

Review Article

S. Irfan Habib, *To Make the Deaf Hear: Ideology and Programme of Bhagat Singh and His Comrades* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2007), xviii+231pp. Rs. 500 (hb), ISBN 81-88789-56-9 and Rs. 250 (pb), ISBN 81-88789-61-5.

The publication of this book in the year of the one hundredth birth anniversary of Bhagat Singh is aimed to highlight the ideological dimensions of the work of Bhagat Singh and his associates. S. Irfan Habib is a historian of science and works with the National Institute of Science, Technology and Development Studies in India. For completing this book, he has accessed the resources of the most important archives and libraries in Delhi, Chandigarh and Meerut that are relevant to this work. He also interviewed Kultar Singh, one of the brothers of Bhagat Singh, and many surviving comrades of Bhagat Singh. This book can be usefully read in the context of competing ideologies in the current political landscape of India. The year 2007 has been a year of many anniversaries relating to South Asia. These include the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the 1757 Battle of Plassey, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the 1857 uprising and the sixtieth anniversary of India's independence from British colonial rule and its partition into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority, though formally secular, India in 1947. As an icon, Bhagat Singh can be called the Che Guevara of India. Yet, the centenary of his birth was the least celebrated of all the anniversaries except the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Plassey. In Punjab, there were some significant official and non-official celebrations of his birth centenary but, outside Punjab, it was largely a marginal affair.

All anniversary celebrations have political agendas and it can be argued that the Battle of Plassey is, perhaps, too far away in the political memory of South Asia and does not seem to fit in with any political agenda there. The celebration or commemoration of the 1857 uprising fits in with several political agendas. The agenda of the Congress party-oriented Indian nationalism is to project that the 1857 uprising symbolises Hindu-Muslim collaboration and, therefore, represents a critique of the Hindu nationalist vision of India. The agenda of the Muslim nationalists is to highlight that the 1857 uprising was led, at least formally, by a Muslim king Bahadur Shah Zafar against British colonialism, and represents a historical moment of contest between the Indian-rooted Muslim rule and the colonial British rule in India. The celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of 1947 is meant to highlight the birth of two post-colonial nation states of India and Pakistan. In contrast with this nationalist interpretation of 1947, the accounts that highlight the sufferings of the victims of the partition present 1947 as a massive human tragedy. The nation state aspect of the celebration was more prominent in India and the human tragedy aspect was more prominent in

commemorations abroad.

Placed in the context of these different types of anniversary celebrations, the centenary of Bhagat Singh represents a challenge to almost every tendency in Indian politics. Gandhi-inspired Indian nationalists, Hindu nationalists, Sikh nationalists, the parliamentary Left and the pro-armed struggle Naxalite Left compete with each other to appropriate the legacy of Bhagat Singh, and yet each one of them is faced with a contradiction in making a claim to his legacy.¹ Gandhi-inspired Indian nationalists find Bhagat Singh's resort to violence problematic, the Hindu and Sikh nationalists find his atheism troubling, the parliamentary Left finds his ideas and actions as more close to the perspective of the Naxalites and the Naxalites find Bhagat Singh's critique of individual terrorism in his later life (p.123) an uncomfortable historical fact.

In judging the claims of different contestations to the legacy of Bhagat Singh, this book would prove a useful resource. It departs from the usual narratives of the Indian revolutionary tradition that describe the bravery and sacrifices of the revolutionaries. Habib has, instead, focussed on describing and analysing the *ideas* of the revolutionaries. In the Preface, he explains:

These revolutionaries were not merely trigger-happy adventurous patriots who sacrificed their lives for the country; more importantly, they espoused a revolutionary vision to transform independent India into a secular, socialist and egalitarian society. We did not lose merely individuals, however valuable, *in the hanging of Bhagat Singh and his associates; we lost rather an alternative framework of governance for post-independent India.* (p. xi, emphasis added)

Habib has made a valuable contribution to the literature on pre-1947 political traditions in India by emphasising that the overwhelming aspect that emerges regarding the ideas of Bhagat Singh and his associates is that they moved unambiguously to the perspective of 'scientific socialism'. He notes that the colonial rulers were acutely aware of the socialist perspective of the revolutionaries. For example he cites the judgement of Justice Medilton, who transported Bhagat Singh and BK Dutt for life in the Assembly Bomb Case:

These persons used to enter the court with the cries of 'Long Live Revolution' and 'Long Live Proletariat' which shows clearly what sort of political ideology they cherish. In order to put a check in propagating these ideas I transport them for life. (p. xi)

Habib has put together a number of extremely important political documents in the form of appendices to this book. The two documents that deserve special mention are: Bhagat Singh's celebrated essay on 'Why I am an atheist' and the list of books read by Bhagat Singh. In this list, Marx's *Capital* is the number one entry.

That Bhagat Singh had read *Capital* at such a young age (perhaps by 1926 i.e. when he was barely 19 years old), is a very important indicator of the making of Bhagat Singh as a thinker. The other entries in the list include works by Friedrich Engels and Leon Trotsky (Appendix A). According to Habib:

Bhagat Singh's jail diary gives us deep insights into his rapidly growing maturity as a Marxist. It contains elaborate quotations from the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Bakunin, Prince Kropotkin, and even Darwin, Bertrand Russell and several others. (p. xvi)

Emphasising the socialist outlook of Bhagat Singh, Habib has highlighted that the name of the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) was changed to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association at the insistence of Bhagat Singh after he joined this organisation (p. xiv and 30).² Jitendra Nath Sanyal, who was a co-prisoner with Bhagat Singh in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, highlighted the intellectual dimensions of Bhagat Singh's personality. He wrote in 1931:

Bhagat Singh was an extremely well-read man and his special sphere of study was socialism... Though socialism was his special subject, he had deeply studied the history of the Russian revolutionary movement from its beginning in the early 19th century to the October Revolution of 1917. It is generally believed that very few in India could be compared to him in the knowledge of this special subject. The economic experiments in Russia under the Bolshevik regime had greatly interested him. (cited by Habib, p.112)³

An important achievement of this book is that it has been able to show convincingly that Bhagat Singh was a serious political thinker and visionary. That brings us to an aspect of this book which has remained underdeveloped but has the potentiality to develop into a serious debate on the competing political currents in India's struggle for independence from British imperialism. The book provides very useful documentary evidence that, by the time Bhagat Singh was hanged in 1931, he had risen in political stature to a level which was higher than all political leaders in India except, perhaps, Mahatma Gandhi. The evidence indicates that Bhagat Singh was equal in stature and political popularity to Gandhi almost everywhere in the country but certainly higher than him in Punjab and, perhaps, in North India more generally. The fact about his popularity was recognised even by the Congress leaders loyal to Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru wrote in his autobiography that by avenging the death of Lala Lajpat Rai, Bhagat Singh seemed to vindicate the honour of the nation and that:

He became a symbol [of the honour of the nation] and within a few months each town and village of the Punjab, and to a lesser extent in the rest of northern India, resounded with his name.

Innumerable songs grew about him and the popularity that the man achieved was something amazing. (1956: 174-75)⁴

In Punjab, the popularity of Bhagat Singh was unprecedented. Bhagat Singh Day was observed throughout the province on 17 February 1931 (Habib, p. 68). The Home Office Political Files consulted by Habib show that The Bhagat Singh Appeal Committees to campaign against the colonial authorities' decision to sentence him to death were reported from ' (1) Kasur, Distt. Lahore, (2) Moga, Distt. Ferozepore, (3) Ferozepore, (4) Sialkot, (5) Ludhiana, (6) Lyallpur, (7) Phagwara, (8) Poilga, Distt. Jullunder, (9) Banga, Distt. Jullunder, (10) Batala, Distt. Gurdaspur (11) Okara, Distt. Montgomery, (12) Gujranwala, (13) Amritsar, (14) Jaranwala, Distt. Loyallpur (sic!), (15) Sheikhpura' (p 68). The hanging of Bhagat Singh on 23 March 1931 bestowed martyrdom on him and he eclipsed every political leader in the country in terms of his mass popularity.⁵

Three days after the hanging of Bhagat Singh, at the Karachi Session of the Congress, Pattabhi Sitaramayya, a top Congress leader and a staunch Gandhi loyalist, acknowledged hesitatingly: 'It is no exaggeration to say that at the moment Bhagat Singh's name was as widely known all over India and was as popular as Gandhi's' (quoted by Habib, p. 70). It is quite obvious that out of loyalty to Gandhi and Gandhism, Sitaramayya was attempting to underplay the political significance of Bhagat Singh and his ideology by equating his popularity with Gandhi. The mood in the country then was one of anger against Gandhi for not opposing in a determined way the hanging of Bhagat Singh. When Gandhi arrived to attend the Karachi Session on March 25, 1931, he experienced the humiliation of facing a black flag demonstration by angry youth who shouted slogans: 'Down with Gandhi'. (p. 71). Subhas Chandra Bose captured the moment: 'Bhagat Singh had become the symbol of the new awakening among the youths...' (p. 102). Nehru acknowledged that the popularity of Bhagat Singh was leading to a new national awakening:

He was a clean fighter who faced his enemy in the open field....He was like a spark which became a flame in a short time and spread from one end of the country to the other dispelling the prevailing darkness everywhere. (p 102-03)

This book contains excellent historical material which, if further processed and analysed, could be the basis for proposing that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, there were two serious ideological contenders for leadership of India's national movement. One was Gandhism and the other was what may fairly be termed Bhagat Singhism. Gandhism and Bhagat Singhism should not be reduced to the polarity of non-violence vs violence. Gandhism was a perspective of minimal socio-economic transformation as a replacement of British imperial rule. It was focussed on transfer of political power. There is ample historical evidence to show that Gandhi was even willing to accept a subordinate dominion status for India under the broad structure of imperial rule. His compromising role vis-à-vis

British imperialism faced sharp criticism from Subhas Chandra Bose within the Congress and in muted voices even from Nehru. A part of the reason for his compromising stance towards British imperialism was the serious involvement of the top layers of India's capitalist class (Birla, Purushottamdas Thakurdass, and Walchand Hirachand etc.) in the influencing of, if not the making of, the Gandhian and Congress perspective. Gandhi's strength was his unflinching, even arrogant, commitment to non-violence and what he considered to be truth. Gandhi's weakness was his utter lack of understanding of the process of global capital accumulation and imperialism and the insertion of India into the global capitalist framework. Yusuf Meherali, a socialist, mockingly and yet aptly remarked that imperialism can not be overthrown through a 'change of heart' as Gandhi seemed to believe (p. 103).

Gandhi's strength was in understanding the deep impact of Hinduism, or at least a version of it, on the consciousness of the majority Hindu population in the country. This led him to coin slogans such as 'Ram Rajya' which resonated with the vast majority of the Hindu population. In this strength also lay his weakness. It was his alienation of Muslims which resulted eventually in the creation of Pakistan, and he never had any influence, whatsoever, amongst the Sikhs after his arrogant characterisation of Guru Gobind Singh as a misguided leader. It is doubtful if he had any serious influence amongst the Christians. Proximity to Hinduism allowed Gandhi to feel the pulse of India's majority but that also resulted in an over-all conservative orientation to his ideas, perspectives and actions.

In contrast with these strengths and weaknesses of Gandhism, Bhagat Singh and his comrades were strong in understanding the logic of the world capitalist economy but were weak in building an organisational structure in comparison with Gandhi's widespread Congress party organisation. The strength of their mass popularity was not matched by the quality of their organisational structure. In terms of their popularity, Habib demonstrates that they were popular not only with the majority Hindu population but also with the Muslims and the Sikhs. There was indeed a tinge of Hinduism in their political language but it was more than adequately compensated for by their non-religious and analytical discourse. Their political radicalism was a product of their analytical strength in understanding the class structure of colonialism. Their vision was not a replacement of the rule of the 'white' capitalist class by the Indian capitalist class; it was a vision of replacement of the rule of capital by the rule of labour (Appendix B5).

Had Bhagat Singh not been hanged in 1931, there would have been a serious contest between the Gandhi-led Congress vision and the Bhagat Singh-led socialist vision. Bhagat Singh also had the advantage over the Indian communists that his radicalism was popularly seen as home grown and rooted. With Bhagat Singh in the leadership position of the Indian socialist tradition, he would have become the rallying force against the Gandhi-led Congress's pro-capitalist vision. It is worth imagining that the polarisations in the country would

not have been Congress vs Muslim League, Hindu vs Muslim and Gandhi vs Jinnah but would have been Gandhi vs Bhagat Singh, capitalism vs socialism and mere transfer of power vs socio-economic revolution. In situations of intense political struggles, the relative positions of competing organisations and ideologies can undergo rapid change. The shift from Menshevism to Bolshevism in Russia in 1917 within a time span of days and weeks is an example of such a historical conjuncture. It is worth mentioning here that the Russia of 1917 was no more or no less radical or conservative than the India of 1930s. Of the many possibilities open in the 1930s, there was this possibility - large scale migration of the Congress cadre to the fold of the Bhagat Singh-led radical alternative. That possibility died with the hanging of Bhagat Singh.

Individuals don't make history but key individuals at critical moments do matter in making history. It is worth remembering that Trotsky, who himself was a hugely popular revolutionary leader in the Russia of 1917, had remarked that had Lenin not arrived in Russia in the crucial months of October and November of 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution would not have taken place. Gandhi and the colonial authorities understood the critical historical importance of Bhagat Singh. Gandhi did not protest against the decision of the colonial authorities to hang Bhagat Singh.⁶ This decision of Gandhi was not simply the result of the moralist/pacifist Gandhi not endorsing violence, because by allowing hanging he was endorsing another kind of violence: it was the result of Gandhi, the extremely sharp tactician and strategist, realising that if Bhagat Singh survived, that would sound the death knell of his (Gandhi's) political leadership of India's independence movement. For the colonial authorities, the survival of Bhagat Singh could have meant facing a revolutionary movement against them in competition with the ever compromising Gandhi-led Congress movement.

The Indian National Congress and the Indian State know and understand that Gandhi and the Congress party were deeply implicated in the colonial hanging of Bhagat Singh. Therefore, while 1857 and 1947 anniversaries continue to be commemorated, the hundredth birth anniversary of Bhagat Singh will remain an embarrassing and, therefore, a marginal affair for the Congress-led Indian government. The political economy of the current Indian nation state necessitates this stance. In helping us to understand this current political economy of the Indian state this book is not only a valuable contribution to Indian historiography but also to an understanding of the ongoing political contestations in India today and their future implications.

Notes

¹ This aspect was developed at some length in a paper entitled 'Competing contestations over the appropriation of Bhagat Singh' presented by this reviewer at the bi-annual seminar of the Punjab Research Group at the University of Manchester on October 27, 2007 to celebrate the 100th birth anniversary of

Bhagat Singh. I am thankful to many seminar participants for their comments and especially wish to thank Shinder Thandi, Meena Dhanda, Eleanor Nesbitt, Amarjit Chandan, Rakesh Bhanot and Tej Purewal for their feedback on an earlier version of this review. The usual disclaimer applies. Currently, there is a bitter contest going on between two groups of Indian MPs regarding the statue of Bhagat Singh to be installed in the Indian parliament building. The long standing demand of many radical and Punjabi groups for installing Bhagat Singh's statue in the Indian parliament building has been accepted in principle by the Indian government after a sustained campaign but the conflicting claims to his legacy is hindering the actual implementation of the decision. A group of MPs led by Manohar Singh Gill is arguing for a turbaned Sikh version of the proposed statue but another group led by Mohammad Salim of the CPM is arguing for a non-religious hat version. The group arguing for a turbaned version has secured the approval of the Punjab government for financing the statue, and the group arguing for the hat version wants to raise the necessary money from 'ordinary people'. For details see M.S. Bawa, '*Shaheed Bhagat Singh de sansad which laggan wale butt bare nawan vivad*' (A new controversy about the proposed statue of Bhagat Singh in the parliament building), *Ajit* online edition 20.11.2007.

² The Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) was formed after the disillusionment of the revolutionary groups with the Congress leadership, especially Gandhi. Most of these groups had agreed to suspend their activities to support Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement launched in 1920. Gandhi ended the movement in 1922 when some peasants in UP resorted to violence against the colonial police. This sudden and unilateral withdrawal of the movement led to protests against the Gandhian leadership, eventually resulting in the formation of HRA.

³ For a useful review of Jitendra Nath Sanyal's biography of Bhagat Singh and a few other books on Bhagat Singh edited by K.C. Yadav and Babar Singh, a nephew of Bhagat Singh, see V. N. Datta, 'Understanding Bhagat Singh', *The Tribune*, March 11, 2007.

⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, New Delhi, 1962.

⁵ For a very interesting and imaginative literary-cultural explanation of Bhagat Singh's popularity in Punjab, see Ishwar Dyal Gaur, 'Martyr as Bridegroom: Contextualising the Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh', *Journal of Punjab Studies*, Vol 14, No 1, January- June 2007, pp.55-67. More work on understanding the appeal and popularity of Bhagat Singh in the other regions/states of India needs to be done. For example, in Andhra Pradesh in South India, there are folk songs celebrating the bravery of Bhagat Singh and in Assam, the village girls doing embroidery represent Bhagat Singh in different forms in their work. I am thankful to my friend J.P. Rao for the information on Andhra Pradesh and several friends from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi for the information on Assam.

