

## Book Reviews

Shormishtha Panja, Shirshendu Chakrabarti, Christel R. Devadawson, eds., *Word, Image, and Text: Studies in Literary and Visual Culture*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, pp. ix + 176. Price not mentioned

Let me begin by saying that it has been a great pleasure reading and poring over this substantial volume of essays. The book is marked by a wide innovative and comprehensive scholarship, interdisciplinary rigour and what is important to me, a readable presentational style yielding precise interpretations of texts, images and objects. Besides, the range of topics the volume covers, as also the variety of photographs and paintings, enhance its provenance many fold manifold. Unfortunately, one can't say even half as much about the general run of interdisciplinary papers one often hears at seminars in India. In that sense too the present volume is a welcome departure and a valuable addition to the current debates on literary and visual culture.

### I

The purpose of this volume can be summed up in the words of one of its editors, Shormishtha Panja: "to see if one can evolve a common vocabulary to talk of word and image" (p.8). From Plato down to the impressionist artists, painting and poetry, word and image have been defined as separate and distinct, though in actual interpretations of literary and visual texts this separation gets blurred. We speak of Hardy as a visual novelist and of Virginia Woolf as the most painterly of the modernist writers. We also speak of 'narrative' in painting (as in our reading of *Guernica*). Wylie Sypher defines 'baroque' painting and architecture as a *movement*, 'in a great imagined space'<sup>1</sup> and Joseph Frank in a famous 1941 essay finds 'spatial form' in much modern literature. We have action painting in which 'narrative progression' yields an epiphany<sup>2</sup> and we have examples of paintings that provide continuity to characters in fiction (as does

Holbein to Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* or Mona Lisa in Huxley's 'Giaconda Smile'.

In spite of Horace, Laocoon, Plato and Sidney, it has not been possible in practice to find a distinct vocabulary to designate the visual and verbal arts. In our interpretations of literary and visual texts (and cinematic texts too), we use terms such as 'depiction', 'rendering', 'narrating' interchangeably without experiencing any discomfort. All this goes to show that generic demarcations between painting and literature are not rigid or immutable and specific vocabularies for specific art forms, even if possible, need not hamper meaningful interaction between them. After all how does one differentiate between Dr Johnson describing Loch Ness in his Scottish tour with Boswell and the Caucasian scene with which Lermontov introduces his novel *A Hero of Our Time* (1839)? As it is, they could both be describing a work of visual art, such is the evocative power with which the scenes are rendered. Both scenes are 'framed' into what could be called, for want of better terms, spatial perspectives. There are numerous such instances in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European novel (the agricultural fair in *Madam Bovary* comes to mind) in which spatial painterly frames encompass narrative progression.

There is also a tendency among literary and art historians to speak of the arts in terms of blanket categorizations such as gothic, mannerist, baroque and other labels. In such categorizations verbal and literary texts share the same traits. Such categorizations present the development of both literary and plastic arts under the aegis of a dominating style. It is in this sense that Arnold Hauser, the Marxist art historian, sees the mannerist architecture and the poetry of John Donne and Marvell as deriving from the same stylistic canon of anti-classicism. Describing what constitutes mannerism in painting and architecture, Hauser suggests that "Donne is undoubtedly not only one of the most characteristic poets of his age, but also intellectually one of the liveliest representatives of mannerism, though certainly not one

of the those with whom the whole movement's claim to intellectual significance must stand or fall."<sup>3</sup> With its wealth of imagery and metaphor, the mannerist literary style, like the mannerist architectural style 'indulges in associations' of diverse kinds.<sup>4</sup> Another Marxist art historian Frederick Antal studies Florentine painting under the rubrics of classicism and romanticism. And in the third volume of his monumental biography of Hogarth Ronald Paulson sees parallels between the artist and the novelist Fielding.<sup>5</sup>

Antal and Hauser go beyond styles and trace their evolution to a variety of socio-historical factors. Hauser's readings of Cervantes, Proust and Kafka, as also of cubism take into their ambit the social forces that brought forth their distinctive styles. A recent literary critic Peter Brooks reads the paintings of Courbet and the nineteenth century European realist fiction as representative of a world-view dominated by the success of bourgeois rationality.<sup>6</sup> Wylie Sypher looks at Dubuffet's work as a way of taking painting 'back to zero' and sees a close link with the French Nouveau Roman. Both, according to Sypher, are products of what Ortega called the dehumanization of art in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>7</sup> The theme of alienation that Hauser saw in mannerist art of the Renaissance is rediscovered by Sypher in the paintings and literature of our own time.

