the narrative of *Fallen City* up to the tumultuous time of the 1980s—the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the victory of Indira Gandhi, the anarchic behaviour of Sanjay Gandhi, the 'unquestioned heir apparent to India-is-Indira-Indira-is-India', the death of Sanjay Gandhi, Operation Blue Star (entry of the army into the Golden Temple at the orders of Indira Gandhi) and the assassination of Indira Gandhi. *Fallen City* ends with the subsequent anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The Emergency had changed the political alchemy of the nation and for Chakravarti the murder of Geeta and Sanjay Chopra became representative of its times, an idea aptly described in the brief Afterword: 'As much as it is about the darkness of those times, and the darkness that fell over Delhi, this book is about the darkness that enshrouded a family that were four. And then, quite suddenly, two.' Chakravarti mentions how his efforts at trying to meet the parents, Roma and Madan, through the journalist Usha Rai, met with an 'emphatic negation', 'No way.' Delhi remains for Chakravarti a 'love-hate' city, one from which he wants to escape and one to which he yearns to return; a sentiment shared by many Delhi-ites. *Fallen City* reminds us of the Nirbhaya case of December 2012 and compels one to rethink the city we have created. A slice from the city's past, *Fallen City* is a chilling reminder of the abysmal depths to which we have fallen, taking the city in our fold.

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Celebrating a Forgotten Life: The Story of Gerda Philipsborn

Nishat Zaidi

JAMIA'S AAPA JAAN: THE MANY LIFEWORLDS OF GERDA PHILIPSBORN
By Margrit Pernau
Speaking Tiger, New Delhi, 2024, pp. 392, ₹ 799.00

Muslims and Jews have been considered proverbial enemies. Yet, in the context of South Asian history, the two have often been invoked together. Historian Faisal Devji has provocatively called the idea of Pakistan a Muslim Zion. Aamir Mufti, on the other hand, invoked what he termed the 'Jewish question' with regard to the minoritization of Muslims in India and the Hindu-Muslim conflict. Unlike these invocations, Pernau's book sets out to trace an extraordinary story of Muslim-Jew solidarity, in which a Jewish woman in Germany struck a life-long friendship with three curious and passionate young Indian Muslim students in Weimar Germany, travelled all the way to India to work with them and made remarkable contributions to the making of the first nationalist Muslim university in India, which was at the forefront of India's struggle for freedom and embodied Gandhian values.

Pernau writes, 'The biography of a ghost necessarily has to be the biography of a community—Gerda's biography is (also) the biography of Jamia, not because she was so important, but preciously because she was not, and because it is only by bringing the whole (Jamia) *biradari* into the narrative that we can make her visible.'

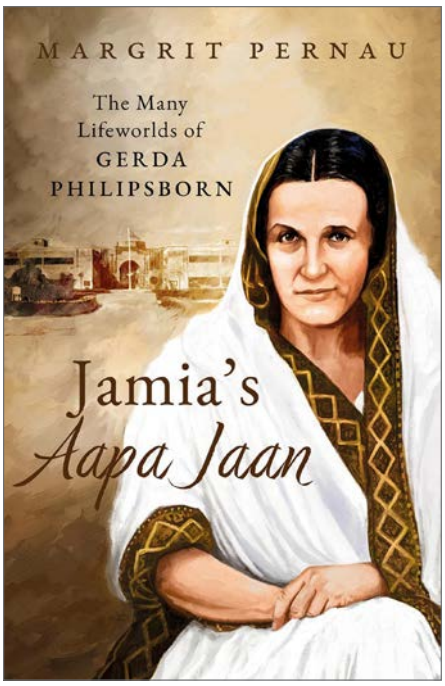
When Jamia Millia Islamia, under its visionary Vice Chancellor Mushirul Hasan, decided to name its newly built daycare facility after Gerda Philipsborn, this German-Jewish woman was resurrected from anonymity for Jamia's younger generations. Slowly, fragments of her life began to appear in articles and discussions and then, Margrit Pernau decided to do a full-fledged biography of this spectral figure. Considering a general apathy for institutional histories and even greater disregard for the role women played in them, this was a remarkable move.

The story of Gerda Philipsborn (April 30, 1895-April 14, 1943) is as curious and full of oddities as the presence of her grave in the Muslim graveyard of Jamia. Surrounded by the graves of Jamia employees, mostly Muslims, lies the grave of a Jewish woman with an Urdu couplet carved in stone for her epitaph. The couplet by Mirza Ghalib beautifully sums up the unconventional life of Gerda: '*na hogā yak-bayābāñ māñdgī se zauq kam merā / habāb-e-mauja-e-raftār hai naqsh-e-qadam merā*' (Any vast wilderness of weariness cannot dampen my enthusiasm/ My footprint is the foam of a speeding wave).

Indeed, like the foam of a speeding wave, Gerda set in motion a culture in Jamia where children were offered care along with education and discipline, women were inspired to participate in the public sphere and attend lectures, and men were motivated to shake off their patriarchal biases and learn to work with women in workplaces.

Gerda Philipsborn, Jamia's 'Aapa Jaan', can be best understood through her writings and responses to children's letters published in *Payam-i-Talim*, a magazine for children published by Maktaba Jamia. Her love and involvement in their lives is apparent in the free-flowing pen interaction she carried with children in these letters.

This image of Aapa Jaan matches little with the image of young Gerda's growing up in Germany. Born in 1895 in a rich Jewish family, she was trained to be an opera singer. She worked as a kindergarten teacher and even undertook social work during World War I. Thus, raised in a liberated atmosphere of Kiel and Berlin, Gerda's life took a different turn after she met three Indian students—Zakir Hussain, Muhammad Mujeeb, and Abid Hussain at a party in Berlin in late 1924 or early 1925. The party was hosted by Mrs. and Mr. ACN Nambiar, a journalist and political activist, whose house was a regular meeting ground for Indian students in Germany. Gerda's dream of a world of equality, justice, and freedom found resonances in these three young men, and this, writes Pernau, 'echoed across the continents and was the basis of the friendship that linked her to Zakir Hussain, Muhammad Mujeeb and Abid Hussain'; Gerda, with her vast familiarity of the city, helped Zakir Hussain navigate his way into the sphere of cultural and intellectual activities in the city. After the trio returned to India in 1926 to build Jamia, Gerda remained in touch with Zakir Hussain. Pernau



informs us that Gerda gave up her life in Germany in 1932, even before the Nazis came to power and forced Jews to migrate to other places. Gerda first went to Palestine and then to India to join her old friends.

Once in Jamia, Gerda found her calling. She was entrusted with the responsibility of children in the Jamia School, a job very close to Gerda's heart, and which she, with her past training as a kindergarten worker and caregiver, happily embraced. Pernau writes, 'What helped her most in this development was her work as the warden (probably rather one of the wardens) of Khaksar Manzil, the hostel for the smallest children. Here, it mattered less than at school that her Urdu still was far from perfect, though she seems to have picked it up quickly.'

Gerda made friends with wives of Jamia founders, like Saliha Abid Husain; inspired women of Jamia to attend extension lectures of Halide Edib, a famous Turkish writer who visited Jamia on the invitation of Muhammad Mujeeb in 1935 and formed *'Payami biradari'*, a forum through which she regularly interacted with children. Pernau writes about Gerda's lack of punctuality, her initial disagreements with Abdul Ghaffar Mudholi, the in-charge of Jamia Primary School, a general sense of melancholy in Jamia after she was arrested and interned at the Purandhar camp in 1940 under suspicion of being an enemy of the British Empire, rejection of her application for naturalization of her citizenship by the colonial regime due to her affiliation with Gandhian Jamia and many other things.

Pernau's biography of Gerda is an immensely engrossing read, but, as the author admits, writing it was not easy. Because Gerda did not leave many traces in the form of facts and evidence, it was like chasing a ghost. Pernau writes, 'The biography of a ghost necessarily has to be the biography of a community—Gerda's biography is (also) the biography of Jamia, not because she was so important, but preciously because she was not, and because it is only by bringing the whole (Jamia) *biradari* into the narrative that we can make her visible.' To circumvent this limitation, Pernau organizes the book around emotions. Each of the 11 chapters of the book is built around a particular emotion, as it maps various phases of Gerda's life and her many lifeworlds. This is not surprising considering Pernau, a Professor at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, is a renowned scholar of the history of emotions. Pernau explains her unconventional approach thus: 'We need to pay attention not only to what she [Gerda] said and wrote (or what was written about her) but also what she heard… .' As a result, through Gerda's life story, we learn about life in Germany at that time, the everyday life and struggles of Jamia in its formative years, the ambivalent modernity of its founding fathers, and the many said and unsaid tales in a mix of anecdotal and factual tone.

…through Gerda's life story, we learn about life in Germany at that time, the everyday life and struggles of Jamia in its formative years, the ambivalent modernity of its founding fathers, and the many said and unsaid tales in a mix of anecdotal and factual tone.

Pernau's experiment with biographical writing challenges several generic assumptions about biography or life-writing. For one, it helps us see how biographies are palimpsest with the life of the biographer as well as of those with whom the biographical subject interacted etched upon the life of the biographical subject. In this case, Pernau's own entanglements with India, Delhi, Jamia and Urdu sources inspired her to reconstruct the life of a forgotten figure and the institution to which Gerda devoted her life. It also displaces assumptions about the relationship between 'facts' and 'life-texts'. Instead of treating an event or the biographical subject as autonomous, such an approach invites us to see each sign within a network of signification, each event as a discursive occurrence. Thus, in pushing the generic boundary of the frame of biography, Pernau performs what Derrida terms as the 'possibility and impossibility of the taxonomy'.

Jamia's Aapa Jaan: The Many Lifeworlds of Gerda Philipsborn is as much a celebration of the nearly forgotten life of Gerda Philipsborn, as it is of the valiant attempt of the author to uncover it. In writing this book, Pernau, like Gerda, has created a footprint like that of a speeding wave, one that will inspire scholars to go beyond facts and data, and think of archives in more creative ways.

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An Enigma among Literary Giants

Dipavali Sen

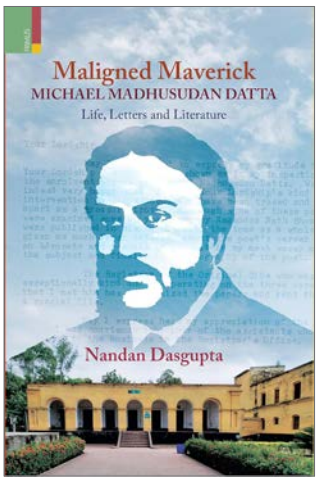
MALIGNED MAVERICK—MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DATTA: LIFE, LETTERS AND LITERATURE
By Nandan Dasgupta
Primus Books, Delhi, 2024, pp. 400, ₹ 1750.00

I was a schoolgirl when I met Michael Madhusudan Datta on the pages of my texts. It is more than half century later that I have came across this vibrant account of him by Delhi-based author, editor and attorney-at-law Nandan Dasgupta. The world has by this time transformed itself but Michael Madhusudan Datta, a maverick often maligned by contemporaries, remains an enigma. Even if his literary work has received due attention, there have not been many attempts to understand it in the sweep of his life and times. For the youth of today, especially those who have been growing up outside Bengal and certainly India, this is an important dimension. For, Michael Madhusudan Datta's story is essentially a tale of two countries, two cultures, or 'biculturalism' as Dr Narayani Gupta has put it. The book opens with a Note on Reading this Book, Illustrations, Acknowledgements, Glossary of Names, Brief Outline of Datta's Life, and his Literary Journey (p. ix-xlix), ending duly with an Appendix, Bibliography and Index (pp. 318-349).