⁶ The Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931 between Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Irwin

stipulated the suspension of the Civil Disobedience movement by the Congress party in return for the release of political prisoners. Gandhi did not insist on either the release of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru or even on the commutation of their life sentence to life imprisonment. This, perhaps, was the lowest moral and political point in Gandhi's career. For details, see A.G. Noorani, *The Trial of Bhagat Singh: Politics of Justice* (OUP, Delhi, 2005). Noorani's account is highly critical of Mahatma Gandhi's politics in the context of the hanging of Bhagat Singh. Writing about Bhagat Singh's popularity vis-à-vis Gandhi's, the Director of Intelligence Bureau Sir Horace Williamson noted four years after Bhagat Singh's hanging that, 'His photograph was on sale in every city and township and for a time rivalled in popularity even that of Mr. Gandhi himself.' (Quoted in Noorani 2005, p.256).

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Shashi Joshi, *The Last Durbar: A Dramatic Presentation of the Division of British India*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192 pp £8.99 (pb), ISBN 978-0-19-547217-9.

Dramatising the tenure of the last British Viceroy of India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, and his stint as the first Governor-General of independent and sovereign India provides ample scope for creative interpretation of historical facts related undoubtedly to one of the most eventful, though controversial epochs in the Indian subcontinent's history. The author blends recorded minutes of actual meetings, official statements and documents, with literary interspersions and fictional scenes and dialogues to portray the concerns, objectives and mindsets of the main protagonists involved in that drama.

Any such undertaking is likely to be a daunting task as it requires not only a thorough knowledge of official documents, but also the ability to understand human nature in very complex situations. Doing this fairly and in a competent and entertaining manner greatly enhances the quality of a well-researched historical play. It must be said that the author acquits herself very well on most counts.

Her portrayal of Mountbatten is more sympathetic than the usual damnation that is heaped upon him in both India and Pakistan and lately by many British writers of a conservative persuasion. It comes out very vividly that Mountbatten exercised great influence on the Congress leaders as a whole and not only Nehru. On the other hand, Jinnah proved to be a very independent and opinionated leader and Mountbatten did not succeed in bringing him over to his point on many occasions.

The brief Mountbatten carried when he was appointed viceroy included most centrally a strategic imperative: to keep India within the British Commonwealth

and if possible to keep it united. The Congress was ideologically opposed to such an intimate connection, but Mountbatten was able to bring the Congress leaders to agree to it. The general reputation of the characters and personalities is largely confirmed: Nehru emerges as a visionary and not a very practical politician; Sardar Patel as the iron man in command of the Congress party machinery; Gandhi as an enigmatic but powerful figure within the Congress movement: and, many lesser characters such as Maulana Azad, Acharya Kripalani, Rajagopalacharya, VP Menon and Krishna Menon are presented very convincingly.

On the other hand, when it comes to the Muslim League the focus is almost entirely on Jinnah, which is quite justified in that his supreme position within the hierarchy of that party was beyond any challenge. Liaqat Ali Khan, Chaudhri Muhammad Ali, Malik Ghulam Muhammad and other lesser figures are brought in at different moments to make the play interesting as the power games and negotiations get underway.

Also, when it comes to the Sikh leaders and their special concerns for the Punjab the author does full justice in emphasising that they were responsible for aggravating the rapidly deteriorating situation in that province by giving extremist calls to fight against any partition of the Punjab which did not correspond to their idea of the international boundary that would leave much of central Punjab on the Indian side. Indeed their attitude was partly derived from the massacres in March 1947 of Sikhs in the villages around Rawalpindi by Muslim hordes.

However, the author fails completely to highlight and dramatise the most controversial decision taken by Mountbatten in the partition drama: to bring forward the date for the transfer of power from mid-June 1948 to mid-August 1947. Even in late May when Mountbatten was on a visit to the United Kingdom the British Government mentioned mid-June 1948 as the date for the transfer of power to Indian hands. Only on the 2nd of June, that is, one day before the Partition Plan of June 3 was announced by HMG, was mid-August 1947 made public to the Indian leaders.

Not only the Indian leaders but the British administration in India, as a whole, was taken aback by such a decision. Mountbatten is himself on record in noting the utter confusion his decision had created among Indian leaders. He remarks succinctly on page 163, 'The severe shock that this gave to everyone present would have been amusing if it was not rather tragic' (Mansergh, N. and Moon, P. (eds.), *The Transfer of Power 1942-47*, vol. 11, May 31 to July 7, 1947, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, (1982).

That the author fails to dramatise this event is rather incomprehensible. It would have helped understand why Mountbatten continues to receive so much disapprobation even today. It is widely believed and rightly so that Mountbatten acted most irresponsibly by forcing such an early transfer of power on the governments of India and Pakistan. The Punjab Governor, Sir Evan Jenkins, had been warning of the dire consequences of an unmanaged and unplanned

partition of the subcontinent and the decision to bring it forward to only some 10 weeks from the June 3, 1947 announcement of the Partition Plan hugely exacerbated the difficulties in the Punjab. The result was a bloodbath in which at least 700,000 Hindus, Muslims and Sikh perished as a result of genocidal rioting, ethnic cleansing and forced migration during the monsoon season.

The author sheds important light on the Kashmir conflict, bringing forth the complications caused by India's decision to take that problem to the UN Security Council and commit itself to a plebiscite. Nehru's emotionalism with regard to Kashmir from where he traced his ancestral roots and Mountbatten's advice as the Governor-General of the Indian Dominion to take the matter to the UN are indicative of a lack of proper policy on that problem. The annexation of Hyderabad, largely masterminded by Patel, is also presented fairly and in a very readable manner.

The author does mention important dates when portraying some scenes but this is not done consistently. It would have been desirable if she had presented such information more fully. On the whole one must say that the Shashi Joshi has succeeded very well in portraying in dramatic form the period of Louis Mountbatten in India as the last viceroy as well as the first governor-general of independent India.

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Ian Talbot with D.S. Tatla, *Epicentre of Violence: Partition Voices and Memories from Amritsar* (New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2006) pp. viii, 234, \$35. ISBN 81-7824-131-5.

The Partition of India in August 1947 is arguably the most important event in the making of the Indian subcontinent. The event was marked by one of the largest migrations of the twentieth century. Around eighteen million people were displaced by the Partition which led to untold levels of violence and destruction. Ten million Punjabis alone were uprooted at the time of the division. Around five and a half million Hindus and Sikhs migrated from western Punjab and six million Muslims came from eastern Punjab. The region was engulfed in a civil war. Most studies until recently were about why Partition happened rather than its aftermath. With the fiftieth anniversary of Independence in 1997, literature dealing with Partition became noticeably more sensitive to its aftermath and the human dimension of Partition, with efforts made to engage more directly with the whole question of the personal tragedies bound up in it. At the forefront were feminist writers such as Butalia, Bhasin and Menon.

If we take the broader spectrum of historical debate about Partition, the book under review, *Epicentre of Violence*, based on twenty-five first hand accounts,

belongs to this growing body of scholarship which seeks to examine Partition through its impact upon individual lives as remembered today. This book sheds new light on the everyday lives of common people caught in the turmoil of violence and dislocation and consequently made the city of Amritsar their home. It re-interrogates the Partition and its accompanied violence and mass migration from the standpoint of survivors' personal narratives. The narratives are woven with memories of the lived experiences and personal histories of Partition. The sense of displacement, the memories of refugee convoys/camps, the challenges of rehabilitation and most important of all the nostalgia for pre-partition bonds between the Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus are common to many migrants' experiences recounted throughout the book.

Ian Talbot and Darshan Singh Tatla set aside the question of why Partition happened and focus on what the event meant to people who lived through it. The authors seek to recover ways of remembering Partition by people whose histories are resolutely missing in the academic discourse on Partition. The variety of experiences reveal the hugely differing consequences of Partition for people and shows how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, and what resources they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives. Contrary to the master narratives the oral histories of those who experienced gruesome suffering during Partition present a picture of the disorderly and hurried nature of the population movement; many of the refugees believed that the exodus was a temporary move. The respondent Sardar Bhagwant Singh Khaira recalls, regarding his family's migration from a canal colony village to India, 'we had gone only a little distance when my mother remembered she had left behind a milk-churner machine imported from England...My brother, who was then about fourteen, ran back to our house to fetch it.' (p.53) The account of the educated middle-class Sadar Mohinder placed the entire blame of Partition convulsions on the Indian leaders. He narrates that the Indian leaders 'hastened the process as they were really after power at any cost. That led to Partition.' (p.170) In a similar way, Sardar Mohan Singh recalls, 'Capitals are changed, kings change, but not people. This was something completely new.' (p.158) The variety of experiences reveals that the Partition brought untold suffering and tragedy to communities who had been living together for generations with some degree of harmony. All communities acted savagely to other communities and at the same time they had stories of heroic sacrifices to save others at the time of the convulsions. A number of testimonies in the *Epicentre of Violence* provide evidence of the key role volunteers and individuals played in not only helping transport refugees and their belongings but also in preparing and serving rations throughout the city. In this, the philanthropy of the well-known figure of Amritsar Bijli Pehelewan was mentioned by a couple of respondents.

