

PANKAJ K. SINGH: How do you respond to the celebration of fifty years of Indian independence?

KRISHNA SOBTI: As a citizen of a free country I do feel involved in India's fifty years' celebrations. It does concern me as a person who has witnessed the historic moment and the change in the Indian collective consciousness. No doubt we have earned democratic values but our system shows erosion of moral values.

PKS: How would you compare India before independence with India after independence?

KS: There is a big difference. Before independence, despite differences Indian identity was one. Being Indian meant being anti-British. Collectively people were never united at such a scale before. The spirit of sacrifice, which coexists with any number of other emotions, was also manifested at its best at that time. And also in an encounter with the western culture, Indians had started having a sense of value and pride for their own culture. Though English education created a certain kind of awareness, yet there was pride in past glory as revolt against British subjugation was simmering in the Indian mind.

During the last fifty years we gave too much weight to regional and religious identities. We have been terribly slow to create a national myth. A democracy places certain responsibilities on the citizen; in return he gets some fundamental rights which he must protect. The state must also have integrity and uprightness.

We the citizens of this country do feel deeply that our fifty-year old democracy badly needs social dynamics and political morality today. The conflict between the greatness of a Hindu past or of Muslim glory alone is not going to change this country. Ours is perhaps the oldest living culture, and it is perhaps the most composite and complex culture in the world. To introduce elements of conflict between religions and faiths is counter-productive for democratic values. Collision between party interests and long-standing traditions of pluralism must be avoided.

The most important task before the country is to even out the existing inequalities of environment and

'Recreating the Life that Was ...'

Krishna Sobti speaks to Pankaj K. Singh about the partition and the context of her writing.

opportunity. India has the potential to develop into a great nation. We have a national personality but we have failed to cultivate a national character. Fifty years is quite a substantial period. It is time we moved forward. Democracy has to be committed to the protection of the weak.

PKS: For you personally as well as for India independence has also meant partition ...

KS: Partition was one of those violent experiences that are difficult to forget and dangerous to remember.

During the partition, migration on such a scale was not a choice but

harmony between the communities as revealed in *Zindaginama*, yet tension simmered under the surface and by mid-forties it was quite visible also.

We have earlier evidence that the political rumbling could be heard much earlier than 1925. Muslims had started playing with the idea of having a state of their own. It was also debated that Hindus and Muslims were not two communities but two nationalities.

It is important to remember that Arya Samaj and Muslim organisations both played negative roles. One published a book *Rangeela Rasul* and other *Seeta Ka Chhinala*.

Partition was one of those violent experiences that are difficult to forget and dangerous to remember. . .

a compulsion. People who crossed over to either side were cut off from their roots, lost their land, homes, and dear ones in the killings that were a consequence of the great political drama.

I wanted to recreate the life that was, the surge of humanity, the people, their faces, their laughter, their noise. Here was Punjab peasantry - rustic, rough, tough, rugged and down-to-earth. The very fabric of their existence was conditioned by constant movement across the frontiers. One fateful morning I had a vision before my eyes of only one minaret of the village mosque - I knew I was committed to carrying the eternal echo that has continued ringing through the centuries - *Allah O Akbar*.

I created ancestral memory through *Zindaginama*, and I felt I was reborn in a new country that was no so new for me.

PKS: In a recent interview with Alok Bhalla, you have stated that partition was 'inevitable,' whereas *Zindaginama* reveals considerable communal harmony. Could you elaborate?

KS: Yes, I have said it was 'inevitable.' There was working

This viciousness created bad blood on both sides.

I could best illustrate this with an incident. It was 1944 or 1945. During vacation I decided to visit my grand parents at our village. I boarded Frontier Mail at Lahore and got down at Gujrat. I had before me a long day and nearly fifteen miles to go first in a Tonga to Jalalpur and then riding on horse-back. I quickly had food at a station *dhaaba*. I walked to see my father's friend at Hyat Furniture where I enjoyed Kashmiri *kahwa* with him. I got into a tonga for Jalalpur. Reaching there I found our horse waiting on the stand but the *syce* was not there. Someone informed me that he is visiting his sweet-heart and would be back before evening. I was not in a mood to wait, so I mounted the horse and rode towards home.

On the way the horse stopped at a *talab* for drinking water. Suddenly a mare was seen on the other end of the pool. The horse went out of my control. I pulled its reins with all my force but it ran so fast that everything was blurred before my eyes. I was in real danger. I knew that if my feet got entangled in the *rakabs*, I could be dragged along with the horse.

Suddenly the horse threw me on a mound along with the saddle. I guess I took few minutes to stand up and walk to feel my legs. I thanked my stars I could walk though with difficulty and pain. How to carry the saddle to the nearest village? I could see from the mound it should be at least a mile away. Drawing the saddle when I reached the village-well, Chowdhary Sahib sitting on a *charpoy* asked me - got serious injuries? I nodded - yes.