The core consists of the Introduction (pp. 1-47) and seven chapters with sub-sections and Notes (pp. 48-317). 'My narrative explodes some myths and questions many perceptions, including an explanation of how he became a spendthrift. To understand Michael, there is a mass of misinformation to cut through…', says Dasgupta (p. 40).

In 'O Tempora! O Mores!', Dasgupta explores why Michael was such a reckless spender. Was it his father's overindulgence? Was it a defence against ragging? Dasgupta suggests that it was rather his father's mislaid plan of making him 'think and behave like an aristocrat' (p. 55).

'Dreamed of Climes More Bright and Free (1834-43)' highlights the role of his English teacher at Hindoo College, David Lester Richardson in creating in him a yearning for a different 'clime' or environment, both geographical and cultural. DLR spotted talent in him but encouraged aspirations beyond his circumstances, including that for a blue-eyed-maid. 'Rather heartbreaking really,' comments Dasgupta (p. 88).



'A Convert in Calcutta (1843-1847)' discusses why he was baptized Michael, and even whether he was baptized at all. It also takes up the question of why he got converted. The suggestion that Dasgupta endorses is that it was a 'contrivance' for him; a means to go to his dreamland, which was England. The same goes for his voyage to Madras. 'He had a dream to fulfil—to become a great English poet' (p. 131).

'A Hindu among Anglo-Saxons' (1848-1855) talks of two myths to begin with, that Michael's 'blue-eyed maid' Rebecca was all-English and that his Henrietta was French. It establishes how '…Michael wanted the best of both worlds, the heritage of his forefathers and the literature and science of the West' (p. 166). It also introduces Michael's sense of fate or destiny (pp. 171-2).

'A Tremendous Comet (1856-1862)' traces how in response to inheritance-related matters, Michael left Madras and Rebecca forever in January 1856, but Dasgupta argues that it was not quite a rejection or desertion (p. 180). Henrietta joined him in Calcutta, giving up a lot and putting up with a lot but getting a lot too in terms of companionship and credit for being Michael's inspiration for *Meghnadbadh Kavya* being written and published in 1861 (p. 183). 'After *Meghnadbadh*, Michael had the world at his feet. He had proved to everyone, and perhaps more importantly, to himself that he was a great poet. Now he had to prove that he could also be rich. He had a horror of being poor' (p. 225).

What happened then? 'Albion and Amaravati (1862-1866)' talks of Michael having misadventures in London and Versailles, repeatedly appealing to Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar in India, staying under 'penurious' circumstances (such as in the apartment building photographed, p. 246), and getting 'broken, not only in body but also in spirit' (p. 269). Soon after becoming a barrister in November 1866, Michael returned to Calcutta. Dasgupta asks why. Was Calcutta calling him back? 'Did the Anglophile remain a Bengali at heart? (p. 269)'. I notice appreciatively that Dasgupta does not tell, but rather asks; not force his conclusions, but simply suggests.

'Out, Out, Brief Candle (1867-1873)' leaves the reader unutterably moved, even angry, at how the end

came, or rather, was brought about. Henrietta and Michael died within a couple days of each other, in poverty, humiliation and pain, but also in love (while Rebecca outlived them by 20 years, merely carrying 'Datta' to her tombstone).

As early as 1932, Priyaranjan Sen had written: 'Though this brilliant poet had been forestalled by fate from continuing his efforts, he had revealed the powers that were latent in the literature. There was no publication in the Bengali language which could show such a mind, so gigantic, so excellently moulded by the sages of the East and the West co-operating together. The greatest poet of Bengal was recognized to be no servile imitator: on the contrary, it was he around whom literary aspirants crowded in order to prove apt pupils in producing works of a like pattern, but with one or two glorious exceptions they all failed in their endeavour' (*Western Influence in Bengali Literature,* p. 143).

Maverick, yes. Maligned, perhaps. But innovators often do have to pay a cost. Prometheus was chained and tortured. The fact is that Michael did change the course of Bengali literature and attitudes.

His is a success story.

More than Michael's literary abilities, I, for one, am struck by his positivity as revealed in this book; his self-confidence, his risk-taking, his gallant efforts to rise above circumstances. The free verse is already there; Michael's legacy, of course, but history now. Michael however is not. He is most contemporary in the globalized world, among Indian-origin people rising to international positions of power, and even aspiring to outer space. Michael's life is not of pathos but of inspiration. There I feel lies the relevance of Dasgupta's presentation.

Dipavali Sen is an academic with interest in mythology.

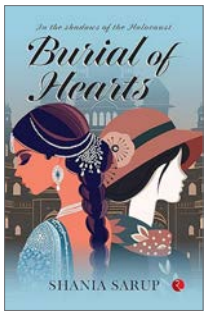
Testament to Compassion and Empathy

Divya Shankar

BURIAL OF HEARTS: IN THE SHADOWS OF THE HOLOCAUST
By Shania Sarup
Rupa Publications, 2024, pp. 280, ₹ 399.00

Burial of Hearts by Shania Sarup is a tale of triumph of compassion over hatred in the shadows of the Holocaust. A work of historical fiction, it is inspired by the true story of Sir Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji Jadeja, the Raja of Nawanagar, who offered refuge to several Jewish children who fled their homes as the Nazis systematically exterminated Jews during World War II years. The novel shifts alternately between the point of view of Silana Haydn, a half-Jew girl from an affluent family in Poland and Tara, the daughter of Maharaja of Bramsadha, India. Silana, who's just turned fifteen years old, finds her life upturned when the secret police arrive at her doorstep. She and her two siblings are forced to leave behind their mother and motherland and embark upon a long, arduous journey to a refugee camp far away in colonial India.

Unmarried and 23 years old, Tara shoulders the burden of responsibilities of a kingdom that lacks a male heir and is ruled by her ageing father. Neighbouring Princely States unfailingly point out their kingdom's vulnerability, either thrusting marriage alliances or threatening them with annexation. As their lives intertwine, we realize both Tara and Silana struggle under the weight of their identity; they adore their siblings who are their polar opposites, they cannot fully comprehend their respective fathers' thoughts and accept a reality they want to break free from.



The Holocaust has undoubtedly birthed the most harrowing stories but Silana's journey across countries, fleeing an infernal homeland to reach a safe haven in India doesn't leave an impact. The Maharaja frets over British disapproval of his mission of saving several Jewish children and the need to keep their work secretive, yet it's unrealistic how several foreign children lodged in his summer palace escape the attention of the Britishers. For a novel largely set in India, the WWII years that mark a crucial phase in the struggle for Indian Independence make a measly appearance. Even though the story has its heart in the right place, the writing is too dandified.

Keeping aside these niggles, Tara's transformation from one who treats the Polish children as if they are filthy insects to one whose life entirely revolves around their routine, happiness and comfort is well-written and believable. The novel is not just a testament to the power of kindness and empathy in dark times but also a coming-of-age story of the protagonists and modest appreciation of art as a means of healing. For a debut novel by a 17-year-old author, *Burial of Hearts* is commendable.

Divya Shankar, an engineering and sciences graduate, with seven years' working experience in the semiconductor industry is currently a stay-at-home mother, a freelance writer and an avid reader with a soft corner for Indian literature and historical fiction genres.

Perspectives to the Study of Non-elite Histories of South Asia

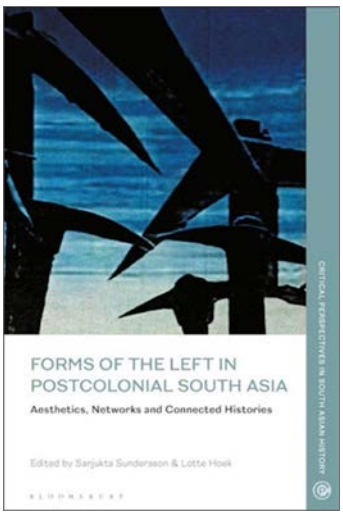
Amol Saghar

FORMS OF THE LEFT IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIA: AESTHETICS, NETWORKS AND CONNECTED HISTORIES
Edited by Sanjukta Sunderason & Lotte Hoek
Bloomsbury, 2022, pp. 300, ₹ 999.00

TOWARDS PEOPLES' HISTORIES IN PAKISTAN: (IN)AUDIBLE VOICES, FORGOTTEN PASTS
Edited by Asad Ali and Kamran Asdar Ali
Bloomsbury, 2023, pp. 276, ₹ 899.00

Two books in the 'Critical Perspectives in South Asian History' series, viz., *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia* and *Towards Peoples' Histories in Pakistan*, provide a fresh perspective to the study of non-elite histories. While the former studies these histories from the perspective of the Left and focuses on South Asian regions including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the latter explores peoples' histories in the specific context of Pakistan.

Sanjukta Sunderason and Lotte Hoek's edited work is divided into seven chapters (apart from Introduction and Afterword). The volume, as indicated in the crisply written Introduction, emerged from 'conversations among a group of scholars who have collected stories, resonances and possibilities around the field of Left-wing aesthetics across postcolonial South Asia' (p. 2). The chapters throw light on different facets of Left-Wing politics and the manner in which it shaped in postcolonial South Asia. The discussions transcend political borders created in the region post-1947. An important aspect of the present book is that it outlines in detail the evolutionary histories of the Communist Parties in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. And while deliberating on this issue, it sheds light on the way in which the idea of the 'Left' expanded and transformed into a wider political and social formation in South Asia, especially during the decades leading 'up to and after Partition in 1947' (p. 5). The evolutionary history of Left- Wing politics, particularly in the post-1947 period, has been studied against the backdrop of such developments as the forging of Afro-Asian and South Asian solidarities, Cold War, crisis of the 1960s and the emergence of Maoist internationalism with its strong base in South Asia.



Along with discussing the myriad ways in which the 'Left' transformed into political and social formations, the contributors have also tried to study its role in the making of such socio-cultural movements as All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) and Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). While the former two emerged in the 1930s, IPTA emerged in the 1940s. The contribution of art and artists in the making of Left-Wing politics has also been explored in the monograph.

'A Melancholic Archive: Chittaprosad and Socialist Art in Postcolonial India' by Sanjukta Sunderason explores the close connection between one of the most important contemporary artists Chittaprosad, and the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the functioning of the latter, between the early 1940s and 1978. Considered as an artist of hunger and humanism, Chittaprosad was for long a dedicated worker of the CPI. However, soon after Independence he decided to remove himself from the Party. His exit from the organization came close on the heels of his mentor, patron and confidant PC Joshi's exit from the Party. Joshi, to be sure, as the article notes, was expelled from the Party in 1948 for his anti-party stance.

The essay, through a wide range of sources including correspondences, journalistic drawings, memoirs of friends, comrades and family members, unfinished essays, to name a few, which make up for what the author terms as the 'melancholic archive of the cultural left', attempts to study Chittaprosad's career as an artist post his distancing from the Party.