Literary and visual texts, taken as part of a society's culture, are expressions of a world-view, a collective consciousness that is also a trans-individual subject and answers to culture's needs and aspirations. These texts are embedded in ideologies and assumptions that, even though they belong to individual artists, in many ways encode the consciousness of a class or a community. As John Barrell suggests in his study of the English art, the notion of the picturesque, for instance, has a class basis, an ideological content that lifts it above a merely idiosyncratic expression of an individual mind. As much as being individual productions texts, both visual and literary, are reflective of the *Zeitgeist*. They are involved in the ideological mores of the time, sometimes without knowing it. Quite a few essays in this collection are grounded in such a conception of word and image. As the introduction to the volume suggests, 'poetry and painting enter the arena as rivals and as allies, the points of comparison being mimesis, invention and humanism' (p.7) or, one might justifiably add, ideology or world-view.

## II

In essays by Panja, Sillars and Chakrabarti paintings and poetry are studied in close approximation to each other.

Written with characteristic flair, these essays succeed in maintaining a scholarly scruple and avoid falling into the trap of 'periodism and collectivism' (Gombrich's phrase). Shormishtha Panja's essay 'Titian's *poesie* and Shakespeare's pictures' is rich in detail and acute in critical analysis without being dogmatic about its subject which is to relate Titian's *favoles* and Shakespeare's 'Rape of Lucrece' and 'Venus and Adonis'. She sees a convergence between the two in 'that they do not condemn Venus associated with physicality and procreation' (p.15). Panja's interest in studying Shakespeare and Titian together leads her to ask 'how does visual image encompass narrative free rather than freeze time?' (p.26). She answers this question implicitly by taking a detour via Panofsky to Homer's depiction of the shield of Achilles 'that also tells stories' (p.29)—a detour which allows her to gloss over the differences between narrative and the freeze-frame. Her essays very judiciously and skillfully demonstrate how difficult it is to maintain clear boundaries between genres.

Stuart Sillars' essay 'Image, Word and Authority in Early Modern Frontispiece' establishes a link between the Venetian statecraft to Palladio's designing a triumphal arch. Triumphal arches made political statements. They lent authority and a sense of power to the ruling king. As Sillars puts it, 'the development of the triumphal arch as an elite form expressive of rule and power, the use of its geometrical structures offered an ideal way of imposing the power of the book as a prestigious cultural object'. Sillars relates the figures on the triumphal arches to the special designs of book titles which similarly initiate an entry into 'arcane secrets' of the book (p.18). Sillars fruitfully illustrates his argument by quoting Michael Drayton's 'Polyobliion'. Another instance of this correlation (not mentioned by Sillars) could be the 'barge she sat in' scene from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

One might supplement Sillars' perceptive presentation of the role of the frontispiece by drawing attention to another aspect of the engravings as illustrated by the Pillars of Hercules. The frontispiece in Bacon's *Novum Organum* shows Odysseus outside the pillars against the injunction *ne plus ultra* (not any further). Yet, Homer and Dante show their hero transgressing the injunction, thereby extending the frontiers of human knowledge. It is not for nothing that classical and modern scholars have regarded the Greek hero as the first imperialist out to colonise the world.

In a closely argued essay 'Between Retrospect and Prospect: The Landscape Painting of Claude Lorraine' Shirshendu Chakrabarti analyses the link between Claude Lorraine and the poetry of 'Epicurean retirement in the seventeenth century' (p.86). He sees in this link a universal

harmony, an attempt to recover the classical canons of order, regularity and serenity Öagainst the tortured irregularity of the baroque'(p.85). Claude and Poussin offer models of the happy rural seat (consider Milton's L'allegro and Il Penseroso or Pope's 'Windsor Forest' and Denham's 'Cooper's Hill') in as much as they exclude physical labour or any other intrusions of real life into their imaginary utopias. As Chakrabarti observes after meticulously analyzing Claude's paintings, the painter jettisoned the baggage of symbolism and allegory to present a scene of rural simplicity and charm.