Class and gender played a vital role in experiences of violence and efforts for resettlement. The differing experiences explore elite and subaltern class complexities. One can explore and understand multiple levels of caste, gender,

minority and location experiences of migration. The respondent Dr Harcharan Singh hailed from a family of well-known medical practitioners in Sargodha. He flew by plane to Amritsar, where he arranged a truck to fetch his family, who remained in Sargodha. After arriving safely in India, he started to work as a medical commissioner for refugees. On the other hand, the accounts of Sardar Gurcharan Singh Bhatia, Sardar Mohan Singh and Sardar Kuljit Singh Khurana display a sharply different picture of migrants' longer and tedious experiences of resettlement. As new vistas of enquiry open up, they take us beyond the stereotypical portrayals and make increasingly clear that there is no undifferentiated narrative of Partition. The accounts of Sardar Kuljit Singh Khurana and Mrs Anant Kaur reveal that families initially thought that they would only have to go away for a short time and would be able to return to their homes once the violence had calmed down. These narratives present a different and far more complicated picture than has frequently been described in the master narratives.

The innovative quality of *Epicentre of Violence* may well be understood in the context of the dominant historiography of Partition and this has the potential to shift the paradigm of Partition history altogether. The work is evidence of a trend of growing dissatisfaction about the wide range of 'high politics' explanations ranging from 'great man' emphasis of history to arguments concerning 'divide and rule' policies. It shifts the focus from standard debates on the official historiography and opens up the inquiry into uncharted territory. This account of the human dimension of Partition not only attempts to connect the experiences of individuals with the history of nations and their high politics but also provides the link between private and collective memory. It is certainly the last opportunity to capture the voices and memories of the people, now very aged, who lived through the 1947 division of India. In that sense, the work has strong implications for the historiography of Partition and inadvertently it not only challenges the established master narratives but also the interviews provide rich resource for the historians and alternative understanding of Partition with vital implications for current conflict and peace.

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Daljit Nagra *Look We Have Coming to Dover*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 55 pp. £8.99 (pb) ISBN 0571238589.

'Shifting Poetic Paradigms' should be this review's subtitle. In Volume 13 Numbers 1 and 2 of this Journal, Jasbir Jain alludes to the fact that we live in an era 'when literary canons are in the process of revision and reconstruction' (2006: 285). Daljit Nagra's arrival on the literary scene seems to indicate that this phenomenon is just as pertinent to the current British/English context as it is

in trying to re-evaluate post-war Punjabi poetry. Nagra's slim volume of poems has already become a landmark in not only depicting the experiences of 'British-born Punjabis' in a newfangled/neoteric manner but also in adding to (as well as challenging) the multi-faceted nature of poetry written in English. Not bad for a virtually unknown poet whose farmer parents left the Punjab in the 1950s.

In the often-cited words of WH Auden, 'poetry makes nothing happen'. However, without dwelling on the obvious semantic *double entendre* of 'nothing', I am not sure that Daljit Nagra would agree, since in recent months his life seems to have undergone dramatic changes on the basis of publishing a modest volume of poetry – perhaps, a volume of modest poetry. The current *Zeitgeist* obliges me to note that in addition to the fame and possible fortune that await the poet, he is in danger (however unwillingly and unwittingly) of using up more than his allowance of carbon by being feted both nationally and overseas.

Nagra had dreams of being a rock star; a profession that carries with it the occupational hazard of being a peripatetic performer. In a curious twist of fate, he seems to have realised this ambition by becoming the darling of the British literati – a peripatetic performer of the poetic kind. Described as the 'most acclaimed debut collection of poetry published in recent years', *Look We Have Coming to Dover* has led to regular appearances on radio and TV, as well as glittering reviews in the literary sections of the national newspapers, and inevitably invitations to perform at literary festivals.

Already 'acclaimed' through winning The Forward Poetry Prize for the best single poem in 2004 (the title poem of this collection), Nagra has firmly established himself on the national literary scene by providing English poetry with some exotic 'Indian stuff'. He laments the fact that the 'so-called canon (of English poetry) lacks references to "the world that I know"'; and the world that he knows is the world he shares with the offspring of those who went to rebuild Britain after the second World War from the Punjab. Some, like Nagra, were born in the UK; others, such as myself, went there as children. Sadly, very few writers to date, especially poets, have articulated our experiences in a way that is accessible to a wider public.

In contrast, the children of the migrants from the Caribbean to the UK have been part of the British poetry scene since the 1970s with voices varying from the somewhat highbrow Archie Markham to more popular performers such as Linten Kwesi-Johnson, John Agard, Grace Nichols and Benjamin Zephaniah. However, even during the 80s when I was on the editorial board of the now defunct journal, ARTRAGE, we received few, if any, poetic contributions from Asian/Punjabi poets. The one exception being Amarjit Chandan, but much of his work sits more comfortably within the canon of traditional Punjabi poetry rather than (perhaps as well as) a 'new' addition, to contemporary Eng. Lit. Whilst artists with Punjabi origins such as Apache Indian (popular music) or Meera Syal (writer/actor *et al*) have 'made it' in many mainstream cultural activities,

the world of poetry has been waiting for some local (UK) home-grown Panjabi talent to emerge and fill the void.

This is a 'market gap' which Nagra's verses seem to have filled and, according to a reviewer in *The Observer* (February 2007), they have electrified the world of poetry. Whether Nagra goes on to win, or even to make the shortlist for, the T S ELIOT prize (as predicted by the above-mentioned reviewer) remains to be seen, but what is clear is that Daljit Nagra has 'arrived'. At the risk of plagiarism, let me posit the following: did he spot the gap in the market? Did the market gap spot him? Or, in his own words, from the poem 'Booking Khan Singh Kumar':

Did *you* make me for the gap in the market
Did *I* make me for the gap in the market

The responses to the two rhetorical considerations are not mutually exclusive; a little bit of symbiosis (both parties *made* each other), coupled with a touch of synchronicity, has meant that Nagra was the right poet in the right place at the right time ready to 'flame on the tree' (ibid) of the canon of English literature by adding a bit of spice to a subject that is not always popular with school children. Nagra, a secondary school teacher (of English) from London, has been variously described as a British Asian, a new voice for the Indian community, and even a 'multicultural' wallah – a term he probably rejects. However, many of the poems do refer to his Punjabi origins and the very rough 'n ready 'Punjabi to Ungreji Guide' (sic) at the end of the collection indicates Nagra's conscious attempt (sometimes even successful) 'to bring Punjabi life to the fore and make references to Indian life wherever possible' (excerpt from Nagra's interview with Kaleem Aftab August 2007). The result is at times poignant, passionate and often humorous. However, the language is sometimes stultifying, especially on the printed page though not always when performed by the poet himself. Perhaps that is part of the charm? On the other hand, perhaps some of the Nagraesque (?) verbal acrobatics just do not work, e.g. when in 'Singh Song!' he is forced into this clumsy rhyme:

vee share in di chutney
after vee hav made luv
like we rowing through Putney

Nevertheless, by any standards, Nagra is a rare phenomenon. It is difficult to come up with names of poets whose debut collection is accepted and published by Faber - the name which is usually associated with T S Eliot. Eliot's definition of poetry as the 'constant amalgamation of disparate experience' and his own struggle with words so eloquently articulated in *The Four Quartets* provide a fitting context in which to consider Nagra's torturous attempts to come up with a new idiom in which to express the pain and joy of the migrant experience - an experience that cannot always be couched in the Queen's English. In pursuing the poet's profession, Eliot talks of 'the intolerable wrestle

with words and meanings' where
 ... Words strain,
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
 Will not stay still.
 and, where
 ... each venture
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling.

Nagra's own experiment with language, trying to infuse a Punjabi flavour into English, is achieved with a varying degree of success but at times his efforts do turn into a rather weak parody of some Caribbean poets who attempt to sound original/authentic by trying to (mis)use aspects of what is often referred to as Black British English. This is not to deny that Nagra has real poetic talent (he can handle the Queen's English as well as anyone) and many of the offerings are eloquent and lyrical vignettes of the lives of Punjabis who have made their home in Britain but still maintain links with the old mother country. However, he is at his best when he is not consciously and overtly making a social comment; when he just lets his poetic imagination flow as in 'Karela!'

Some bemoan Nagra's sudden rise to fame but most agree that he has brought freshness, colour and some comic spice to the pallid palette of contemporary poetry. If this review seems to be fluctuating between praising and castigating the new Punjabi bard on the block, it is because of the varied quality of his offerings which, taken as a whole, can only provoke such an ambivalent response. In some ways, most of the themes he covers are not new; radio and TV documentaries, even films and books have touched on the gamut of experiences suffered (sic) by Asian migrants and their children in post-war Britain but what gives Nagra's work its piquancy (as well its humour) is his valiant attempt to Punjabify the English language. I am not sure that it always works but there is enough there to mesmerise the average reader or listener into accepting that here's a 'brave new world' of words and that this particular Caliban really has managed to achieve 'something rich and strange'; some of which will find its rightful place in many forthcoming anthologies of British poetry.