Citing essays that Chittaprosad wrote in journals like *Unity* and *Crossroads*, the author tries to shed light on the issues that the painter had with the Party. She highlights the lamentations of the artist. One of the major problems that Chittaprosad had with the CPI related to the manner in which his paintings were used by the latter as a propaganda tool. He lamented the fact that hardly any of his paintings were acknowledged by the organization. His essays in such journals indicate that he had become quite bitter towards the Party and its auxiliary bodies like IPTA from around the 1950s. The author notes that the process of Chittaprosad's removal from the Party was quite similar

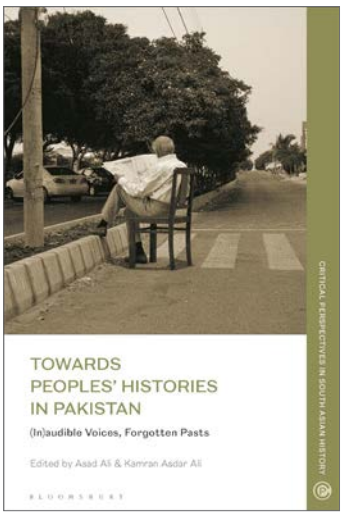
to Ritwik Ghatak's expulsion. He too, like Joshi, was shunted out from the Party due to his anti-Party stance.

Significantly, Chittaprosad, Sunderason notes, distanced himself from the Communist Party of India not due to his disillusionment with Marxism, but due to his 'rejection of the particular form Communist Parties and in particular ruling Communist governments have taken' (p. 52). In fact, it was due to this reason that he refused to visit the then Czechoslovakia, where his paintings were being exhibited. The country according to him had a repressive government in place which stifled the artistic qualities of painters.

Among other issues, an important facet of the painter which is highlighted in the essay relates to his popularity in the West. Chittaprosad's paintings became a rage in many parts of Europe. It was through his art works, the author notes, that he was able to forge close ties with people in the West, most of which had Communist governments. The article, therefore, suggests that Chittaprosad had problems specifically with the Communist Party of India and not with Communism per say. The final portion of the essay highlights the diverse ways in which Chittaprosad, the painter, has been rediscovered in the twenty-first century.

The next essay, 'Kagmari Festival, 1957: Political Aesthetics and Subaltern Internationalism in Pakistan' by Layli Uddin is written in the specific context of East Pakistan (modern day Bangladesh). The essay draws its name from a congregation which took place in 1957 under the tutelage of the Awami League. The council convention was held in Kagmari, a 'small sleepy village 50 miles north of Dhaka' (p. 65). Described as a mela or fair, the convention, the author notes, had long term socio-political consequences for Bangladesh as well as Pakistan. Apart from a mela, the convention has variously been described as a *sanskritik sammelon* or cultural congregation and an Afro-Asian cultural convention. Through a repository of archival material including memoirs, photos and correspondence among the organizers, Layli Uddin throws light on the proceedings of the convention. The essay suggests that a range of political issues were discussed during the six days of the conference. Some of the problems which were deliberated upon related to the Cold War, Afro-Asian solidarity, military alliances and future of decolonization and imperialism. The convention was significant in that instead of political actors, those who were usually excluded from political proceedings also participated in large numbers. The reason that they were able to participate in the convention was because rather than being held in closed chambers or parliament, the conference took place in an open area, maidan, in Kagmari.

The main organizer of the convention was a Sufi saint by the name of Maulana Abdul Hamid Kahn Bhashani (the Red Maulana). Given this, it was not surprising, the author notes, that the convention was akin to a political theatre marked by a 'total work of art' (p. 67). Layli Uddin argues that an in-depth study of conventions like the one held at Kagmari is important in that it provides a fresh perspective to study subaltern constituencies and Left politics in South Asia. Such a study will allow us to understand not just the diverse ways in which the peasants and workers worked creatively but also understand the ways in which they accommodated such facets as secular and profane, tradition and modernity, history and future, and in the process shaped the trajectories of the 'Left in postcolonial South Asia' (p. 94).



Iftikar Dadi in his essay 'Between Neorealism and Humanism: *Jago Hua Savera*' explores ideas like intellectualism, neorealism, and socialism through the prism of a movie. Released in 1959, this AJ Kardar-directed movie is considered as 'the only prominent example of a neorealist Pakistani film from the 1950s and 1960s'. AJ Kardar, it may be mentioned, was the brother of the Indian film maker AR Kardar, who is credited with the founding of film industry of Pakistan in Lahore.

Through an in-depth study of a cross-regional movie like *Jago Hua Savera*, the author attempts to analyse the close association between political contradictions and artistic challenges. The movie, the essay notes, highlighted themes and personal histories from both within and outside Pakistan. Some of the leading names in art and culture industry were associated with the making of the film, including Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Walter Lassally (cinematographer of *Zorba the Greek*), Shanti Kumar Chatterji (assistant director of *Pather Panchali*) and Timir Baran (music composer of PC Barua directed *Devdas*), among others. Besides narrating at length, the main plot of the movie, *Dadi* also studies in detail elements related to its style as well as the manner in which it was received by the audience in Pakistan and India. The movie, which was experimental in nature, was a complete failure at the box office. Though a failure, it marked a new era of neorealist cinema in South Asia in the 1950s. It also was a novel experiment in that unlike the productions of PWA and IPTA, it was trying to create a progressive cultural form that had cross-regional address. The movie, it may be mentioned, inspired other later day movies in Pakistan and India which too tried to experiment with concepts like neorealism and socialism. The article discusses at length this phase of film making in India and Pakistan.

> An important aspect of *[Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia]* is that it outlines in detail the evolutionary histories of the Communist Parties in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. And while deliberating on this issue it sheds light on the way in which the idea of the 'Left' expanded and transformed into a wider political and social formation in South Asia, especially during the decades leading 'up to and after partition in 1947' (p. 5).

At time when South Asia is engulfed by jingoism and exclusivism, a movie like *Jago Hua Savera* is a reminder of collaborations that happened among film makers belonging to different regions at one point of time.

The following chapter, 'Lotus roots: Transporting a Political-Aesthetic Agenda from South Asia to Afro-Asia' by Maia Ramnath, studies the history of a little-known organization, Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA). In particular, it sheds light on the role that the Association's journal, *Lotus*, played in forging South Asian and African solidarity during the Cold War. The journal, according to the author, may be seen as a culmination of the project which was started by Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). This project involved culture as a tool of resistance against reactionary forces. The emergence of *Lotus* marked the transcontinental expansion of this project.

The essay explores at length the close relations between the workings of the PWA and AAWA. Besides deliberating upon the evolution and checkered history of the PWA in India and Pakistan, Ramnath also makes an attempt at studying the socio-political and cultural scenario in which the journal *Lotus* emerged. AAWA provided a common platform for the reunion of Progressive Writers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. While the journal *Lotus* ceased soon after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, attempts at forging an alliance between Africa and South Asia have continued unhindered.

Harshana Rambukwell's essay 'What got "Left" Behind: The Limits of Leftist Engagement with Art and Culture in Postcolonial Sri Lanka' attempts to study the emergence of the Left in Sri Lanka against the backdrop of Sinhalese nationalism. While doing so, she pays particular attention to the ways in which Left cultural movements became an intrinsic part of this majoritarian nationalism. The period that she focuses on is primarily between the 1950s and the 1980s. The Left cultural movements, although they were part of the Sinhalese nationalist movement, raised rather uncomfortable questions regarding sexuality, gender, and ethnicity, to name a few.

The final two essays in the volume, 'The Conscience Whipper: Alamgir Kabir's Film Criticism and the Political Velocity of the Cinema in 1960s East Pakistan' by Lotte Hoek, and 'Look Back in Angst: *Akaler Sadhaney*, the Indian New Wave and the Afterlife of the IPTA Movement' by Manishita Dass, may be read in conjunction. Both the essays explore the concept of the Left in the specific context of art and culture in erstwhile East Pakistan and India. While Hoek's essay studies this theme from the perspective of the cinema, Dass's work looks at the same issue from the point of view of the theatre, particularly IPTA.

Among other issues, an important point that Lotte Hoek's essay makes is that during the era of war and genocide in 1971, cinema emerged as a viable tool for the Left to propagate its progressive ideas among a section of the population who shared common commitments and ideals. Apart from discussing, albeit briefly, the functioning and the history of the Communist Party in East Pakistan between the 1950s and 70s, the essay also studies at length the role of the Left-leaning cultural organizations and movements during momentous events such as those of 1947 and 1971. Through a study of cinema, the essay sheds important light on the role of fine arts in liberation struggles. While in this case the focus is primarily on the liberation struggle of Bangladesh and the 1971 war, the facets touched upon by the author may be studied in the context of other similar kinds of liberation struggles.

Manishita Dass's essay brings to light little-known facets related to the history of 'New Wave' cinema in India. The author discusses at length several movies which were part of the 'New Wave' cinema. It also discusses some of the songs which were composed in this era, and which had garnered a lot of attention. Through all these, Dass's essay tries to analyse the role of IPTA in influencing Indian cinema in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Among others an important point that the article makes is that the IPTA inspired 'New Wave' cinema; rather than attracting subaltern spectators, it became limited to the elite section of the Indian society, which was in a minority.

The short but crisply written Afterword by Kamran Asdar Ali brilliantly encapsulates the main themes of the book and provides an overview of each of the seven chapters of the volume.

Asad Ali and Kamran Asdar Ali edited *Towards Peoples' Histories in Pakistan* is divided into four sections. While

the first two parts have three chapters each, the latter two sections have four chapters each. Rather than studying the history of Pakistan, the nation, the essays in the volume have tried to shed light on the histories which are closely related to the people of Pakistan. Such histories, the work notes, have rarely been studied. Given that many of the issues, especially those related to the emergence of Left politics, are common in both the books, the two volumes may be read in conjunction. The essays in this volume discuss a range of issues including sectarian violence, ideas of nation and nationhood, the making and unmaking of subaltern histories, to name a few, related to the histories of Pakistani people. In addition to these, little-known histories such as those of reprisal of the Left under the rule of Ayub Khan, insurgency in Baluchistan, queer movement in Pakistan, women's response to the systemic violence against them during Zia-ul-Haq's regime, among others, have been discussed at length by the contributors. A range of sources including archival and literary have been used in the volume to study the various facets related to people's history.

While *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia* takes a macro-historical approach, *Towards Peoples' Histories in Pakistan* takes a micro-historical approach with respect to one nation, viz., Pakistan. Jargon-free language of both the volumes, coupled with some rare photographs and paintings, make these collections a delight to read. It is realized that the volumes will strike a chord with readers of all kinds, specialists as well as non-specialists.

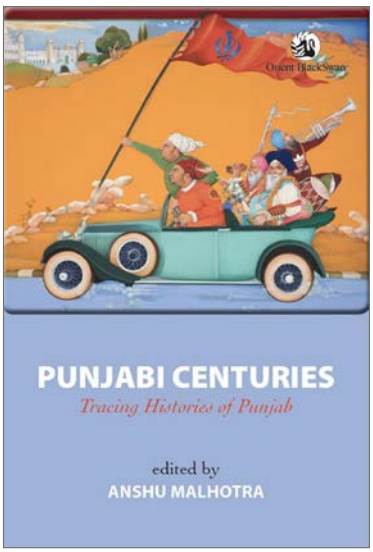
Amol Saghar is an independent historian.