The special merit of the analysis lies in Chakrabarti's refusal to fit Claude into the straitjacket of the 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic, particularly the Virgilian aesthetic of the picturesque. Intimating, though not explicitly stating it, he rehearses the later debate on the picturesque and the sublime that dominated the discussion of romanticism in the next century. By bringing in Salvatore Rosa's representation of the savage, the essay prepares the ground for the later understanding of the gothic, and the 'tortured irregularity of the baroque'. (p.88). As Raymond Williams notes in his *The Country and the City*, the rapidly expanding and changing city was to put paid to the manufactured 'felicities' of the happy rural seat.<sup>8</sup> Rosa seems to have had his counterpart in James Thomson who foresaw 'the sons of riot flow Öto swift destruction'.

Despite its Latinate title and occasional convoluted style, Davinder Mohini Ahuja's essay on Bruegel's paintings and Rabelais' Garguanta offers some suggestive insights into the methods of the two artists. In the event it makes a statement about the 'tension in Renaissance literature between its attractions to a past representing the fullness of original truth and its resistance to that past in the face of puzzling historical contingency' (p.67), between its 'adagia' and its 'aporia'. Ahuja reads this insight into what she believes to be the utilization of paradox by both the novelist and the painter. In Rabelais the grotesque body, to use Bakhtin's term, is taken over in the Thelme Abbey scene by its rigid Epicureanism, bringing the 'tropical exotica and the courtly practice' as satirical counterpoints. In Bruegel too there is a gap between the overt meaning and what is hidden, between the fecundity of the bodily detail and what seems to lurk beyond and beneath it. Ahuja extends this paradox to the use of language by the painter and the novelist. Rabelais' incestuous linguistic outpouring matches Bruegel's presentation of ziguratic Babel as both a total confusion of absolute determinate meanings and a utopian throwback to the symmetrical order typified by the tower's structure.(in the painting 'Tower of Babel').

While the parallels drawn by Ahuja make good sense, there is one other thing to consider, namely, the sense of

indifference to tragedy in Bruegel and the sheer delight that Rabelais takes in his linguistic saturnalia. In his poem 'Musée de Beaux Arts' Auden suggests the indifference of the foregrounded people in the painting 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' to the drowning of the mythical figure. Similarly there is also the possibility that Rabelais indulges his language deformations for their own sake and not with intentions of satire and parody.

Megha Anwer's essay 'Picturing Power: Politics of the Image in Revolutionary France' is the one contribution that takes a popular-culture approach to the revolution. She draws attention to the desacralisation of the Kingly body in current diatribes culminating in the ultimate ritual of decapitation. In the archival material Anwer refers to, she finds evidence of the popular contempt for the Royals that makes it easier to execute them in order for the new era be ushered in. ( In this respect Jacques-Louis David's paintings are significant). The French Revolution was conceptualized through symbols and rituals and it is important that one understands their significance. Anwer provides enough evidence to suggest that the prevailing iconology managed to insinuate the abstract ideals of the revolution into popular imagination. The figure of Liberty has a paradoxical presence in the popular imagination (as in Victor Hugo's novel *Ninety Three* ). Anwer explains this by saying 'the king represented political tyranny'. The feminine figure of Liberty would provide an antithesis to the patriarchic monarchy, even though Robespierre discarded this figure for Hercules (p.96) who in turn was dethroned for a more caring mother figure. The popular paintings and sketches illustrate this phenomenon in full measure.<sup>9</sup>

In one of the shortest and most focused of essays in this collection, 'Black-and White and Shades of Grey: Lockwood Kipling's illustrations of India', Cristel R.Devadawson brings to the fore the strategies adopted by the colonial power to popularise their rule in India. A successful way to achieve this was to make 'folktales valuable to adult researcher' with interest in the empire. (p.115). To that ends Flora Anne Steele wrote the text of 'Tales of Panjab' and Lockwood Kipling drew line drawings and calligraphic images to accompany it. But these were not innocent exercises, asserts Devidawson, but were geared to create a topological hierarchy of the powerful and the powerless in the empire (also present in the laying out of Mughal gardens, as shown in the paper by Maria Antonia Escayol, pp.48-65). In other words through Kipling's illustrations to the anthropological folktales, the potent presence of the imperial hand, the guide was reiterated. As Devidawson unflinchingly makes clear, animal fable becomes an allegory of empire.