PS Many rock stars turn out to be one-hit wonders. My sincere hope is that Daljit, in burning so much rubber through driving from one literary festival to another, doesn't burn himself out.

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Sukhmani Bal Riar *The Politics of the Sikhs (1940-47)*, (Chandigarh: Unistar Books Pvt. Ltd., 2006), xi and 231 pp. Rs. 395(hb). ISBN not given.

The book under review undertakes to examine the Sikh Politics and the convoluted course it had been taking throughout 1940s. Ever since All India Muslim League passed Lahore Resolution in March 1940, Sikh leadership became visibly unnerved and unsure about the fate of Sikhs in case Pakistan comes into being and the Punjab constitutes its integral part. It amounts to stating the obvious that the Punjab holds tremendous significance for the Sikh community in the realms of religion as Guru Nanak's birthplace and the politics as Maharaja Ranjit Singh's kingdom. However, numerical strength of Sikhs in the province precluded them to assert an exclusive claim on whole of the Punjab. Moreover, repeated claims of Muslim League for Pakistan to be a Muslim State provided Sikhs good enough a cause to faze and fluster. General perception that the demand for Azad Punjab originally came as a counterpoise to the League's resolution of March 1940 forms the important theme of the book. However the author in order to situate the core issue into broader context picks up the thread from 1931 when the question of minority rights was broached during the Second Round Table Conference. In the course of the deliberations Ujjal Singh and Sampuran Singh, the two representatives of the Sikhs, came up with the proposal in the Minorities Committee, calling for the territorial re-adjustment of the Punjab.

That proposal asked for Rawalpindi and Multan Divisions (excluding Montgomery and Lyallpur districts) to be sliced away from the Punjab and made part of North Western Frontier Province. That, according to the two Sikh representatives, would bring in the communal balance in the Punjab as Muslims would constitute 43.3 percent, Hindus 42.3 percent and Sikhs 14.3 percent of the total population. In such a territorial arrangement Sikhs would not ask for any further concessions. That proposal was shot down by the Minorities Committee however it kept on resonating from time to time. That resonance became ever more deafening after March 1940. When Cripps Mission too failed to come up to their expectations, Master Tara Singh exhorted with all possible vehemence to re-draw the boundaries of the province so that Azad Punjab could become a possibility. The Azad Punjab Scheme got a considerable hype through the efforts of Sant Nihal Singh, an acclaimed journalist and staunch supporter of that notion himself. He was the first one to flesh out the Azad Punjab scheme in a concrete sense by publishing a piece in the Hindustan Times by the title 'A Project of Partitioning the Punjab'. However the boundary of the Azad Punjab was left to any body's imagination.

The Akali Dal formally adopted the demand of the Azad Punjab on 5 June 1943 and in a form of a memorandum presented to Cripps by Giani Kartar Singh on behalf of All Parties Sikh Committee. He asserted quite succinctly that the Azad Punjab Scheme was counterpoise to the Muslim demand for Pakistan. He too was a bit tentative regarding the boundary of the proposed scheme but

considered Ambala Division, Jullundur, Lahore, Lyallpur and Montgomery as inevitable constituents of it. That scheme was vigorously advanced and promoted but just for the time being. Baba Kharak Singh of Central Akali Dal was the first one to undermine that Scheme and likened Tara Singh to Jinnah, both being agents of Imperialism. All said, the wind was taken out of the sails of Azad Punjab scheme by March 1944. However the demand on the similar lines was voiced by Dr. V. S. Bhatti from Ludhiana immediately after the Lahore Resolution was passed. Dr. Bhatti proposed a buffer state by the name of Khalistan to be carved out between the two antagonistic states of India and Pakistan.

Khalistan as proposed by Bhatti would encompass South Eastern Districts of the Punjab, Colony Districts, Lahore and the Sikh princely states. The Maharaja of Patiala would be the head of the proposed Khalistan which was conceived as a theocratic state. Apart from Baba Gurdit Singh of *Kamagatamaru* fame, Khalistan scheme did not cut much ice with other Sikh leaders. The High Command of Shromani Akali Dal and Indian National Congress lambasted it relentlessly, making it as a consequence a damp squib. One can however conclude with somewhat assurance that the Sikh Politics was largely being punctuated by the Lahore Resolution of Muslim League, which forms the central theme of the book. As the Sikh leadership was overwrought with the impending creation of Pakistan with Punjab as one of its important constituent, a scenario with no promising prospect for the Sikhs. Shuttling between the schemes of Azad Punjab, Khalistan and hobnobbing with Jinnah or playing cat and mouse with Congress clearly reflect the complexity and complication in the Sikh politics of that period. Despite all the challenges that the Sikhs were up against, they failed to forge unity.

It was after the Rawalpindi massacre and the dislodging of the coalition government of Khizr Hayat in which Akalis, Congress and Communists were the partners, the Sikh leadership managed to have some direction. They wanted Punjab to be partitioned on the basis of property instead of population. Radcliffe did not meet their expectations as they wanted Lyallpur and Montgomery districts into Eastern Punjab. Punjab's partition was firstly pleaded by the Sikhs that was realized in August 1947. Sukhmani Riar nevertheless concludes that in seven years preceding partition, Sikh leader played but a small role in determining the fate of Sikh community and the Punjab.

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Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, *Sikh Identity An Exploration of Groups Among Sikhs*, (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2005) pages xv + 215, illustrations, glossary, bibliography, index. Price, ISBN 0 7546 5202 5.

Most non-Sikhs would say that a real Sikh is someone who wears a turban and the 5 Ks. Many Sikhs would agree. For example, in an interview recorded for the Open University the historian and writer Khushwant Singh suggested that a Sikh 'who gives up the external forms really becomes a Hindu believing in Sikhism'. Opinderjit Kaur Takhar is not so sure. In this book she asks what an examination of the historical development of Sikhism, and an analysis of five different Sikh or Sikh-related groups, can tell us about Sikh identity.

In her introduction Dr. Takhar explains that she discovered as an undergraduate that certain of her practices and those of her family did not conform to those stipulated by the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, the code of Sikh belief and practice issued in the mid-twentieth century by the influential Sikh organization, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). As a result, she says, she was left with many questions about Sikh identity. In fact the issue of identity, particularly in relation to Hinduism, is one that has concerned many Sikhs since the nineteenth century. So, for example, the Sikh scholar Kahn Singh Nabha published a book in 1898 with the title *Ham Hindu Nahin* (We are not Hindus). It has also been explored by non-Sikhs, such as Hew McLeod (*Who is a Sikh?* (1989)) and Harjot Oberoi (*The Construction of Religious Boundaries Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (1994)).

In her first chapter, Takhar reviews the history of the Sikh community, explaining that although Sikhism's founder, Guru Nanak, was not very interested in definitions and boundaries, over time a distinct Sikh identity has been created. Thus the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* defines a Sikh as 'any human being who faithfully believes in One Immortal Being, ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh, the Guru Granth Sahib, the utterances and teachings of the Ten Gurus, and the baptism bequeathed by the Tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion'. Baptism here refers to the initiation ceremony through which a Sikh becomes a member of the Khalsa ('the pure ones'), and undertakes to wear the 5 Ks and a turban. However, as she explains, the difficulty with this is that the majority of Sikhs, especially in the diaspora, are not in fact *amritdharis* - Sikhs who have been initiated and wear the 5 Ks - but either *keshdharis*, who keep their hair uncut and wear a turban but are not initiated, or *sahajdharis*, who cut their hair and do not wear turbans.

Based largely on secondary sources supplemented with interviews, the core of the book consists of five chapters dealing with five different groups, all of which may be regarded as in some way or to some extent Sikh, but also have some features which, Takhar suggests, distinguish them from the mainstream. So Chapter 2 discusses the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, a group founded in Kenya by Sant Puran Singh which became established in Britain at the end of the 1960s with its headquarters in Birmingham. Its following consist almost

entirely of 'twice-migrant' Ramgarhias who came to Britain via East Africa. In most respects they maintain a strict Khalsa identity, and encourage members to be *keshdharis*, and preferably *amritdharis*. In spite of this, Takhar suggests, there are features which distinguish them from the Sikh community as a whole. Most important is the extent to which they venerate Sant Puran Singh and his successors Norang Singh and Mohinder Singh, as well as the fact that they have established their own gurdwaras.

