Byzantium-Upon-Indus

SINDH
STORIES FROM A VANISHED HOMELAND
by Saaz Aggarwal
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by **Shefalee Vasudev**

A HALF-SINDHI who cannot speak the language but is so viscerally affected by the emotional baggage of the Partition of 1947 that she gathers stories of her mother and relatives to put the loss into perspective—that would be one way of describing this book. Aggarwal challenges the Sindhi stereotype of loud-mouthed, flashy, papad-eating people with paunchy 'saeens' and diamond-dusted women. She chooses to recount inspiring stories instead of the expedience of reconstructing cliched Sindhi identities.

The book is an assimilation of pre-Partition memories and post-Partition dilemmas of the author's mother Situ Savur, aunts, uncles, grandparents and family friends who significantly influenced the Savur family's resettlement in India. Each goes through an emotional struggle to retain a strand of Sindhi roots, yet willingly enlists in the larger task of becoming global citizens, even if that means shaving off some aspects of identity.

Some insights in the book will undoubtedly evoke a sense of nostalgia in the engaged reader, as will peculiar Sindhi names like Putli and Hotu, which find no favour in contemporary naming games. The caste consciousness of Sindhis, for instance, which has seldom found its way into mainstream discourse; the ambivalence in attitudes towards Muslims that lingers till today; the emphasis on rarely used Sindhi words and recipes, a dip into cultural practices of rural Sindh—all this evokes feelings of longing and loss. As a researcher, Aggarwal has done excellent work. She has dug up songs and couplets, old pictures from family albums, postcards, maps, sketches depicting native peculiarities, images of old bazaars, even the Scinde Dawk of 1852, India's first adhesive postage stamp issued by Sir Bartle Frere, the East India Company administrator of the province of Sindh.

As a second-generation refugee, raised on a diet of Sindhi stories by parents who never tided over the sadness of losing the motherland, I find the emotions that propel Aggarwal's book worthy of applause. Yet, at another level, the book disappoints. It is too scattered. The stories are personal; they open up multiple, bewildering labyrinths of relationships and subconnections, throw up dozens of names, making each account distracting after a few initial paragraphs. Too many disparate details, turns and U-turns of memory and circumstance reduce them to diary notings instead of elevating them to compelling accounts that feed into a poignant narrative of the Partition experience.

A few sections are oddly titled: 'Pasture', 'Tapestry', 'Allegory', 'Ballad', 'Rainbow', even 'Vivisection'. Few, if any, live up to their themes. They start purposefully, then drift away. Wistful pre-Partition stories collide into the psychosis of the post-Partition phase, poetry comes up alongside food and drink recipes, history fades into geography, linguistic nuances sit juxtaposed with notes on cultural practice; anything comes up anywhere. For the reader, instead of being gripping, the Partition experience slips away like sand through fingers. If emotions, ideas, planning and writing are the stages a book goes through, this is a jumble of them all. Last week, at the Jaipur Literature Festival, in a session titled 'India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India', author Pico Iyer commented that writing was more about structure than content. This book demonstrates why. ◘

The emotions that propel this work are admirable. But it is far too scattered, leaving the many varied accounts in it a bit distracting after a while.

BIBLIOFILE

The Sharma Shine

WHILE the Jaipur Literary Festival has been a page-turner, with the unputdownable Ashis Nandy in the thick of things, another, quieter one, the first Taj Literature festival, took off last weekend in Agra. It didn't exactly lack in shock quotient. The festival was organised on a school ground where the locals and students were stirred out of small-town stupor when adman Prahlad Kakkar asked celebrity author Shobha De, "Are you famous because of your books or looks?" De gave it as good as she got. She also held forth on how Narendra Modi did not have it in him to go national. There were many big names—Raghu Rai, Pavan Varma, Farooque Shaikh, Muzaffar Ali—but it was Hindi comedian Surendra Sharma who got the greatest response. Very different from JLF. This was Brajbhoomi after all.

Word Shadower

THE most magical session at the Taj fest was by Sathya Saran, who has written the wonderful *Ten Years with Guru Dutt: Abrar Alvi's Journey* on the iconic actor-filmmaker and his unsung but talented writer Alvi. She read out from it in English, recounting fascinating anecdotes about his films and personal life. Theatre actor Namit read out Alvi's accounts in Hindi, including poignant details of the night Dutt took his own life.

Who's Who Blues

BACK at the JLF, a certain visage and appearance seemed to be common to many male writers: a thin frame and thinning hair, sharp nose and eyes and a mild voice. This led to some comedy of errors too. Author and journalist Manu Joseph, who sort of fits the description, was mistaken for Pico Iyer and Manil Suri many times. On one occasion, an ardent Suri fan talked to Manu for nearly half an hour without either of them realising the mistake.

Illustrations by SORIT