A Repository of the Histories of Punjab

Vikas Rathee

PUNJABI CENTURIES: TRACING HISTORIES OF PUNJAB
Edited by Anshu Malhotra
Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2024, pp. xii+391,
₹ 2150.00

This book is a collection of essays dealing with cultural aspects of the history of colonial and postcolonial Punjab. The contributors include both established and upcoming scholars located in different parts of the world. The volume talks about it being a repository of 'histories of Punjab', and each essay contains seeds for further research and writing. Anshu Malhotra, the editor of the volume, outlines on the first page itself that 'the historical and territorial imaginary that is Punjab has been politically and spatially unstable and mutating, although from the early times, the region's identity has remarkably been cast around its rivers and doabs' (p. 1). She is cognizant of the trajectories of cultural evolution underway in the multiple provinces into which Punjab today finds itself politically divided, and by the Punjabi diaspora outside South Asia. However, the history of Punjab and Punjabis is so rich and convoluted that despite noble intentions, the entire range of cultural and social diversity of its historical formations is hard to be represented in volumes coming out of various post-Partition political units of the region. Thus, the increasing assertion of regions outside the five rivers and doabs, viz., Malwa and Puadh, in politics, culture and economics of Punjab is not fully reflected. The volume finds place for historical developments in the cultural life of various communities of Punjab cutting across location, class, caste, gender and other markers of identity. However, barring contributions by Purnima Dhavan and Yogesh Snehi, one has to point out that upper caste Hindu and Sikh communities of post-1966 Indian province of Punjab are the focus. Indeed, this is a reflection of the state of the field of Punjab studies, and the editor cannot be faulted. Within these confines, a commendable aspect of the volume is the highlight upon women and discourses around gender.



The Introduction mentions that following Indu Banga's *Five Punjabi Centuries*, the title of the book is inspired by the autobiographical account of Prakash Tandon, a leading businessman of Independent India, titled *Punjabi Century*, a quintessentially post-Partition account of resilience and resurgence. The Introduction brings to notice the autobiographical accounts of Ganesh Das Badhera, Prakash Tandon and Lala Lajpat Rai. Lajpat Rai's intriguing autobiography details the influence of Sikh, Muslim, Jain and Hindu traditions upon his upbringing, eventually coalescing into mature Arya Samaji politics and worldview.

Purnima Dhavan's 'A Feast for the Heart and Mind: Print Culture, Polemics and Religious Debate in Punjab in the 1870s' discusses the evolution of Islamic literature after the arrival of print in late-nineteenth century Punjab focusing on the *Baran Anva*, a lengthy seventeenth-century text, and *Pakki Roti*, a short booklet written in

the nineteenth century. Focusing on Muslim Punjabis, Dhavan uses these texts to discuss printing enterprises, script, language and education in the 1870s. Going against the grain, she argues that Punjabi Muslims learnt about Islam not from Arabic or Persian, but through texts in Shahmukhi script that were in Punjabi and occasionally Urdu. She concludes that 'common tactical goals shared by Punjab's educated and landed elite…met with success due to their collaboration on selected groups. A unity enjoined by tactical goals was prioritised…over differences in ideology in order to achieve a shared goal of local control, often by educated elites, over the new civic opportunities' (p. 77). Nicole Ranganath's contribution revolves around the lives of musically active Sikh women in California in the second half of the twentieth century. Specifically, it details the lives of Harbans Kaur Panu and Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara of Yuba City. Harbans was born in Malaysia and went on to live in India and the USA, while Mohinderjit lived in Burma, Iran, India and the USA. In addition to Punjabi and English, the two women also knew Tamil and Persian between them. Ranganath concludes that despite their active engagement with Punjabi and Sikh musical traditions, ultimately the musical aspects of their lives were isolated and distant from their homeland. She concludes by saying that 'their poignant songs…no longer formed a part of the circles of connectedness in Punjabi village soundscapes in which their mothers' and grandmothers' voices were once heard' (p. 106).

Arti Minocha's contribution titled 'Women and Print Cultures in Colonial Punjab' provides an introduction to the literary output of Susila Tahl Ram and Hardevi, two women authors from an Arya Samaji background writing in the late-nineteenth century. Amongst other things, Tahl Ram wrote an English novel titled *Cosmopolitan Hinduani* published from Lahore in 1902, while Hardevi kept accounts of her travels published as *London Yatra* and *London Jubilee* in Hindi in 1888. Minocha has outlined the visions of an ideal woman, and of a Hindu woman developed by Tahl Ram and Hardevi, respectively. Interestingly, Hardevi has portrayed the Queen of England as *sugrahini* (good householder) devoted to dharma (duties of a wife). Anne Murphy's article has the seeds of a longer literary and intellectual biography of Dalip Kaur Tiwana (1935-2020), one of the biggest names in modern Punjabi literature. Murphy has focused on Tiwana's relationship with the 'progressive' current in Punjabi literature in light of the truth that 'modern Punjabi literature remains a male-dominated field and the figure of the woman as a site of progressive intervention remains a construction largely managed by men' (p. 151). Murphy sums up the oeuvre of Tiwana's work by highlighting how she offered 'a grounded perspective on women's liberation imbedded within a patriarchal order and challenged it from within' (p. 182). Inderpal Grewal has written about the infamous 1988 eve-teasing incident involving supercop KPS Gill and Rupan Deol Bajaj, an I.A.S. officer. Other than looking at this event as a landmark in the history of legislation and activism regarding sexual harassment, Grewal also looks at angles such as internal squabbles between the civil administration and the law enforcement agencies, and values of Jatt-ness and Sikhi during and after the period of militancy in Punjab. Radha Kapuria's article talks about the Punjab leg of the career of Pandit VD Paluskar, a leading icon of a gentrified 'Indian classical music' that sought to underplay the contributions of courtesans, lower-caste and Muslim practitioners of Indian music. Specifically, Kapuria discusses the patronage extended to Paluskar by Hindu and Sikh elites of Punjab not only in Lahore, Jalandhar and Amritsar but also in mofussil towns. Specifically, she focuses on the role of Paluskar in determining the evolution of the Harballabh music festival of Jalandhar.

Yogesh Snehi has discussed three 'sacred shrines', spiritual sites that could not be neatly associated with any of the mainstream religious traditions of colonial Punjab which often 'employ a language of monolithic religious identity which is bereft of diversity' (p. 257). Snehi has provided the reader with a fascinating account of the evolution of the Samadh Baba Jalan Das near Atari on the Indo-Pak border from the late seventeenth-century to the present day. Snehi discusses the association of Baba Jalan and the shrine with Sufis, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus over time. Lately, the shrine has seen the construction of a gurdwara in its complex. Next, he introduces the reader to the story of Shree Bhairon Nath of Amritsar, containing 19 Gorakhpanthi samadhs. However, in the twentieth century, the Bhairon Nath shrine has been appropriated by the more famous Durgiana Temple despite the efforts of its caretaker Jogi Shiv Nath. Yogi Adityanath wrote to the Chief Minister of Punjab to stop demolitions and appropriation of the Bhairon Nath shrine into Durgiana Temple, but to no avail. Lastly, Snehi has discussed the sufi shrine of Ghuram Sharif and the associated Gurdwara Milapsar in Patiala district.

Kanika Singh has written about the commemoration of Baghel Singh's 'conquest' of Delhi (1783) as *fateh diwas* by Sikh organizations in the present day (2014), paintings from the 1970s, and Ratan Singh Bhangu's Sri Gur Panth Prakash (1841) to trace the evolution of concepts such as martyrdom and sovereignty in the Sikh tradition. In the final essay, Gurpreet Bal has written about the history of the Khatri community of Amritsar. Simultaneously, she has written about the evolution of Amritsar as an entrepreneurial centre after Partition, and as a centre of textile industry.

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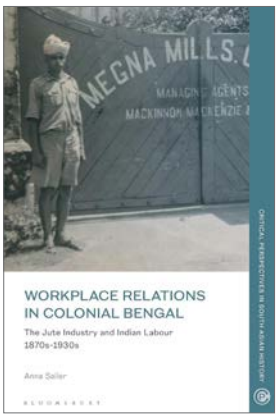
Colonial Capitalism and Changing Organization of Work

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay

WORKPLACE RELATIONS IN COLONIAL BENGAL: THE JUTE INDUSTRY AND INDIAN LABOUR 1870S-1930S
By Anna Sailer
Bloomsbury India, New Delhi, 2022, pp. 293, ₹ 999.00

Labour history is a rich field of study with many theoretically and empirically important books and articles exploring various aspects of working classes all over the world. Indian labour history has also carved out its place with the publication of a number of significant studies over the decades. However, despite its efforts to diversify its research base, most studies on Indian labour remained focused on big urban centres such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Kanpur, Ahmedabad, Jamshedpur, etc., due to better availability of archival and printed documents. The main exception to this disproportionate emphasis on urban labour have been the Assam tea garden workers for whom the colonial archives contain a good number of records. The Bengal jute mill labour has been relatively overrepresented in this focus on urban areas with several accomplished historians exploring multiple dimensions of its existence and actions. In the present study, Anna Sailer delves into this crowded field by investigating labour relations in the workplace of jute industry.

The workplace, along with trade union movement, has been an important field of research in most studies on Indian labour until at least the 1970s. The situation began to change in the 1980s when the Indian labour historians began to realize that the workplace and the trade unions constituted only two dimensions of workers' existence which was multi-dimensional with neighbourhood, extending to the villages even in distant provinces, forming a very important part of their lives. In fact, many historians saw the neighbourhood intruding majorly even into the workplace. Such historians have also emphasized on the enormous importance of culture and neighbourhood within the overall experience of the worker, including the urban workers and even those working in relatively organized industries. Through such studies, culture became an important aspect of investigation into industrial work and politics which inaugurated the 'new labour history'. It is this which Anna Sailer endeavours to challenge in the book under review.



The main point of Sailer's endeavour is her undiluted focus on the workplace. She explores the organization of production consisting of long working hours, multiple-shift system, and work gangs. The supposed 'habits' of Indian workers without any 'true sense of time' and without any extended attention to machinery, as asserted by the employers, resulted in employment of work gangs, instead of individual workers. These work gangs contained higher number of workers than was needed to run the machineries. This regime of 'excess labour' was sought to be compensated by multiple-shift system and long hours of work to sustain 'a continuous process of production'. This peculiar organization of production, which particularly evolved during the boom of 1890s, proved quite effective as it propelled the Bengal jute industry to the front ranks leaving behind the jute industry of Dundee in the United Kingdom. However, although this catered to the supposed 'habits' of Indian workers and also served the interests of the capital, the work gangs and multiple-shift system were not amenable to tighter managerial control. They were also not fixed in time but products of historical circumstances. Thus, the author points out, during the 1870s this system was used by the employers to maintain a 'reserve army of labour, in a context of recurring labour shortages'. But during the 1890s, the multiple-shift system represented 'a qualitatively new development' in which the managers tried to control deployment of labour in certain crucial departments of jute industry in the name of standardization and rationalization. The process of control intensified in the early decades of the twentieth century and finally the multiple-shift system and work gangs were abolished by the early 1930s. Single-shift system was now imposed in many mills with increasing managerial control over the work process.