Chapter 3 deals with an older, rather different movement, the Namdharis, founded in the nineteenth century by Guru Balak Singh (1799-1862) and his successor, Guru Ram Singh (1816-85). Like the Nishkam Sewak Jatha, they emphasize the importance of the Khalsa tradition, and most of them are *amritdharis*. What in particular distinguishes them from most Sikhs is their belief that the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, was not the last human Guru, and that the line continued with Guru Balak Singh, Guru Ram Singh and their successors. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the beliefs and practices of two lower-caste, 'untouchable' groups, the Ravidasis, traditionally leather-workers, and the Valmikis, traditionally sweepers. Though the Valmikis already had a link with Sikhism through the tenth Guru, members of both communities converted to Sikhism in large numbers in the early twentieth century as part of their struggle for more equal treatment. However the refusal of higher-caste Sikhs to accept them fully led them to identify themselves as separate communities. Features of their beliefs and practices differ significantly from those of most Sikhs. The Ravidasis for example perform *arati* in their places of worship, known as *sabhas*, and use the word Hare as a symbol instead of the Khanda and Ik-Onkar used by Sikhs. As regards the Valmikis, one of their principal sacred texts is the Yoga Vasistha, which teaches an *advaita* (non-dualist) understanding of reality and of liberation, which is quite different from the devotional approach of the Sikh tradition.

The groups Takhar has looked at so far are of Punjabi origin. In her sixth chapter she discusses the *gora* (white) Sikhs of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, which emerged in the early 1970s out of the 3HO organization founded in the USA in 1969 by Harbhajan Singh Puri. Most of the members have taken *amrit*, follow the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* and wear the 5 Ks, but they also practice kundalini and white tantric yoga, which Punjabi Sikhs do not. However, she explains, the principal differences between them and Punjabi Sikhs are cultural rather than religious. Most important is the fact that all Punjabis, whether Sikh, Hindu or Muslim, agree on the need to maintain *izzat* - 'honour', whereas the *gora* Sikhs do not.

So, Takhar concludes, Sikhs are diverse in terms of caste, ethnicity, and attitudes to charismatic leaders, and the Khalsa. It is 'not possible to cite a monolithic definition, such as that contained in the Sikh Rehat Maryada, which will encompass all *types* of Sikhs ... not all Sikhs are the same, as is commonly assumed' (p.188). Instead Sikhs should think in terms of a 'federal identity', which 'might mean one or two core beliefs, such as the acceptance of *gurbani*

[the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture] and belief in the Sikh Absolute' (ibid). This 'would unite all Sikhs in the *religious* context, by allowing each Sikh to accept a common core of the faith, but maintain differences in how that core faith is manifest in related belief and praxis' (p.189).

At some points the discussion could have been clearer and the arguments easier to follow, and a few minor errors have crept in. It is a pity, given that Takhar makes numerous references to it, that the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* is not reproduced in Appendix 2, even though footnote 2 of the Introduction says it is. Nevertheless *Sikh Identity* has much to recommend it. Its informative discussions of the origins, history and characteristics of a diverse selection of Sikh or Sikh-related groups make it a useful source of reference, while its advocacy of a tolerant, inclusive understanding of Sikh identity will be of interest to both Sikh and non-Sikh alike.

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Joginder Singh, *Myth and Reality of the Sikh Militancy in Punjab*, (New Delhi: Shree Publishers & Distributors, 2006), viii + 278 pp., Rs. 750.(hb). ISBN 818 329-1295

The book under review has two very important conclusions to offer or should one say two important lessons, one implicit and the other explicit. The implicit lesson is that those who commit themselves to an extremist form of politics are ultimately forced to pay a heavy price; and largely this price is paid by those who are innocent.

This book is about the rise of Sikh militancy in Punjab between the period 1978 and 1992. The Punjabi society is largely an agrarian society; Sikhs and Hindus constitute majority of the population.. The Sikhs are 60 percent of the total population of the state. Of this only 31 percent live in urban areas. The Jat Sikh peasants comprise about 39 percent of the population and it were the Jat youth '*munde*' in Punjabi) that was the driving force of this militancy, largely if not exclusively. The so-called scheduled castes comprise almost 25 percent of the total population. Majority of the agricultural labourers are from this section and are economically dependent on the Jat Sikh Peasantry. The awakening of these Dalit groupings to a sense of democratic rights will have serious implications for Sikhism and the Punjabi society in the coming two decade.

The author claims, that apart from the economic consequences of Green Revolution, the rise of Sikh militancy in the Punjab cannot be understood without taking into consideration the dominant impulse of Sikh history. This was constructed in the modern period through the contest for power between the various Sikh factions to exercise control over the most important institution of the Panth, the Shiromani Gurudawara Prabandhak Committee, the Sikh

Parliament. In fact, the control over the management of SGPC implies control not only over the huge budget of Rs.200 crores but also over a network of religious and educational institutions, hospitals and orphanages. Thousands of individuals draw their salaries from this institution, a sort of state within a state. Control over the SGPC generates enormous patronage over the appointments of priests of hundreds of Gurudwaras, ragis, sevadars and other personnel to manage its offices. Control over this huge budget ensures control over the Jathedars of the Akal Takhat and other takhats i.e. a total control over the cultural-spiritual resources of the rural Sikh communities. The Sikh political factions have their respective rural support bases and the faction that controls the SGPC automatically emerges as the genuine representative of the Sikhs. The democratization of a religion and its rational management has shifted the focus from issues of spirituality to politics of power within the Sikh faith. The rise of many other religious sects such as Nirankaris, Radhasoami, Sacha Sauda, etc., which draw inspiration from Sikh Gurus and Sikh Scriptures need to be understood in this historical context. To some extent, the implications of these parallel and competing religious movements sharpened the edge of this militancy.

The struggle for power in democratic institutions is always inseparably linked with the print media, in this case especially the newspapers claiming to be the custodians of Sikh cultural values and heritage. It was the owners and editors of these newspapers that mediated between these Sikh factions on the one hand and the Sikh society vis-à-vis non-Sikhs and the Indian state on the other. The rise of militancy through a process of competitive politics to control institutions embraced these various fields to varied degrees and in various ways. Even when the author brings in all these factors, his lenses are largely focussed on the role of the Punjabi press, especially the two well-known newspapers *Ajit* and *Akali Patrika*.

Their interpretations of Sikh ethos, history, scriptures and rightful political conduct generated a discourse of militancy. Even the moderates within the Sikh community did not dare to point out that the subversive ideas that pervaded all these periodicals may do great harm to Punjabi society in the long run.

The press reflects its country's political culture because it is very much a part of its political processes, sometimes as an independent player shaping events, sometimes as an accomplice of power. In India the situation in the media has received less attention than it deserves. In this book the author critically analyses the various political articulations in the context of an active role played by Punjabi newspapers in communalising the secular issues and pampering separatist forces by deliberately focussing on conflict and violence.

The present work is based upon the coverage of the turbulent period of militancy in Punjabi newspapers. These newspapers evolved a peculiar idiom of reporting which celebrated, aided and abetted the militant mood among the Sikh youth. It incited the Jat Sikh youth of the province through its editorials invoking sacrifices and martyrdom of Sikhs in medieval times. The

contemporary politics of the Centre was portrayed in colours which made it resemble the Mughal Durbar in medieval times. Through their commentaries the Sikh intellectuals and journalists took pains to make the Sikhs believe that the Indian state was a Hindu state and the Sikh people cannot have any hope of justice from such a state. On the other hand, it denounced the moderate politicians among the Sikhs and projected Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala as the only repository of distinct cultural heritage and Sikh identity. Journalists eulogized him as the harbinger of revival of Khalsa maryada. Under his influence thousands of Jat Sikhs in the villages became *amritdhari* Sikhs. The metaphor of *Sant-Sipahi* i.e. a saint-soldier once used for Guru Gobind Singh, now came to be used for him by these journalists. Moreover, the honour and maryada of the Panth, they argued in their editorials, could only be defended by the armed men of Bhindranwale. His bravery and militancy was counter-posed to the cowardice exhibited by the other Sikh politicians in the face of state repression. His *dharam yudh* (the religious war) was portrayed as Sikhs' last battle of 'do or die' against the Indian state to carve out an independent state of Khalistan.

Soon Punjab was burning. The number of violent incidents began to increase in the state. These incidents comprised bank robberies, thefts of weapons, setting fire to railway stations, attack on policemen and their families, murder of public men. Hindu passengers were taken out of buses and shot and innocent poor Bihari labourers were killed in one of the villages. The thin line between the militants and the criminals began to vanish when in the village Cheema Bath in Amritsar District, the militants killed nine members of a family of one Bir Singh who was suspected to be a police informer. Among the killed were three kids and their mothers. God fearing ordinary Sikhs were shocked and bewildered. Singh states:

Political parties indulged in mudslinging and accused their political opponents for generating communal violence. The Akalis and the Sikh press accused Hindu organisations and Congress politicians. Where as, the Mahashay/Hindu press and the Congress accused the Sikh communal organisations. The Government accused both Hindu and Sikh communalists. The Congress alleged that some foreign powers were behind the communal violence (p.63).