## III

I have chosen to treat some of the essays in this collection more extensively than others for two reasons: one, they more than others are written within the defined ambit of the title of this book. Two, and this is more to my purpose, they are at a definite angle from the conventional treatment of the subjects and could open up fresh inquiries. But it does not mean I see no merit in other essays. There is reasoned argument in them and a palpable positive direction that appeals to discerning readers. At least one essay, by Loris Button on time in visual and literary autobiography, makes me think again about how time is treated in autobiographies and how language, both visual and literary, offers the continuity in time that autobiographies by their very nature encompass. The essay reminds me of S.H Vatsyayan, whose novel *Shekar: Ek Jivani* is regarded as a fictional autobiography, ruminating as follows in an unjustly neglected series of lectures titled *A Sense of Time*.

I am simply a sack puffed out with air,  
Tied at the mouth with ageing,  
And promised to death  
And yet there's this other thing, this love. . .  
This child of an instant can toss aside,  
As if in play. Time's stunning hammer<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style*, New York: Garden City, 1955, p.212.
2. See Mehaly Vajda, 'Aesthetic Judgment in Painting' in Heller and Fehrer, *Reconstructing Aesthetics*. Oxford, 1986, p.68.
3. Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism*, Vol. I Text, London, 1965, pp.42-43.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
5. Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: Art and Politics 1750-1764*, New Brunswick, 1993, pp.30-31.
6. See Peter Brooks, *The Realist Vision*, New Haven, 2005.
7. Wylie Sypher, *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*: New York: Vintage Books, 1962, pp. 110-138.
8. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London, 1973, p.142.
9. For further discussion, see Ernst Gombrich, 'The Dream of Reason' in *The Uses of Images*, London, 1999, pp.162-183.
10. S. H. Vatsyayan, *Sense of Time: An Exploration of Time in Theory, Experience and Art*, New Delhi: OUP, 1981. p.30.

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Nonica Datta, *Violence, Martyrdom and Partition: A Daughter's Testimony*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, xv + 235 pp. Rs. 695

Oral history in recent years has acquired a salience and acceptance that is both popular and academic and has occupied a recognised place within the scholarly practices of numerous academic disciplines, such as anthropology, education, history, geography, political science and sociology. It is an interesting and developing field which plays a vital role in recovering lost histories while enlarging our understanding of the past. As a methodological tool it is being widely used by feminist historians to contest the subaltern status of women and recover histories that would otherwise remain hidden behind the dominant discourses, thus foregrounding the silenced subjectivities of women. One cannot simply run down subjectivity as not expressing visible facts - the ostensible business of history, because what an informant believes is, indeed, a historical fact as much as what 'really' might have happened. Very often, we find that written documents are only the uncontested transmission of unidentified oral sources. The importance of oral testimony lies not in its strict adherence to a so called fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, memory and desire structure it. Education, religion, politics, local and family traditions and public culture -all influence the way the past is remembered and interpreted.

*Violence, Martyrdom and Partition: A Daughter's Testimony* by Nonica Datta is based on the oral narrative of a woman in colonial Punjab. The narrative invests new meanings into the received accounts of communal divide and the concomitant violence which has shaped much of our colonial and postcolonial history. What is significant about this testament is the view from the other side that violence and retribution can also derive legitimacy from the victims' perspective. One could perhaps concede that the specific acts have their own contexts of validation. Datta has worked extensively outside the archive to recreate account of an individual's history as it emerges in uneasy tension with nation and community, by engaging into debates on women, agency, speech/silence and subaltern interrogations of dominant historiographies. She uses memory as an important tool. Of course, memory comes loaded with ideological and cultural representations of both the present and the past, so that accounts of the past are never 'pure' recall of life as it were. As poststructuralists maintain, accounts of experience cannot give direct access to 'reality' because it is impossible to compose or frame them outside the language and discourses in which we make sense of our

lives. Datta is fully aware of the limitations of her approach and as a historian marshals enough evidence to make up a coherent and credible account.