This development, the author argues, was at the centre of increasing resistance from the workers resulting in strikes, demonstrations, and 'intense violence' against the mills, and managers and overseers. Such militant responses on the part of the workers began since the second decade of the twentieth century and intensified as the process of 'rationalization' disrupted the earlier

system of workplace organization. Increasingly larger number of workers became involved, directing violence against the mill authorities as well as against the police. The emergence of 'radical trade unions in the jute belt', along with their pan-Indian character, also led to workers' protests being more organized, widespread, and prolonged. According to the author, all actors—the workers, employers, trade union leaders, and the state—were 'responding to the transformation of the organization of work on the factory floor'. Other grievances such as retrenchment and the lowering of wages paled in comparison to workers' resentment towards 'a comprehensive change in the organization of work'. While the workers resisted the growing intensity of managerial authority in the workplace, the employers and managers attempted to assert their control even in the neighbourhoods.

The strong point of the book is its exploration of transformation of production organization at the workplace. The class conflict at the shopfloor was ultimately decided in favour of the employers when they managed to assert control and discontinue decades-old practices of cooperation and sharing of work among the work gangs or groups. Over several decades, the workplace was transformed and a specific work routine under a single-shift system was imposed by the employers on the workers. The latter strongly resisted the increasing managerial control by undertaking violent strikes across the industry. Although she touches upon the issues of gender and family as well as communal riots, the main endeavour of the author throughout the book is on 're-establishing the workplace as a changing terrain for wider questions of labour history'.

It is here that the weak side of this study is revealed. The 'new labour history' focusing on the terrain beyond the workplace emerged as a legitimate reaction to the limited explanatory power of workplace-centred histories of the earlier period. By exploring the urban neighbourhood, rural hinterland, the process of migration and adaptation, the issues of gender both in the family and the workplace, the casual and unorganized labour, the wider politics of community and nation, and the ideology of work formulated and promoted by various agencies, the 'new labour history' enormously enriched and expanded the scope of labour history. Workplace is an important constituent of the workers' existence, but it cannot encompass most of their experiences. Exclusive focus on the workplace restricts the workers to an organized and urban setting, and it does not even cover it fully. So, it is imperative to look outside the workplace also for a rounded picture. Labour history will become much poorer if it limits itself solely to workplace narratives.

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Problems of Indian Cities: A Dialogue from Three Lenses

AG Krishna Menon

TARMAC TO TOWERS: THE INDIA INFRASTRUCTURE STORY
By Pratap Padode
Westland Business, Chennai, 2024, pp. 392, ₹ 799.00

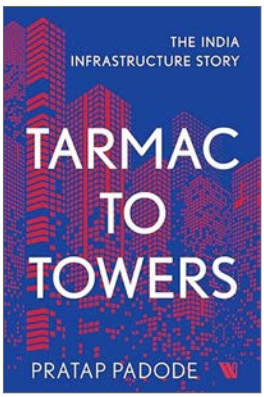
CHARLES CORREA: CITIZEN CHARLES
By Mustansir Dalvi
Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2024, pp. 204, ₹ 299.00

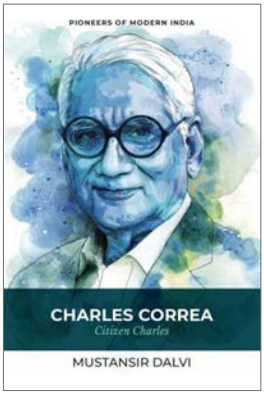
CITIES RETHOUGHT: A NEW URBAN DISPOSITION
By Gautam Bhan, Michael Keith, Susan Parnell and Edgar Pieterse
Westland Non-Fiction, Chennai, 2024, pp. 204, ₹ 399.00

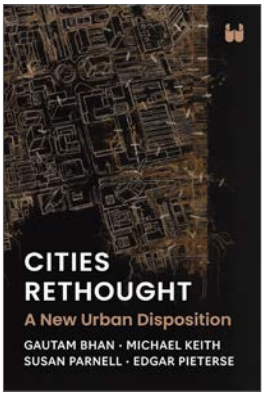
Urban planning and the professional protocols of managing the built environment are generally considered the exclusive domain of experts, in which the public, its putative owner, has no significant role. However, many critics believe that their disengagement has resulted in 'urban illiteracy' which, in no small measure, has contributed to many of the urban problems that defy the earnest ministration of professionals. In this light, the books being reviewed are of interest because they offer three different lenses to enable both professionals and the public to view the problems of Indian cities and engage in productive dialogue.

The first, *Tarmac to Towers: The India Infrastructure Story* by Pratap Padode, focuses almost exclusively on economic issues. It highlights the significance of the causal relationship between the country's political economy and strategies to modernize cities. Since the 1990s, when the country's economic policies were radically transformed, this perspective has captured the imagination of policymakers, civic authorities and urban planners who have leveraged massive capex and state-of-the-art technology to construct modern infrastructure to make cities 'world class'.

The second, *Charles Correa: Citizen Charles* by Mustansir Dalvi, is an elegant biography of a well-known







and critically well-regarded architect and urban planner. The book focuses on the social, cultural and environmental issues that define the nature of Indian urbanism and Dalvi cogently explains how Correa's understanding of its significance was the leitmotif that characterized his works, both as an architect and urban planner. Before the economic reforms turned their gaze, professionals in India had used this perspective to understand and deal with urban problems. Correa's works demonstrate what was lost in the transition because he translated its imperatives in an exemplary manner to create human-centric and context-specific habitats that imbued both his architecture and urban planning initiatives with a rooted identity and gravitas that is celebrated world-wide.

The third, *Cities Rethought: A New Urban Disposition* by Gautam Bhan, Michael Keith, Susan Parnell and Edgar Pieterse, looks much deeper to uncover a radically different view of the nature of contemporary urban problems and how to engage with them. They highlight the interconnectedness of local urban problems with global political, economic, cultural and environmental processes to convincingly argue that local urban planners are now confronting a new disciplinary paradigm that is upending existing canonical knowledge that underpinned the urban planning strategies discussed in the first two books. What they suggest to address these challenges will require new protocols of professional engagement with cities that will push the discipline in directions yet to be charted.

Each book offers fresh insights that would be useful to both professionals and the public to gain a more authentic understanding of the nature of Indian urbanism and how to deal with its problems. It should also provide sufficient grist to conduct transactional discussions between them and thus, bridge the chasm of urban illiteracy that is currently an impediment to democratically resolving the problems of cities.

Tarmac to Towers: The India Infrastructure Story describes how neo-liberal economic policies are mediating the modernization of Indian cities. Whether it is to alleviate the problems of slums or create 'world-class' cities, to provide essential services like water supply and electricity for all, or to construct sophisticated infrastructure like Metros and air terminals, all strategies are now based on the imperatives of neo-liberal economic policies that have become a one-size-fits-all solution to modernize Indian cities. These policies are unselfconsciously driven by what Jane Jacob, the legendary author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* called 'the wistful myth that spending more money could wipe out the problems of cities'. It relies on humongous capex to create spectacular infrastructure, more to fulfil the objectives of political aggrandizement and to glorify aggressive nationalism, than to thoughtfully, prudently and pragmatically meet the contingent needs of cities.

Padode is not an urban scholar or professional, but a financial journalist, co-founder of the equity magazine *Dalal Street Journal* and currently heads the FIRST Construction Council that focuses on matters related to 'infrastructure, construction, real estate, sustainable cities, economy and finance'. Not surprisingly, his narrative becomes an uncritical paean to the benefits of infrastructure development not only to modernize cities but also to boost the country's GDP. It typically elides describing the serious downside of these strategies which have been methodically documented by knowledgeable critics, perhaps because the book was primarily intended to be a public relations exercise for the government to promote its vision for Viksit Bharat by 2047 and as an analytic exercise.

But for better or worse, these strategies are decisively transforming the country's urbanscape. The process, in fact, was initiated by the UPA government in 2005 with the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM). The present NDA government has vastly expanded its scope with the launching of other more ambitious urban renewal missions, each with catchy acronyms like SMART City, PRASAD, HRIDAY and AMRUT. They are all backed by enormous budgets that are largely used to construct infrastructure projects, often with the covert intent to fulfill the NDA government's political ambitions. Moreover, to demonstrate their administrative decisiveness and produce quick results, these projects often cynically steamroll over democratic protocols of good civic governance, such as nurturing the objectives of the Master Plan of cities and respecting environmental and heritage protection laws. In fact, Padode disingenuously states that these protection laws and third-party oversight of infrastructure projects are major 'hurdles' facing the modernization of cities.

Progressive modernization and construction of new urban infrastructure are, of course, important and even essential components in the planning and developing of any city, but in these Missions, the need

for infrastructure is defined more by the imperatives of greater capex and more sophisticated technologies than by understanding the ground realities of the social, cultural and environmental ecology of cities. It is certainly transforming the urbanscape but simultaneously flattening the country's diverse urban character. What the book does not examine are the grievous consequences of uncritically relying on the potent mix of technology, large budgets and patently self-serving political agendas to modernize Indian cities.

In this context, *Charles Correa: Citizen Charles* by Mustansir Dalvi is like a breath of fresh air. It is a comprehensive but succinct monograph that introduces a towering figure of post-Independence architecture and urban planning in India to a wider audience. His humanistic and context-specific ideas of architecture and urban planning provide a credible model to question the infrastructure-led strategies of urban development which Padode celebrates. As a professional practitioner Correa also engaged with the 'wicked' problems of Indian cities, but the range of his solutions varied according to the nature of the problems he dealt with, varying from his sensitive approach to design a simple house for the urban poor, to his bold and pragmatic proposals to address the complex problems of cities. But he is better known as an architect because he designed many iconic buildings that are admired both nationally and internationally. A retrospective exhibition organized in 2013 by the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, for instance, called him India's greatest architect.

But it is unfortunate that in public imagination, his influence as an urban planner has not received the same attention or kudos as his architecture, because he was an equally protean thinker in that discipline. He was one of the key authors of the proposal for creating Navi Mumbai and as the Chairman of the first National Urbanization Commission of India, the Report the Commission prepared presciently anticipated many of the urban development policies that the government later adopted, albeit in part and spurred by other economic and political motives. Dalvi's well-researched monograph is well worth reading because it provides an accessible record of Correa's prolific professional career and, *inter alia*, puts in perspective the narrative of post-Independence Indian architecture and urbanism. His contributions are particularly important today because they throw light on the significance of culture of human-centric architecture and urban planning that is sadly missing in the current infrastructure-led urban development strategies that Padode describes.

Dalvi points out that he elaborated upon this theme in his book, *The New Landscape* which was published in 1985. He had stressed the need to pursue holistic urban development policies instead of the piecemeal and reactive measures to deal with the problems of cities. Instead of relying on imported solutions, he explained that a traditionally rooted and resource-constrained nation should sensitively and authentically define its own needs for a better and *modern* habitat for all and thus fulfil the true meaning of the redemptive promises of political independence. In retrospect, his visionary ideas to develop contemporary 'Indian' architecture and urbanism met with only partial success because they were pitted, on the one hand, against the stronger aspirations of professionals and the elite to adopt the principles of universal modernism, and on the other, resistance from a variety of murky vested interests who preferred business-as-usual. What resulted can only be described as a modern form of colonially rooted ideology of elitist architecture and urban development.