What happened during the militancy could be likened to the age-old Hindu ritual of *Yagna*. Here was a political yagna where a society-in-turmoil used its young men ('munde') as human sacrifice ('*Ahuti*') in order to exorcise its inner demons of chaos and restore social harmony, even if temporarily. The carefully crafted narrative of the book depicts, step by step, the various phases through which the political unconscious of the Sikh society enacted this yagna without any guilt or

sense of responsibility. The book is a must read for anyone interested in the contemporary history of Punjab as well as of India.

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Javid Iqbal, *Encounters with Destiny: Autobiographical Reflections*, trans. Hafeez Malik and Nasira Iqbal, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006) 334 pp. (hb) Rs. 595. ISBN 0 19 547142 3.

Being a son of a famous parent is certainly a daunting challenge and especially when the father happens to be the most noted poet-philosopher of his century adulated by millions of Muslims besides being viewed as the father of a young country. Javid Iqbal is not only the son of Sir Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) - also known as Allama Iqbal - but is also a jurist and a writer, who likes to dabble in politics and often tries to philosophise on the issues of Islam and modernity. In all these areas, he is justifiably trying to be a person in his own right as well as the son and a kind of intellectual heir to a towering personality. It is certainly not an easy proposition, yet Javid is surely sensitive to popular expectations while being concurrently conscious of a pervasive respect and adoration for being the son of an almost divine personality in modern Islam.

Translated by Professor Hafeez Malik of Villanova University and by Nasira Iqbal, the author's wife, *Encounters* is both a biography of Sir Muhammad Iqbal and the autobiography of Javid Iqbal. His book mainly focuses on four inter-related themes: relations with his father; his own cultural and intellectual activities; commentary on Pakistani politics with reference to the army's predominant role, and the profile of the judiciary within the country.

In its initial section Javid Iqbal's narrative brings out the real human being behind the towering poet-philosopher, whose feet remained on the ground even though he was aware of an ever-increasing adulation. Sir Muhammad Iqbal comes across as a kind father, an affectionate husband, a caring friend, and very much like creative genius remains quite otherworldly. Unconcerned about worldly possessions such as a house in Lahore and shunning an ostentatious lifestyle, he was none too enthusiastic on travel, and instead lived like a Sufi intellectual, avoiding the excesses of both the sacred and secular type. He comes across as down to earth and as not yearning for worldly gains but rather as more concerned about India, Muslims and the world at large. Like Syed Ahmed Khan, Syed Ameer Ali, Yusuf Ali and Jawharlal Nehru, Sir Muhammad Iqbal was a living embodiment of Indo-Islamic traditions and crucially reinvigorated a withering Persianate both in South Asia and elsewhere. His sense of humour and humility did not inhibit him from seeking Javid's horoscope from an expert astrologer in Mysore through Raja Narendra Nath, a close Hindu friend. At the same time, the rationalist in him urged self-affirmation, which he called *khudi*

(self-awareness or ego) and vehemently opposed predetermination and fatalism.

Javid and his sister, Munira, were Iqbal's children from his second marriage, whereas his two other children from the first marriage remained distant from their father. Aftab, Iqbal's eldest son, was born in 1898 and was senior to Javid (b. 1924) by twenty-six years whereas Miraj, the sister from the first marriage, died quite young. Aftab studied law and political science; was associated with the Lincoln's Inn and had been in the care of Iqbal's elder brother, Shaikh Ata Muhammad of Sialkot. Aftab lived and worked in Karachi and passed away in 1979 in London. Javid and Munira, his sister, largely seem to have carried the mantle of Iqbal's succession. The latter was born in Lahore in 1935 and unlike Javid, did not remember their mother, Sardar Begum, who passed away in 1935 at an early age of forty-two. Their mother was a kindly, traditional woman who wanted to own a house for her family and knew that the poet-philosopher spouse would have no truck with the project. His otherworldliness would disallow this though, to be fair to Iqbal, he had ensured excellent education and even a private German tutor, Aunty Doris, for his children. Sardar Begum saved money from her daily expenditure without Iqbal knowing of it, until she was able to build a house in Mayo Road, the Javid Manzil, in a shady area of Lahore. Javid's reminiscences of his ailing mother are certainly moving, especially when on 20 May 1935 she was taken to her new house in an ambulance and quietly passed away within a few days of moving in. He must have been deeply aggrieved when he wrote: 'Sadly, my mother's family has completely disappeared' (p. 20). Other such details about his father's own ailing health, his journey to Bhopal for treatment and his usual meditation phases, resulting in his poetic works, offer moving evidence of the life of a pre-eminent luminary, who often ignored his own health prerogatives. 'In later years, he became totally indifferent to his personal appearance; the zest for life was gone' (p. 28).

Iqbal's death left Javid and Munira to seek out their lives in a rapidly changing world. Unlike his father, Javid lived in style and he had the unflinching support of his father's friends who eventually deputed him to Cambridge in 1949 followed by a bar-at-law at the Lincoln's Inn. Javid and Munira began their professional lives in Lahore where the former moved between the tripolar worlds of law, politics and lecturing whereas Munira married Yusuf Salah ud Din, a scion of a well-known Old Lahori family.

Javid Iqbal's detailed comments on Pakistani politics may not appear unique but they certainly reveal his own agony over an enduring problem of governance. He laments the demise of the founding vision of Pakistan owing to insecure politicians and over-ambitious generals. The dispersal of the Muslim League and manipulation of presidential elections by General Ayub Khan to defeat Miss Fatima Jinnah in 1965 dispirited democratic forces in a country where two distinct polities had been intertwined rather hastily. The uneven politics, khaki interventionism and brutal military operation in the former East Pakistan hastened the partition of the Muslim republic that had failed to forge enduring institutional interdependence. Javid Iqbal's memories of Zulfikar Ali

Bhutto and General Zia ul Haq, who ruled Pakistan through the 1970s and 1980s, are not different and no less sordid from those of any other concerned fellow citizen. Geared by personal insecurities and whims, they both pursued authoritarian politics by a selective usage of socialism and Islam, respectively, which only exacerbated the socio-ethnic tensions within the plural society. The democratic interlude of the 1990s under Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif suffered from personal and institutional imbalances once again allowing the army to dominate Pakistan while the problems of governance only became more acute.

Like other Pakistanis - and especially the younger element - Javid's generation felt helpless and even hapless before this perpetual saga of drift and betrayals where a country otherwise endowed with human and natural resources had been mostly misgoverned by its own self-seeking elite. The lack of trust between the generals and politicians, and politicians and the superior judges has kept the entire society at the mercy of ad hoc measures with each new ruler promising a new but essentially false dawn and leaving a greater mess afterwards. Javid might have found solace by dabbling in philosophical issues or through travels abroad on lecture tours but certainly for any sensitive citizen, country's history did not offer any significant inspiration. Located in a difficult geo-political region and inflicted by ideological polarity, Pakistan has still, like several other similar Muslim polities, a long way to go before Allama Iqbal's vision of a self-confident and forward-looking 'Muslimness' can emerge.

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N Ali, V.S.Kalra and S.Sayyid (eds) *A Post-Colonial People; South Asians in Britain* (London: Hurst and Company, 2006), ix + 436 pp. £14.95 (pb). ISBN 185065971.

This remarkable book brings together some highly sophisticated discussion of the theoretical "frames" within which understanding of what the book calls *BrAsians* may be sought. It also, however, brings together a wide range of papers some of them reproduced from earlier sources, some rewritten and some original. As one of the earliest left liberal anti-racist authors. I find it fascinating to see recorded here the subsequent studies up till the so-called Northern disturbances of 2000 onwards written about and also significantly by *BrAsians*.

There is something of a problem in structuring such a book; the early chapters reflect the well-read philosophic and methodological reflections of Sayyid who is a Lecturer in Sociology in the University of Leeds having previously been a Research Fellow in several Northern Universities. The questions which his 'frames' pose do actually structure some of the articles, but the collection is much wider than that.

The collected articles may first of all be seen as being about the position of BrAsians in various places. These places include Leicester, Bradford and Newham and Southall. In each of these cases, however the basic empirical and historical literature is set out and critically analysed so that simple stereotypes are avoided. Always this critical standpoint makes *BrAsians* the subject rather than the object of the investigation.

Another way of classifying the papers is in terms of their institutional coverage. Peach gives an up-to-date demographic account of different Asian communities and their relative success. Anwar in a simple and straightforward piece records the extent of Asian participation in the political process. There are interesting sections on Asian experience of the judicial system and the economy, in which going beyond the facts there is a review of theories as to why they are where they are. Finally there is some discussion of the family and arranged marriage in which the politics of these issues in places like Keighley are demonstrated.

There is, of course, much concern about the role of Islam. Here the work of Philip Lewis, first in his book *Islamic Britain* and then in his subsequent discussion of the response to Islamophobia and of the relation between Islam and non-religious secular questions. Obviously it is Islam rather than any of the other religions, which is central after the Rushdie affair and the Gulf and Iraq wars. These issues have transformed any simple discussion of Islam. There is also an interesting contribution from Tariq Modood who has more than anyone else shown that emphasis on colour racism has prevented a sufficient understanding of the different trajectories of Asian and Muslim migration and politics.