The author's subject/informant Subhashini (1914-2003) was born to a jat family in Karnal district of Haryana. Her father Phool Chand was a colonial subject in service of the British Raj, as a *patwari*, who, by the time Subhashini was born, had resigned his job to become an itinerant Arya Samaj preacher. This was a time when the Arya Samaj Movement was gaining ground in Punjab. As a child Subhashini was sent off by her father to a *gurukul* to instil in her the spirit of the Arya *dharma*. She attended the *kanya gurukuls* in Delhi and Dehradun, to study the basic teachings of Dayanand Saraswati. She also spent some time in Gandhiji's Sabarmati Ashram, but Gandhi did not impress her much. She was married off, much against her own inclination, though she remained devoted to the ideal of brahmachari and would call herself a *rand-lugai*, a wife leading the life of a widow. By now her father, who was popularly called Bhagat ji, had started a gurukul for boys in Bainswada, and also set up in Khanpur the Kanya Gurukul Pathshala, a gurukul for girls, which Subhashini was asked to supervise. In the meantime there was some communal turmoil when Karamat, a Muslim zamindar had a liaison with a Hindu widow Shringar Devi. The Hindu community was up in arms. Bhagat ji warned the woman but she wouldn't listen, and a jat Hindu zealot Basu Ram kills her in a field with his harvesting tools. This infuriates Karamat who vows revenge on the jat community whose spiritual mentor was Bhagat ji. On the fateful day of 14 August 1942 Bhagat ji was found murdered. Subhashini was convinced that the killers of her father were 'Musalman Rangars.' The banyan tree under which he had died became a sacred spot for the jat community. Phool Chand turned from a *bhagat* into a *shaheed*, a *Hutatma*, in the memory of the local jat community. As far as Subhashini was concerned her father had achieved martyrdom and the day, which was to remain etched in her memory, became the defining moment in her life. From then on this beleaguered daughter became obsessed with the idea of retribution and took upon herself the moral responsibility to devote all her energies for the education of the girls of Kanya Gurukul, Khanpur, the task her father had assigned her.

The Aryan concept with its associations of vigour, conquest and expansion was an important element in the nationalist construction of a sense of identity, and within the framework of the Aryan there was a *virangana* (the heroic woman) ideal that has for a long time presented an alternative paradigm for womanhood. On the one hand it challenges patriarchy, while on the other it asserts

the female potential for power as well as virtue as strong reservoirs against unholy colonial intrusions. Dayanand believed that in the ideal society of the Vedic period women participated in all spheres of public life, and it was the Muslim influence that had corrupted the Hindu social order. Woman was seen as a symbol of purity and the Kanya Gurukul became a model for women's institutions in many provinces.

Subhashini who strongly subscribed to the tenets of the Arya Samaj had fully internalised the role that was assigned for a Hindu woman. It was an activist and militarist path that was obviously very different from the one advocated by Gandhi, who wanted to deploy the 'femininity' of women against the colonial masculinity, but which also saw women as suffering and patient. That is perhaps the reason why Gandhi never appealed to her. For her, women were both victims and agents. If she perceived women as victims, who felt oppressed in the Hindu patriarchal dispensation, she also saw them as agents when it came to defending themselves from the Muslim marauders. Thus the Hindu woman became the agent while Muslim man became the victim. When Swami Shradhdhanand launched his programme of *shuddhi* in the 1920s using the community and nation making discourse he advised the Hindus that the best way to avoid conflict with the Muslims was to take care of their 'own' women and children. Subhashini could never forget that Bhagat ji was killed by a Muslim.