He called his wife and ordered milk and *ghee* for me. I readily drank it. It was first-aid for a horse-fall. I felt better. His wife offered to attend to my bruises with *ghee* and *daru* but I declined. I was in a hurry to reach home before it was dark.

Chowdhary Sahib offered me his mare saying - if you like we can send a man along but she is very gentle; will give you no trouble. In the meantime the village kids had surrounded me. I got on the mare; took reins in my hands and was about to move when an unknown young man patted her and looked towards me and said - teasingly - take her home today, but later she and her likes - their bangles and ringlets - are going to be ours.

That remark made me boil with rage but nothing could be done. I knew this was not mere boldness or defiance. It was a challenge that was pointing towards the times to come. It had a message for us that they are going to be in command. Times are going to be theirs.

It is so much easy to falsify history. You decide to conceal certain relevant facts and the true picture is distorted. Pakistan did not emerge suddenly in 1947.

PKS: Most of the partition literature, such as your story 'Sikka Badal Gaya' or Bhisham Sahni's novel *Tamas*, upholds human values. How is it that human values remain powerless in the face of the onslaught of history or politics?

KS: Human values may not be able to stop the onslaught of politics or history, yet these values greatly contribute to lessening the loss. Even in the midst of communal crisis human values were active. Personal loyalties towards friends and concern for humanity did reduce the damage. Otherwise, the loss of life on both sides would have been much greater than what it was, which in any case was terrifying - a whole train steams in with absolute

silence with not a single human being in it alive, it was so frightening. The result was as apprehended, the same massacre took place on this side of the border. There was no difference between a Hindu or a Muslim at that time.

You were placed at that point where you could see both the sides. Usually you are confronted with one side, but we could also see the agony on this side of the border. The concern for our Muslim friends - whether they would reach safely the other side or not, what will happen to them? Such tremendous pressure I have never had on my mind again. It was happening and you couldn't talk about it to any one. No personal feelings, no private feelings remained.

Human dignity was great in the face of suffering. I remember my distant Mamu, tall and handsome, arriving in Delhi with just a shawl and a tiny bundle under his arm, silent and stunned - he had lost all his sons. Seeing him I really felt he was a chopped tree trunk.

PKS: May be because *Zindaginama* is set in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the communal divide is not so visible and the harmony seems to be more pervasive and operative...

KS: Partition was not a sudden development. Even in *Zindaginama* you can find reflections of the simmering discontent and division. The Mirasi's *swang* is a good case in point. The scene shows this village wag entertaining a marriage party, but all along he is also articulating the Muslims' desire for a separate homeland of their own.

You know, he is asked to narrate something amusing.

'As you please, sirs' - he says and starts off:

'I have a weakness for opium. One day I took a little bit more of it than my normal quota and was soon on my way to heaven. My friend Jani Darvesh was accompanying me. When we entered Maharaj Indra's territory, we were awe-struck at the splendour all around. Tents, shamyanas, shimmering colourful silks, music, tantalizing damsels, dancing bells tied to their ankles, Maharaj Indra walking with beautiful girls, now patting someone on cheek and caressing someone's back, peering at a damsel's necklace, embracing one or kissing another. It was wonderful - groups of beautiful

maidens fully decked in glittering jewellery and Maharaj Indra drinking their beauty as avidly as he drank Som-rasa.

Suddenly Maharaj Indra recognizes the Mirasi and asks about his well-being and the conditions at home. How are the Shahs and the peasants down there? - says Maharaj Indra, the Rain God. We hope our praja is getting enough water for the fields.

Sorry, sir. Now we use the water supplied by the British.

The Rain God was surprised - Then what happens to the water we send down from here.

Sir, that is converted into silver and gold and jewels in palaces and temples.

Is that so? Well, I am pleased to

I wanted to recreate the life that was, the surge of humanity, the people, their faces, their laughter, their noise. Here was Punjab peasantry - rustic, rough, tough, rugged and down-to-earth. The very fabric of their existence was conditioned by constant movement across the frontiers. One fateful morning I had a vision before my eyes of only one minaret of the village mosque - I knew I was committed to carrying the eternal echo that has continued ringing through the centuries - Allah O Akbar.

hear that. And how is the British Sarkar?

Sir, these days they are engaged in a war. Earlier, the war was only confined to Turkey, but now they are at war with other countries too.

News of the war turned Lord Indrasad and depressed. He ordered - Let there be music.

And there was sweet sad music with fair apsaras swinging their bodies and falling in Maharaj Indra's arms, making delightful shivers run all over his body by their sensuous breath.

Seeing this the Mirasi felt a twinge of jealousy and decided to visit Allah Tala too.