The book, however, is entitled *A Post-Colonial People* and its major preoccupation has to be with the nature of empire from the point of view both of the imperialists and their colonial subjects and with migration of the descendents of these subjects to the metropolis. A mantra amongst immigrants is 'We are here because you were there' and this leads to several discussions of empire, but there is a subtle nuance when the book records a discussion in which the participants mock this very notion. Then there is an interesting section on Vasco da Gama which shows that da Gama's 'discovery' of sea route to India has to be understood against a trading system which existed before European exploration and which was run by non-Europeans.

Another theme of some of the papers near the end of the book is *BrAsian* participation in the arts which exists independently of political struggles but also interacts with them in literature, the visual arts and in drama. Nothing could illustrate this better than the triumphant irony of the television programme *Goodness Gracious Me*, in which Peter Sellers mocking of Asians is turned against him and the authors are liberated to make fun of colonialism, racism and themselves. This tradition is continued in the comedy programme *The Kumars at no 24*.

Of course the experience of colonialism and the exploitation of immigrants is

not simply a matter of comedy. It is brutal and repressive. The point about comedy is that it shows the capacity of oppressed and exploited to produce a culture which enables them to retain their dignity.

This brief review can give only a limited account of the riches of scholarship about and by *BrAsians*. It clearly is a text which all students of immigration should read as a basic text, but which will also open up a new type of democratic debate.

A final word should be in praise of the publishers. They have devised ways of juxtaposing ordinary articles with blocked off pages illustrating the books major themes. It could hardly have presented them more adequately.

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Hannah Bradby, *Skinfull* (London: Onlywomen Press, 2005) 234pp ISBN 0-906500-83-4 (pb) £8.99.

The book *Skinfull* includes two fictional stories by Hannah Bradby: 'Skinfull' (pp1-132) and 'Underneath the fairy lights' (pp.133-234). Though the two stories share a number of common elements, this review will focus on the first.

The setting of *Skinfull* is modern multi-cultural Glasgow. Indeed, it is the way in which different national and cultural traditions coexist, collide and coalesce that provides the story with much of its texture and appeal. To take one of its many delightful cultural juxtapositions, the story might well have been titled '*hagis and chana dahl*' (p.35).

The main characters, all women, themselves represent different cultural traditions and ways of living though they all meet and influence each others' lives through the Shakti Family Centre, the mission statement of which is 'To improve the transferable skills, social networks and quality of life of women, and their families, who could suffer from racism' (p.22).

There is red-haired Maya whose very neurotic and very English mother conceived and gave birth to her whilst on a quest in India for 'exotic authenticity'. Maya's troubled sense of personal identity is influenced, amongst other things, by her increasingly romanticised Indian roots, and by her Englishness: thus, at one moment she can feel 'a bit Indian' (p67), the next 'dreadfully English' (p.111).

There is Maya's fellow Shakti-worker Balvinder who comes from a large Sikh (Ramgharia?) family with its roots in pre-Partition Punjab. It is her status as a single mother and the impact of this on her family in particular that provides much of the dynamic of the story. Even at the stage of having given birth to a little baby boy in hospital, neither friends nor family know of her predicament. She is in particular dread of her father's reaction to having his daughter a 'fallen woman'. Having nowhere else to turn, Balvinder moves in with Maya.

Eventually, when Balvinder is accepted back into her family and is married in a gurdwara to a Sikh Mauritian widower, Maya herself moves in with Balvinder's family and, with curious irony, finds an identity that had eluded her to that point in her life.

There is the formidable Mrs Kapadia, the wealthy Hindu socialite and director of the Shakti Centre who, against all appearances, embraces the single mother Balvinder as if she were her own daughter and thereby provides her with the social entrée and respectability that provides her with a route back to the bosom of her own Sikh family.

And there is Heather Cromarty, a professor at Glasgow University, who is on the board of the Shakti Centre. She, too, is facing a number of guilt-inducing issues relating to identity and family. She is an older mother of two who has to juggle professional and motherhood responsibilities at the same time as coping with ageing parents. Interestingly, in both cases it is men - one her understanding husband and the other her ecologically-aware brother - who provide her with the means of finding creative responses.

The main female characters, and many other people besides, live out their stories within a kaleidoscope of different cultural traditions. This is perhaps most obvious in the realm of food where traditional Scottish dishes - such as 'tatties, neeps and haggis' (p.35) - exist side-by-side with those with an Indian provenance - such as *saunf, haldi and moong dahl* (p.80) ... not to speak of 'riotta and spinach pizza' (p.60).

There are tensions, of course. In her hospital maternity ward, for instance, catering staff display ignorance of Balvinder's ethnicity as well as of her dietary needs and preferences. Maya's English mother, on the other hand, is condescending towards anything so far north of London as Scotland and Maya herself encounters some street racism - though, ironically not directed towards herself but at Mrs Kapadia's son with whom she strikes up a friendship.

Generally speaking, however, the characters move easily between different cultural scenarios, displaying both good humour and compassion as they do so. As such, this is a well-told, well-informed and affirming story which throws light not only on the lives of contemporary women but also on the shifting nature of personal identity and social responsibility within a multi-cultural community.

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Rahila Gupta *From Home Breakers to Jail Breakers: Southall Black Sisters* (London, Zed Books) 2003 ISBN 1-84277-441-7

'We have come to build bridges to each other in order to tear down the walls of bigotry ... Fear is their weapon but courage is ours. (p.278)

This quote was a concise and precise summary of the work that some community based projects do, although I only found it towards the end of my read it summed up the very reason why some groups form and exist. When I came across the book, I was intrigued by the title as well as the organisation that contributed towards the book. The Southall Black Sisters (SBS) have been active for at least two decades that I have been aware of, so to read about specific cases that they have worked with was interesting. The book addresses the social, legal, religious and political issues that emerge from the social activist stance that the SBS take, and sheds light on some of the critical factors that are not always talked about in the public sphere.

The editor has chosen to include topical subjects, ranging from domestic violence to immigration, and from fundamentalism to policing and mental health. These are all key components of some of the struggles and problems embedded within and/or faced by the Black community, but even the term 'black' does not seem to be all-encompassing. Some readers may be left confused with the usage of this term, as certainly from my own experience of researching racism within the probation service in England, when asked what they defined themselves as, participants felt strongly about being identified as Asian rather than Black. But one key message is the cross cutting way that individuals exhibit or are characterised by not only racial differences but also those of class, age, religion, gender and sexuality. Ethnic origin and cultural identity are key terms that tend to define individuals from minority ethnic groups, certainly in my experience and to some extent this is reflected in the book.

The first part of the book gives the reader the impression that the editor is trying to raise the profile of the organisation, by including various statements within the content of each chapter highlighting how hard they work, and are making a difference to service users, potentially over and above what other non-government organisations are doing locally and/or nationally. However, it is only from chapter 8 onwards that one realises that such an approach is needed. Having worked in the voluntary sector myself for a number of years, I know all too well that the financial, professional and emotional journey that is travelled by community activists cannot be accounted for lightly. In fact, the statutory and public sector that rely on the very services carried out by the struggling voluntary projects spend very little time or attention on the good work that is done for them (the statutory/public sector) but not by them.

A key message that the book does give to the reader is the need for more people to be community activists. The detail and knowledge of some of the time consuming campaigns, such as Kiranjit Ahuwallia (chapter 11) and legal challenges faced by them as in the case of Zoora Shah (p.243) reflects quite clearly how the work of SBS is invaluable as is their determinism to succeed in what they do. It gives a sense of pride and duty to pay much more attention to the voices of those from whom we hear very little.

Chapter 10 is of particular interest as an insight into Hindu fundamentalism.

In the UK at least one hears little of this in the media (which are usually consumed with Islamophobia) or even in the Asian community. This book certainly contextualises some of the activities of religion-based groups both 'here' (England) and 'there' (South Asia). It can be perceived by those from the South Asian communities that some religious groups certainly draw upon the 'divide and rule' system which the authors suggest has, from the days of the British Empire, been engrained in members of South Asian UK society - at times without their realising it themselves, as demonstrated by religious and caste conflict (see chapter 9). This is a practice that also attracts the attention of the British National Party (BNP) who use these very 'divide and rule' tactics to gain votes from the Hindu and Sikh community against the Muslim members, hence, generating (religious) divisions between the minority groups in England. Certainly readers of the *Journal of Punjab Studies* should be aware that such divisive schemes are in operation in Western societies, as it will give them an idea of how people interact and how perceptions and stereotypes can be reinforced by such far-right wing groups specifically, as well as by the media generally.

As a member of one of the very communities with whom the SBS work, I realise that it is imperative and essential that members of the public from all walks of life read this book to understand how the actions of the minority groups can impact upon the majority of society, be it detrimentally or positively. It is unfortunate that it tends to be the former rather more often than the latter.

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