Cities Rethought: A New Urban Disposition is therefore an important book because it digs deep to expose these and other fault lines to construct an alternative way to engage with urban problems, not only in India but worldwide. It is the outcome of a self-conscious collective exercise undertaken by four well-regarded scholars, with very different biographical trajectories, who had been independently teaching and researching the problems of cities in China, India, South Africa and the United Kingdom at different academic institutions, but got the opportunity to work together on a well-funded, innovative, multi-country research project. A collateral outcome of their collaboration was that it enabled them to examine the deep structure of the discipline of urban planning, which they cogently present in this very thought-provoking book.

However, the rarified nature of the origins of their ideas elides some obvious professional expectations, which they blunt at the outset by stating that they do not offer 'empirics, new urban theory, or…a survey of existing and emerging literature…(but) something else: a way to finding a *sensibility* rather than an argument, an *approach* rather than a methodology, a *disposition* rather than an ideological position…to (enable) a lay reader, a young professional, a more experienced practitioner and a curious scholar' to engage with the 'wicked' problems of contemporary cities. In this manner, they expect diverse interlocutors to become agents to re-define the objectives of their discipline.

They argue that this shift in perspective becomes necessary because the problems of cities are no longer the purview of conventionally trained urban scholars or specialists planning practitioners alone, but rather a strategic site where numerous professional domains and disciplines—from 'epidemiologists to coders, engineers to ecologists, agronomists to designers—are excavating their own patch with an eye on what is going on down the lane. They are increasingly doing so from and in a wider set of cities, across the global north and south, treating all locations as both critical and foundational to generating

knowledge.' Each situation requires interlocutors from different disciplines to engage with local problems with a common urban disposition, so that together they could push the envelope and build a different professional imagination to engage with the problems of cities.

The urban disposition they have conceived is a triad, a three-legged stool, which must 'articulate *normatively* where it begins and what motivates it, be able to think *analytically* about how cities actually work as well as about the nature of complex urban problems and move *operationally* to point to how one could get to different desired ends'. It is not a new urban theory or paradigm, but a process to engage with the problems of cities in order to produce new knowledge towards change that one desires, but crucially, it is never fully predetermined or *a priori.*

It is as much for understanding the problems of cities as for resolving them. It is for those who are looking to cross disciplinary aisles: 'an engineer who realises that a well-built bridge does not automatically translate into mobility and wonders then what all building infrastructure must entail; a sociologist who wants to grasp the materiality, design and legibility of housing as much as understanding it as social infrastructure; a hydrologist who wants to think about how to govern and distribute water whose natural geographies they intimately understand. (It offers)…scholars, students and researchers a way to scratch this itch, to move slowly and incrementally to keep expanding disciplinary boundaries of knowledge even as they continue to do the necessary and vital work of focused and deep enquiry within their own field.'

The book offers many valuable insights which could be easily dismissed by professionals overwhelmed by the day-to-day problems they have to deal with. But suffice to say that like all visionary propositions, it is too early to critically evaluate its relevance because, over a hundred years ago, Patrick Geddes too offered visionary advice to engage with the problems of Indian cities and found little traction in the professional mainstream then, but today they are generating great interest.

The collective message that can be drawn from the three books is that challenges of urban planning in India today are now a whole new ballgame, but the objectives, strategies and protocols of dealing with it are mired in the legacies of disciplinary ideologies of the past. One of those legacies is 'urban illiteracy' I referred to earlier. While each book offers a different narrative of how these challenges should be addressed, it has been presented in a manner that both professionals and the interested interlocutor can understand. Such an understanding can facilitate a dialogue in the public domain, which is an important prerequisite to deal with the complexities of Indian cities.

AG Krishna Menon is an Architect and Urban Planner.

Situating Women in the Debate of Tibetan Nation-Building and Nationalism in Exile

Juanita Kakoty

GENDER, NATION, AND NATIONALISM: PERSPECTIVES OF TIBETAN WOMEN IN EXILE
By Amrita Saikia
Routledge, London and New York, 2025, pp. 150,
₹ 1295.00

Amrita Saikia's book could be read with other feminist studies on the marginalization of women's voices and roles in nationalist movements. It is an important contribution to this discipline since it deals with a subject that has not been explored much in academia. Besides, the book also contributes immensely to the repository of literature and knowledge on Tibetan women in exile in India while dealing with the ontology of a Tibetan identity. This makes it an engaging manuscript on how identities are socially constructed, in the interstices of politics, history, everyday life, and symbolism.

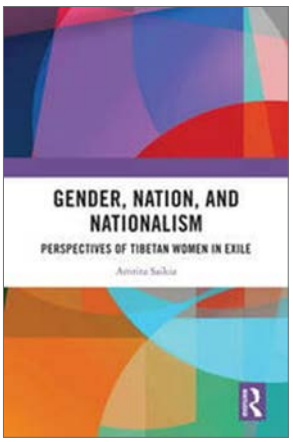
Saikia documents the regular and everyday socio-political lives of the Tibetan community in exile in India, while addressing the central question of her book: how, like other nationalist movements in the Third World, Tibetan women's voices have been ignored in the discourse of Tibetan nationalism.

The book carries an extensive literature review on the subject and enriching personal narratives that Saikia documented during her field research. As an academic, Saikia also sheds light on the need for further research on Tibetan women's history and for documenting more personal stories about how Tibetan women perceive the history and idea of Tibet.

Saikia weaves in Tibetan women's contribution to the construction of Tibetan nationalism with the symbolism associated with them as bearers of culture, as mothers and biological reproducers, by interrogating the crucial aspects about their agency and aspirations.

Her book expands the knowledge that despite internal differences on the basis of provinces, class, sects and gender, the aim of Tibetan nationalism has been to create the dominant narrative of a homogeneous and hegemonic Tibetan identity in exile. She argues that Tibetan women's construction of the idea of Tibet is based on memories and the dominant discourse of a unified Tibetan identity in exile.

The section on research methodology and methods



is particularly engaging and insightful. Saikia has elaborately articulated how she accessed the field, which is far removed from her world. To inform herself about the Tibetans in exile before conducting her research, she referred to books, research articles, documentaries, and newspaper articles. She also identified and joined a week-long programme in Dharamshala (her field) to gain access to the community. This programme was run by a Tibetan NGO called *Students for a Free Tibet* (SFT). The programme introduced her to major Tibetan institutions and organizations, which helped her understand their structure, role, and functioning. The process helped her to identify and establish contacts with the potential participants of her research.

Thereafter, she adopted the snowball sampling method to locate more participants. She conducted interviews and freewheeling conversations in English with the educated and in Hindi with those who had no schooling or minimum education. For the latter, she makes an important point about why it was important not to prod further when they did not understand her clearly. Nor did she take copious notes or record the conversations in order to prevent discomfort in them. This section provides helpful insights into how to proceed with and conduct fieldwork.

The book draws out the important role that the Dalai Lama has played over the years not only as a religious leader but also as a social leader. For those who are not aware, the book traces how the Dalai Lama had retained political authority of the Tibetan Government in Exile till 2011, after which he relinquished control and the authority of political affairs to the elected Tibetan leadership—Central Tibetan Administration (CTA).

One can read about the legal status of Tibetans in India and get answers to queries like who are the Tibetans who have been issued the Identity Certificate (IC) by the Ministry of Home Affairs, India and how does this IC help them; why does the Tibetan Government in Exile dissuade Tibetans from taking up citizenship in India, but encourages them to become American citizens—issues that can be located in the interstices of socio-economic identity, and political concerns.

The Tibetans started arriving in India in 1959. One reads how if Tibetans in India opt for Indian citizenship, the CTA will not have a constituency to govern. Further, the Charter of the CTA provides for dual citizenship which allows Tibetans to become citizens in foreign countries such as Europe and North America and still retain their status in the CTA. Besides, as the book documents, in June 2024, a US delegation visited Dharamshala and met the Dalai Lama, post which, in July 2024, the then US President Joseph Biden signed the 'Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act', bolstering the US's commitment to advancing the human rights of Tibetans and resolving the protracted conflict between China and Tibet. This development is crucial since, as we read in a chapter of the book, no negotiations between the Chinese and Tibetan representatives have happened since 2010.

The introductory chapter of the book neatly lays out the theoretical pinning, research methodology and methods, and the scheme of the book. Chapter two engages with a brief political history of Tibet and the Tibetans in exile in India. One can read, besides other nuances of the Tibetan-Indian socio-political landscape, how the Government of India had refused to recognize a Tibetan Government in Exile since India was bound by the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954 and the then Prime Minster of India was reluctant to jeopardize India's relations with China for Tibet. Finally, the Government of India clarified its stance regarding the accommodation of the Tibetans to be based on Buddhist religion.

In chapter three, Saikia has engaged with the idea of a Tibetan nation, for those in exile particularly, as an imagined community, where shared memories, language and culture play key roles. This chapter covers general debates on nation and nationalism, and feminist critiques of these debates. Chapter four discusses Tibetan women's construction of the idea of Tibet as they remain in exile. This construction of a Tibetan idea and identity are drawn from their memories, discourses in exile, and the onus on them to preserve the intangible Tibetan cultural heritage.

Chapter five seeks to answer the central question of this book: how do Tibetan women in exile contribute to Tibetan nationalism? Saikia argues that they are active agents in this process, which has not received much documentation. Chapter six traces how the Tibetan society portrays the Tibetan women as occupying a high position in society, while the reality states the opposite. Saikia's research reveals that the Tibetan society is patriarchal and women are subordinate to men in all spheres of life. Finally, in the conclusion, Saikia winds up by emphasizing that the utopian construction of a Tibetan identity has invisiblized the heterogeneity underlying the category of Tibetans and Tibetan women in exile.

The book will be an immensely useful resource for readers and scholars interested in Tibetan studies, social construction of identities, feminist critiques of nation and nationalism, women's studies, and Asian studies.

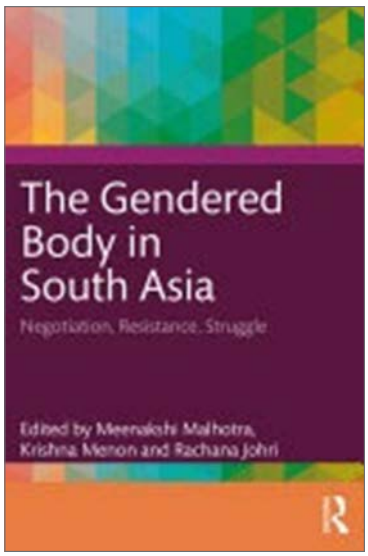
Juanita Kakoty writes with a sociological imagination and works in the field of Child Sexual Abuse prevention.