Indra sensed his discomfort and ordered one of his guards to take him to Allah Mian's abode.

As they crossed the Rain God's last post, greenery was gone. They now entered a dry and deserted land. After pointing to a small kuchcha mosque, the guard leaves them near a small well. Here they find an old man sitting on a charpoys, smoking

hookah. His eyes were lined with collyrium prepared from the eggs of kites. The Mirasi and his friend soon discovered that the fellow was no other than Allah Tala himself.

The Mirasi cries out - By God, what a contrast! Hindu Indra Maharaj is surrounded by riches, splendours and beauties, and here is our God all dry and deserted.

The Mirasi's friend Yar Jani cried out - O King of Kings, O Lord Supreme, why such a difference?

Allah said - Do not worry. What you see is not true. The truth is that the decor of Jannat has been carried away by Bulaki Shah under the court orders.

Oh, Lord Master, we thought that sort of a thing happened only to poor peasants, but you, who are the

master of the whole universe, how can you let such a calamity befall yourself?

Allah Tala said - Look, Bulaki Shah is a cheat - all Shahs are. He forged the documents. But see, if I were to file the appeal, I would have to borrow cash from Bulaki Shah only. So, boys, I dropped the idea of appeal, and my property has been liquidated.

My God - to hell with ...

Don't get so perturbed. Some day some solution will be found.

The Mirasi cried - The tribe of Indra Maharaj guards their wealth so tightly that nothing ever reaches down to our side.

Suddenly Jani Darvesh bowed to Allah - O Lord, Protector of the poor and the faithful, pray fix new boundaries for your riyaya, your people.'

Such is the confidence of the Mirasi that he can keep the audience splitting their sides while at the same time building and sustaining this contrast between the Hindu Rain

God Indra Maharaj and Allah Mian.

Language has an inner relationship with the structure of the novel. The author has to know that reality always exercises its own pull and power over the text. It is the visible truth of his times that the Mirasi presents indirectly, in imaginative form.

PKS: In *Zindaginama* you talk of the novel being *itihās*, i.e. history, a history which flows with the psyche of people, which is different from official history, a kind of 'history from below.' In any case the sense of the period is very strong in the novel. What relationship do you visualize between history and literature? And what impelled you in particular to write *Zindaginama*?

KS: Yes, it was immediately after the partition that I wanted to voice the end of an era. I cannot recall how much history I knew at the time but I am sure I had some idea of the interior history of the pre-partition Punjab.

Confronted with the plain papers on my table I soon realized I didn't want to create the characters of the book. Instead I would like to make a book with the people who lived in those good times. I wanted to recapture the life that was before partition.

PKS: How do you see yourself as a writer, and particularly as a woman writing?

KS: For me writing is like living in body and soul together. It feels good to think that being a woman I have been my own person and as a writer I have enjoyed the freedom to grow.

My intellectual and creative responses have been deeply rooted in my eclectic and integrated experiences. I have always been conscious of two distinct elements merging in me while I am at work. I must say I have a creative faith in the mystical concept of *Ardhanarishwar* in whom the male and female instinctive rhythms, urges, mental and intellectual, are combined and mingled in contrastive shades.

As a writer who happens to be a woman I have had to create quite wide inner and outer spaces for myself. I have stayed and lived like a bachelor girl. I did not manage a home; nor did I create a family. I had realized it in time that I was not cut out for that sort of a role. My emotional range was deep and intense, but I was not a dreaming

kind. Nothing overwhelming to forget me and myself in others. I always knew that to carry out my writing I could not be a second being, I had to be a self proper.

PKS: What would be the role of art or skill in creativity?

KS: A writer creates men and women of flesh and blood - not with mere technical skill or competence. It needs an inner dimension to visualize a touch, a sensation, an idea, a dream, a challenge, and finally a sudden madness, a leap, for creating something special and alive. A writer does need stamina as well as an intimate sight to locate and explore those living areas where morals and morality cross the boundary of social correctness.

A writer must enter these areas with love and compassion, write and not pronounce judgment with the severity of law. Objectivity in writing involves a refusal to distort or falsify things, situations, persons, happenings and above all one's own self. When the writer's basics are disturbed or distorted, she becomes erratic and inconsistent towards the organic whole that is her text. The deepest part of a creative writer is her honesty and her passion to reach the truth.

All creative works, while taking shape, function like another presence on your table. The text before you does absorb you, it develops a rhythm of its own both with your inner self and your working apparatus. A writer must provide a relaxed, almost sanctified environment to the valuable presence of the text.

A good creative piece always reveals that it is not a product only of memory, association, and imagination. It comes alive with the help of a certain shade of language which is the outcome of a complex process involving the mind and its intellectual and emotional climate.