Understanding Women's Embodiment and Agency in Diverse Contexts

Meenakshi Thapan

THE GENDERED BODY IN SOUTH ASIA: NEGOTIATION, RESISTANCE, STRUGGLE
Edited by Meenakshi Malhotra, Krishna Menon, Rachana Johri
Routledge, Taylor & Francis, London/New York, 2023, pp. 372, ₹ 1595.00

This edited volume makes a serious and welcome contribution to the field of gender and embodiment in the South Asian region. There are twenty-two essays, as well as an introduction, in thematically grouped areas: Negotiation, Struggle, Resistance, Critique, Protest and Representations and New Directions. Established authors, senior practitioners and emerging scholars are included among the contributors, which is an excellent way to develop and encourage research and writing skills among younger scholars. It is also necessary to state at the outset that, despite the theme being complex and intense in a number of ways, the editors have kept the title relatively straightforward, and have been able to elicit several meaningful contributions. Apart from a well-researched and lucid introduction, the book takes account of multiple dimensions of gender and the body in South Asia. Locating their argument in the context of the women's movement in India in the introduction, the editors signal the significance of protest, negotiation and resistance. They also take serious note of the feminist position on embodiment as well as, through the essays, question the rigidity of a solely feminist approach that perhaps elides women's voice as 'submissive' or passive in some contexts.



The themes the authors address represent different ways in which we seek to embody ourselves in the world, whether through negotiation, submission, dissent, protest or critique. We make the world what it is. The world no doubt exists out there with its structures and fixed meanings, through which we are viewed as embodied humans, but we too have the wherewithal to modify that fixity, and transform it to make our lives meaningful in the ways in which we seek to live. This brings agency to the foreground and emphasizes the role of the human subject in not merely living out a human life but in transforming that process in whatever way possible. Embodiment is therefore not fixed or unchangeable. It is a living process, filled with both the dilemma of being set into a pattern as well as having the ability to transcend that immutable quality. This is the impasse into which we are born and with which we struggle throughout our lives in social worlds that seek to marginalize, valorize, shame, or project us in diverse ways. We may however negotiate with, or question, subtly or directly, as well as, transcend this 'making' of us at different moments of our lives. This book has tried to capture this quality through many of the essays that are set in diverse contexts such as that of Muslim women and the veil, the ritual of female genital mutilation in the Bohra community, sexual assault and the honour of women in Pakistan, women's voices and conflict in Sri Lanka, the psychotherapist and her patient/s, feminism and BDSM, the 'tribal body' in Mahasweta Devi's stories, sex workers and 'respectability' in Bangladesh, pain and disabled bodies, and many others. I find that the nuanced and sensitive approach in many of the papers offer a refreshing perspective to understanding the limits of feminism in certain contexts, of the individual and her problematic embodied life, of restricted social and cultural contexts, and of the ability of the human subject to overcome challenges in one way or another. Such an approach not only provides us with ethnographic detail and analytical rigour of women's embodiment in multiple contexts, but also urges us to review our gaze as contemporaries who are perhaps quick to label, criticize and slot women into particular categories depending on our ideological

A novel endeavour in this collection is the consideration of the psychological aspects of embodiment alongside other papers that view sociological, feminist, and other contexts in which embodiment is examined.

position or location in particular socio-cultural contexts.

A novel endeavour in this collection is the consideration of the psychological aspects of embodiment alongside other papers that view sociological, feminist, and other contexts in which embodiment is examined. The psychological dimension in many of the papers is a less known and generally an under-explored aspect of women's embodiment in the region. The nuanced analysis in several of the papers contributes to adding a refreshing perspective in the understanding of women's lived experience in urban India. At the same time, it might also have been useful in understanding the lives of the less privileged and their access to psychological care and its intersection with their embodied experience. Some discernment of this aspect would help us navigate diverse women's lives in greater depth.

Placing agency at the heart of the book's work makes this volume a uniquely significant collection. The one essay I found which denies agency to young girls is based on a study of an educational space where the school uniform and the role of the institution is viewed as the disciplining of female bodies. The paper relies on Foucault's approach to the disciplining of bodies in institutional contexts in creating 'docile bodies', and fails to take into account the agency exhibited by these young students when they resist such efforts. No doubt, schools are spaces where the disciplining of young minds as well as their embodiment has taken many forms since the time schools came into existence. The author's own data however has illustrations of the girls' critique and resistance to these disciplinary efforts which we must listen to and emphasize upon.

The philosophical aspect of embodiment and its construction of the self is also a theme running through the essays in the book. This is another fascinating aspect of what makes the book unique because it is not stuck in any one framework. My question at this point is whether one can take this forward to simultaneously hold up a mirror to oneself as an author in this process. The psychologist, or philosopher, or feminist scholar, may not perhaps be so comfortable with uncovering their own self. The signifiers for one's own embodiment and the meanings we hold are however as important as those we bestow on others. I read this perception in a few of the essays (for example, Jaya Sharma, Anita Ghai) that stand out for their honesty, forthrightness, and ability to let go of an easy invisiblizing of their self. I congratulate the editors for encouraging and including such perceptive and insightful essays. This is a book that makes an invaluable contribution to not just gendered embodiment but also to understanding the varied and complex ways in which we make the world.

Meenakshi Thapan is Director, Rishi Valley Education Centre, Annamayya District, Andhra Pradesh.

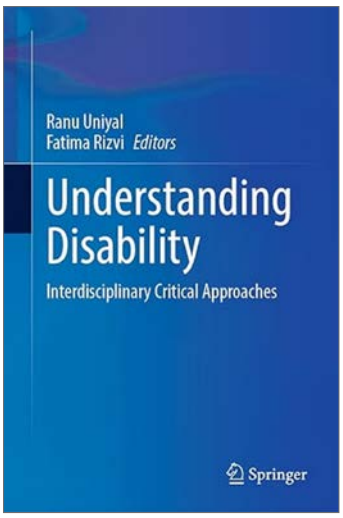
Literary and Sociological Aspects of Understanding Disability

Vedamini Vikram

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY: INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITICAL APPROACHES
Edited by Ranu Uniyal and Fatima Rizvi
Springer Verlag, Singapore, 2023, pp. 245, ₹ 11,836.00

'Understanding Disability' inevitably means understanding culture, bodies (psychological, biological, ontological and corporeal), identities, and politics. It is an endeavour that requires a radically critical vision, an ethical and emphatic interaction with human beings, and thorough and creative ways of doing research and expressing it. *Understanding Disability: Interdisciplinary Critical Approaches* is a collaborative academic project in the present time that has achieved these parameters. It provides a map tracing the rapidly evolving discourse on disability, offering a scale to measure progress, a springboard for ideas, and a comparison of diverse perspectives bridging best practices from India, the West, and the UAE. The editors are based in Lucknow and have extensive experience in the field of Disability. Divided into three sections—'Disability and Empirical Experiences', 'Disability in Literature, Art, and Theatre', and 'Approaches to Dealing with Disability'—it includes varied contributions from industry experts, academicians, writers (including writers with disabilities), poets, and students from various countries, professions, and age groups, making it a project in collaboration and inclusivity.

The book delves deeply into literature, film, and cultural media, presenting essays that examine the same artifact from different perspectives.



Gaele Sobott's essay titled 'I Can Hear Her Breathing: Disabled Writers Writing Disability' explores possibilities for widening intellectual and aesthetic horizons through the disruption of dominant disablist narratives by writers with disabilities writing for themselves and telling their own authentic stories. Sobott herself is admittedly more interested in writing that supports a world with diversity, like works by disabled writers of colour and works translated into English rather than writing that strives to make the experience of disability more palatable to a non-disabled audience. The chapter frames impairment as a resource by demonstrating how the embodied experience of the world among disabled writers finds expression in the way they organize sounds and silences, symbols, rhymes, spaces, assonances, rhythm, meters, pace, narrative structure, imagery, and even spelling and grammar. She states that disabled writers, consciously or without realizing it, may bring concrete and imprecise traces of their bodies and cognition to their style of writing and consequently to the logic and aesthetic of writing, therefore creating the potential to disrupt current literary expectations. Her essay demonstrates that a disability aesthetic is a unique, powerful, and resourceful form of expression which has the capacity to bring about a better cognizance of diversity.

The chapter on a pilot research study by Terrell and Resnick highlights the importance and need for constant empirical research in affective aspects surrounding disability, an angle that still has immense potential for development in the Indian context. It acknowledges the critical role caregivers and parents play in the development and well-being of children with special needs. The study investigates whether the trauma experienced by parents upon receiving their child's diagnosis and during subsequent episodes can be alleviated through online EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy. Despite significant scope for further development, the authors, based in San Diego, provide insights that could potentially guide similar research in India, where it would be intriguing to explore the effectiveness of such therapy amidst the cultural and social challenges specific to the region.

The chapter, 'Social Role Valorization Theory in India: An Idea with Consequences', introduces the theory of Social Role Valorization (SRV), developed in the 1960s by Wolf Wolfensberger, which is built on the simple yet profound observation that the 'good things of life', such as relationships, a positive self-image, and opportunities, are afforded to those who are valued members of society. Conversely, it highlights how the devaluation of certain individuals is a systematic process that pushes people to the periphery and casts them into devalued roles. At the core of this theory is the concept of roles, advocating for the replacement of devalued roles such as 'burden', 'menace', 'better-off dead', or 'sick', with valued roles like 'elder brother', 'taxpayer', 'guitarist', 'homeowner', or 'student'. The chapter documents SRV's progress in India since 2016, analysing the ground it has covered, the ways it has been adopted, and the current scenario.

In the book, Pant offers an intimate exploration of the practices at the PYSSUM (Paramahanasa Yogananda Society for Special Unfolding and Moulding) school. His chapter focuses on affective measures, breaking away from traditional spaces into the ontological—an integral yet often ignored aspect of human existence. For instance, it highlights the use of prayer and chanting as tools to promote peace and calm. The chapter draws from Indian visionaries like Kabir, Tulsidas, and Ramana Maharishi, who view breath as a connection to the inner realms of human existence rather than just a mechanical process of inhaling and exhaling. The author calls for further research in this area and urges Indian schools to look beyond popular culture and incorporate elements of India's spiritual heritage into systematic routine-building practices.

The book delves deeply into literature, film, and cultural media, presenting essays that examine the same artifact from different perspectives. Ega Peter, in the essay, 'The Mad Mother in the 1BHK—Hallowing and Harrowing Positions in Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*', explores the interplay between form and narrative, emphasizing the role of memory in shaping the protagonist's perspective. The protagonist does not perceive time as linear but moves back and forth through time while narrating the story. This recalls Gaele Sobott's idea about the relationship between writing and the mind

She [Gaele Sobott] states that disabled writers, consciously or without realizing it, may bring concrete and imprecise traces of their bodies and cognition to their style of writing and consequently to the logic and aesthetic of writing, therefore creating the potential to disrupt current literary expectations.

of a writer with a disability, and how such a mind shapes the aesthetics of writing.

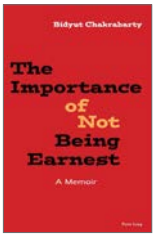
Drawing on ideas from Raymond Williams and Foucault, another essay, '(No) Shared Towers: Performing the Bipolar in *Em and the Big Hoom*', underscores the performative traits that society imposes on motherhood and critiques the cultural expectations placed on individuals with mental illnesses. The essay further investigates the role of language in the encoding, circulation, decoding, and internalizing of cultural ideas. For instance, it examines how the book critiques casual phrases in everyday language, such as 'mad or what?', or lyrics from Hindi film songs like 'M-A-D, mad *mane pagal*'. These linguistic elements contribute to a broader 'psychic blindness towards the un-coercible other', creating widely accepted labels and stereotypes around altered or heightened psychic states. These stereotypes, in turn, harm those who are labelled.

Complementing the book's social and cultural themes, the essay 'People of Determination—Making Achievements, Overcoming Challenges' by Pranita Lele examines the subject through a historical lens, discussing the Islamic perspective on disability and examining policy measures implemented in the UAE as an exemplary model in inclusion. Similarly, the chapter on education and the labour market for persons with disabilities in India by Naincy Singh examines education and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in India, identifying challenges and gaps in employability.

Aside from the pertinent and variegated perspectives it captures, the book as a whole points toward the future of academic writing on disability, calling for a rethinking of identity politics and language.

Vedamini Vikram is a doctoral student at the University of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Her Ph.D. thesis is associated with Indian Mysticism and its cross-cultural aspects. She studied at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi and Ambedkar University, Delhi. She has worked at Amity University, Lucknow as Assistant Professor and at IIM, Lucknow as Research Associate. Her creative works have been published in *Teesta Review*, *Rhetorica Quarterly, Muse India* and *PYSSUM Literaria.*

Book News *Book News*



The Importance of Not Being Earnest: A Memoir by Bidyut Chakrabarty situates the unfolding of the life of an educator in varied socio-economic contexts. It is not just a narrative of how an individual evolves but also analyses how a particular mindset develops by being dialectically entwined with the milieu in which one passes different stages of their life.

Peter Lang Ltd., International Academic Publishers, 2024, pp. 340, ₹ 6716.00

Travelling in the Wild

Govindan Nair

NO HALF MEASURES
By Jennifer Nandi
Notion Press, 2024, pp. 260, ₹ 799.00

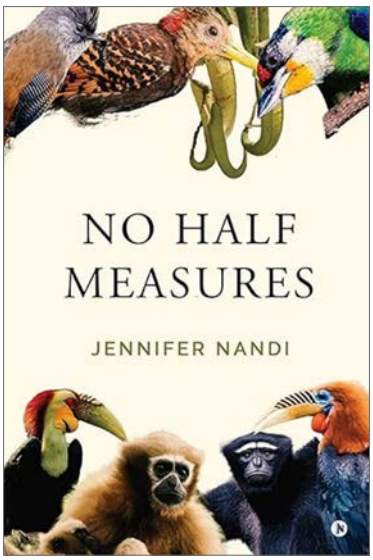
This book defies categorization. Essentially an account of travels in the remotest parts of Northeastern India, it is equally a birder's diary, a handbook on responsible guiding, and a meditation on our relationship with the natural world. Notably, it fizzes with the joyous energy and infectious enthusiasm of the author.

Jennifer Nandi is a travel guide who does not see her 'work' as work and, till her husband's untimely demise, took on assignments largely pro bono. An avid bird-watcher and committed naturalist who regards herself as 'literate' in the scientific and environmental sense, she revels in exploring wild places, encountering the unknown and engaging in risk-laden expeditions.

Specializing in customized tours to help the knowledgeable and discerning traveller 'make connections with the soul of India', Nandi says: 'I use Nature, a central principle of human lives, which is not only beautiful but also good for us, that helps us regain our equanimity, that tunes our brain's attention network, that keeps us so very happy; for this has made me who I am.'

No Half Measures describes a rambunctious excursion of several weeks in 2010 to the wildest reaches of the North East: parts of the country known for insurgency and instability, but which appealed to Nandi's non-conformism and derring-do as much as that of her

Nandi says: 'I use Nature, a central principle of human lives, which is not only beautiful but also good for us, that helps us regain our equanimity, that tunes our brain's attention network, that keeps us so very happy; for this has made me who I am.'



client's. Pete McKay, a deep-pocketed traveller, believed, after tours of the usual sites, that India's identity lay in her unique biotic diversity. His interest in birdlife spurred the choice of North East India for an imaginative itinerary extending across the region and including diverse habitats.

Nandi's conviction that the client's happiness and satisfaction are paramount necessitated stocking up not just on cheeses and sauces, coffee and liquor, but crockery, cutlery, glassware, bed and bath linen, even camp chairs and a foldable table. Though the party often had to settle for 'cheesy' lodgings in far-flung villages, to the credit of McKay he never voiced dissatisfaction, whereas he was quick to exult at a stunning vista or special bird.

Accompanied by a reliable and long-suffering local guide and an uncomplaining driver, McKay and Nandi embark on a rollicking adventure that included close calls with elephants and bears, confrontations with unfriendly rhinos and recalcitrant officials, treks through leech-infested forests and along treacherous mountain trails, perilous river crossings and non-existent roads. Any discomfort, however, was more than amply compensated by breath-taking mountain vistas, virgin primeval forests, abundant water bodies and, most of all, by the magnificent birdlife, unusual fauna and unique peoples of the region.

Commencing at the Dampa wildlife sanctuary in Mizoram—where no one in their right mind would schedule a trip, in a State where the forests are training camps for jungle warfare—the birders are quickly rewarded with a glimpse of the elusive Mountain Tailorbird and rare Pale-blue Flycatcher, leading McKay to exclaim: 'My God, Jennifer, this is Paradise.' Spotting a 'passionately-dressed' Red-headed Trogon, a skulking Bugun Liocichila, and brilliantly-hued Myzornis, Minlas, Yuhinas and Fulvetas, or hearing the call of a hidden Abbot's Babbler, give the duo their 'Zen moments': the quiet enjoyment of just looking with no other purpose, 'a state of Being'.

Cruising on the mighty Brahmaputra, the travellers witness the precarious lives of people living on its banks and islands and river-raft homes. The rhythms of life on the river, nonetheless, leave them with a 'warm feeling of conviviality'. Nandi observes that 'whereas the rich subdue to survive, the poor appear to coax, nurture, and progress, not at the expense of, but with, nature.'

Visits to remote villages provide glimpses of the lives of indigenous peoples of the region: hospitable Monpas who lavished the visitors with spirited drinks; Nyishi settlements that still practiced animism, where Nandi hoped Christian missionaries would never reach; wrenchingly-poor villages of Apatani, the faces of whose women were alarmingly disfigured to 'safeguard' them from marauding outsiders; and Naga tribals on the border with Myanmar who proudly held head-hunting to be an important cultural tradition.

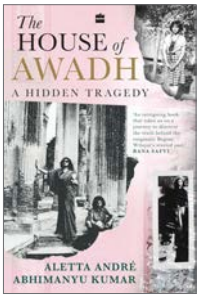
Criss-crossing the region, the travellers have frequent brushes with officialdom—few of them pleasant. Nandi is appalled at bureaucratic apathy, corruption and insensitivity. All over the Northeastern States, she points out, 'amply-proportioned employees…loved their position for the power it gave them over travelling tourists and executed their authority over the ordinary man by making life as inconvenient as possible.' McKay, Nandi and their companions respond to the annoyances and setbacks with equanimity: 'No matter what was thrown at us,' she says, 'we just laughed'. And, whenever possible, the table and camp chairs would be unloaded and set up on a river bed or a mountain promontory, and victuals and spirits would be laid out to restore the mood or provoke more 'Zen moments'.

Birding is central to this book. Nandi describes scores of birds—both rare and not-so-rare—with knowledge and eloquence. As an 'ethical birder', she disapproves of using means such as recordings to facilitate spotting at any cost. The reverence McKay shows for the White-winged Wood Duck—the holy grail of wetland birds—by quietly walking away from it not wanting to disturb its cherished privacy, moves her deeply.

As a guide book to the North East, this provides invaluable first-hand information on the best birding and wildlife sites, besides snippets of local history, observations and reflections on the sociology and culture of the fascinating, but little-known, people of the region. And, Nandi takes on her task at full tilt—no half measures—to make this a most enjoyable read.

Govindan Nair is a former civil servant based in Chennai.

Book News ***Book News***



The House of Awadh: A Hidden Tragedy by Aletta Andre and Abhimanyu Kumar is an intriguing book that takes us on a journey to discover the truth behind the enigmatic Begum Wilayat's stories past.

HarperCollins India, 2025, pp. 352, ₹ 393.00

The Book Review Literary Trust set up in October 1989 to disseminate information about advances in knowledge and books, is a non-political, ideologically non-partisan organization, and seeks to reflect all shades of intellectual opinions and ideas.

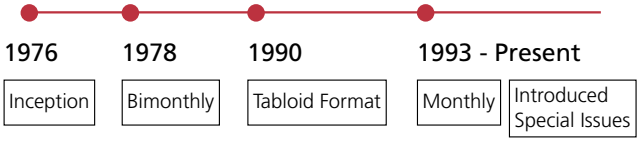
Objectives

- Publication of the monthly magazine *The Book Review*
- The running of such other magazines/publications;
- Organizing exhibitions of books;
- Organizing seminars on themes of relevance to the objectives of the Trust;
- Providing financial assistance for publishers to publish seminal works in several disciplines at subsidized prices;
- Awarding scholarships, prizes for meritorious research and publication;
- Undertaking publication, sale and distribution of books;
- Running freelance or syndicated columns in newspapers, magazines and the like.

The Book Review

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

The Development of the Journal: A Brief Time Line



1. Set up to promote Indian publications and Indian authors, particularly those in the Indian languages;
2. Encourage and develop high-quality translations of works in the Indian languages;
3. Develop a culture of critical in-depth reviews, leveraging the expertise of the best in a given field;
4. Promote awareness of studies in special areas of concern by publishing special issues on Gender, Indian Languages, Children's Books, South Asia, International Relations, Politics, History, Media Studies.

Seminars

- Big Dams and Displaced People – January 1993
- Women Writing in India: From the 6th Century to the Present – August 1993
- The Role of Critical Reviews: An International Colloquium – February 1995
- Reviewing and the Publishing Industry – February 1996
- Subversive Sites: Women's Engagements with the Law – September 1996
- Anuvaad: Linking Literatures – October 1996
- Role of Critical Reviews: A Dialogue with Robert Silvers & Rea Hederman of *The New York Review of Books* – November 1997
- On Critical Reviewing – in New Delhi, Chennai and the University of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA between 1993 and 1997
- International seminar on -'War Peace and Hegemony in a Globalized World' – 2006
- International Colloquium on – 'Superpower Rivalry in the 20th Century: Lessons for the 21st Century' – 2008
- The Role of The Public Intellectual, March 2015
- Questioning Paradigms, Constructing Histories: A Festschrift for Romila Thapar, March 2018

Lectures

- 1996 *Toward Freedom and Beyond* –Nikhil Chakravartty
- 1996 *A Small Craft Industry: Reflections on Reviewing* – Barbara Epstein
- 1997 *On Biographies and Kings* – Romila Thapar
- 1999 *Development as Freedom* – Amartya Sen (1st Nikhil Charavartty Memorial Lecture)
- 2004 *War Peace and World Hegemony in the 20th Century* – Eric Hobsbawm (2nd Nikhil Chakravatty Memorial Lecture)
- 2014 *To Question or Not to Question: That is The Question* – Romila Thapar (3rd Nikhil Chakravartty Memorial Lecture)

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