PKS: Your mastery of the right word, particularly the right 'spoken' word is superb. A large part of character and context comes alive through dialogue, while *Ae Ladki* progresses entirely as a dialogue. Equally impressive is the range of your style from novel to novel...

KS: Language is what one has imbibed and assimilated through life's pattern, living, thinking and reflecting in relation to the social

reality or system and the set of values one carries with conviction.

For me the simple test of good expression is clarity and simplicity. I would like to stress the tremendous power of the spoken word, the rhythm and vitality of the oral word, that I could imbibe from Indian oral traditions. While writing *Zindaginama* I had focused on peasant speech and dialect with its precise visual and dramatic recall. Concentration on the visible and the audible created a world of its own.

Most important are the images that quietly push the writer towards innovation and experiment. *Ae Ladki* is one text on which I did not have to work hard at all. It all came smoothly.

almost final. The third draft is intimate and intense but is done in pure neutrality. It creates its own value, creates its subtle ease when no effort is visible. Invariably this draft turns out to be nearly identical to the first.

PKS: Your novels are usually set far back in time, before or around the time of partition. How is it you haven't really made contemporary post-independence India the subject or setting of your novels?

KS: Temperamentally I am slow to assimilate things, and filtration takes long. My way of looking at things takes me back in time, that creates a distance. It gives a historical

Allah said - Do not worry. What you see is not true. The truth is that the decor of Jannat has been carried away by Bulaki Shah under the court orders.

Oh, Lord Master, we thought that sort of a thing happened only to poor peasants, but you, who are the master of the whole universe, how can you let such a calamity befall yourself?

Allah Tala said - Look, Bulaki Shah is a cheat - all Shabs are. He forged the documents. But see, if I were to file the appeal, I would have to borrow cash from Bulaki Shah only. So, boys, I dropped the idea of appeal, and my property has been liquidated.

I wish I could write a play. *Ae Ladki* had the possibilities but I did not have the courage to experiment with theatre.

PKS: Normally how long does it take for the chiselled word to leave your desk for the publisher's?

KS: I always make three drafts. The first one is the most precious to me, for I work on this only during the high tide. It is always intense but relaxed. I like to sail simultaneously on two contrary elements. Relaxing in intensity but no tensions. On my writing table there is no space for tensions. They suck out the rationale of the text and threaten the writer with their own confusion.

During the second draft I create two different levels to feel my discriminating reader. I want the silent spaces to flow easily towards this unknown reader, while I do a bit of tinkering with text.

My third draft has to be compared with my first, which always remains

perspective on things.

In fact, while writing *Zindaginama*, I had planned a trilogy. My first novel *Channa*, which I wrote in the fifties, was about partition. More than three hundred pages had been printed when I took it back from the publisher, objecting to some of the changes they had made in it. I paid the printing expenses to the publisher and got the novel back. As I was reworking on it, I felt no story could be written on partition without going back in time. *Zindaginama* was the first part covering 1900 to the first world war, the second part covers the period from the first world war to 1947, and the third one was to cover contemporary India, that is after independence. It is a big task.

PKS: While being cool ironical exposures of arbitrary power structures including patriarchy your novels also appear to be sagas of strength of women. How do you view women in post-independence

India and also the contribution of women writers?

KS: There can be no denying the fact that in spite of gender politics a substantial body of women's writing has emerged out of the feminine literary vision. There are now women writers in almost all Indian languages that are equal to men of letters. We know that literature is a great deal more than mere literature. It has an invisible load of intellectual politics.

Coming to woman, it is Indian democracy that has recognized and given the Indian woman the value of being a citizen. It is a great value indeed, and has enabled her to carry her card of identity with dignity.

It is for scholars and critics to examine women's texts. I can only say that as a writer who happens to be a woman I did contribute something vital in that direction. I tried to remove inadequacies from the persecuted, sheltered woman's language and created the image of a new, independent woman in my narrative and dialogue. We have reasons to believe that the Indian woman today is not obsessed by the traditional image of the woman generated by men. She is moving away from emotional dependency and making all efforts to be economically free and independent. Her exposure to a wider world has diffused her typical domestic attitude to life, work and family. Being in profession has not lessened her concern for relatedness to the institution of family. In fact, she is responding to change with vigour and enthusiasm. She has realized that if she continues with the traditional, one-track role of woman - 'I am as you desire me to be' - it is not really in the interest of one's identity. Preserving one's right to become what one potentially is, is the right of all human beings - whether men or women.

KRISHNA SOBTI, renowned Hindi novelist and author of several books including *Zindaginama* (1979), *Dilo Danish* (1993), *Mitro Marjani* (1956) and *Dar se Bichhuri* (1968), is currently a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. PANKAJ K. SINGH is a Reader in English Literature at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla. This conversation took place in October 1997.