Partition is recorded in the popular imagination as a traumatic event, and of unprecedented communal upheaval and pain which rent asunder the lives of the people and left deep scars on their psyche. The two communities have not yet been able to come to terms with the violent rupture. Yet a narrative such as Subhashini's presents us with a completely different perspective on the partition violence. This is an account that views partition as an occasion for retributive justice, and hence for celebration. For her the moment of reckoning though is not 1947 but 1942 the year of her father's martyrdom. 1947 is celebratory not just because it comes as a culmination of the anti-colonial resistance but because the collateral violence becomes a crucial mechanism for the articulation of subjectivities and communal identities. For Subhashini the partition, even if it comes as a tragedy, accomplishes a certain poetic justice. From her perspective violence is justified because it defends community interests, redresses the wrongs visited on a community, and in the case of pre-emptive violence, protects the community from the potential threats.

*Violence, Martyrdom and Partition* also raises some disturbing issues. The legitimization of violence, retributive

or otherwise, in the wake of partition naturalises and reinforces the pre-existing notions of fundamentally opposed Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities. Datta strictly adheres to her protocol, scrupulously avoiding any normative position while recounting Subhashini's testimony, and skilfully crafts memory as history giving us an account that is credible. In the process she opens up a historian's territory to look at an event from various perspectives, not necessarily congruent.

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M. K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule [Hind Swaraj]: A Centenary Edition with an Introduction by S.R. Mehrotra*, New Delhi & Chicago: Promilla & Co., Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2010, 238 pp. Rs. 495.

*Hind Swaraj* is acknowledged as Mahatma Gandhi's root text, and even in the closing years of his life he expressed his unchanging adherence to the main ideas expressed in it, first published in Gujarati in 1909. However even when he was expressing his continuing faith in its ideas, apparently in the nature of a paradox, in his letter of October 5, 1945 to Jawaharlal Nehru, he made certain qualifications that he did 'not think' to have made in the *Hind Swaraj*, notably in relation to science, and to some extent towards technological innovations like the railways etc. But it should not be imagined that it had been a frozen text with him even earlier. Commencing from the twenties, he had repeatedly clarified on various occasions that he did not visualize a return to rusticity (my choice of a rather unhappy word), and, that he never advocated the rejection of both the principles as well as the spirit of scientific research. But he never deviated from the position that *Hind Swaraj* contained his basic ideas. Writing in the *Harijan*, on October 10, 1939, Gandhi called *Hind Swaraj* - 'that incredibly simple (so simple as to be regarded as foolish) booklet'. It represented an 'attempt to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, poverty and slowness'. It was the 'picture' of an ideal, which he never expected to reach himself, and 'hence cannot expect the nation to do so.' But he nevertheless asserted that, having 're-read it carefully' in the recent past, he wanted readers to know 'that I could not revise a single idea. I had no desire to revise the language.'<sup>1</sup> Since its first publication, *Hind Swaraj* has attracted critical commentary, not to mention the fact of its almost immediate proscription. Gandhian scholarship has variously seen in it, a

fundamental ideological text, a testament of the politics of decolonization, a formative position in the tradition-modernity dialectic, and of course, an alternative economic theory. Commencing with the year 2009, we have witnessed a renewed interest in the work, substantially owing to the fact that it was the centenary of its first publication, although some contemporary trends in world politics have made Gandhi seem much more relevant as a political thinker, than was being acknowledged in the recent decades. However, it is also essential that the text, containing many of Gandhi's key ideas, be also critically interrogated, particularly, his evaluation of some professions, as well as his idea of villages as the necessary embodiments of truth and non violence. This apart from such knotty issues, as those pertaining to its translation, the circumstances of its conception, and the genealogy of its ideas.

S.R. Mehrotra's lengthy and comprehensive Introduction to this centenary edition of *Hind Swaraj*, has addressed itself to some of these issues. Many of these it deals with directly, while some others find indirect elucidation in his tracing of the growth of Gandhi's ideas, done mainly towards the close of the introduction. Regarding the genesis of the text, Mehrotra has adduced Gandhi's statement to establish his contention that the book was written primarily for Pranjivan Mehta. He has also sought to dispel other related 'myths', particularly, that *Hind Swaraj* 'was the outcome of some sudden inspiration'. His argument appears valid that the ideas contained in the text had been forming in Gandhi's mind over a period of time. However, it seems from Gandhi's own testimony that at a certain stage the ideas had 'taken a violent possession' of him. But for me, the appeal of Mehrotra's introduction lies mainly in his highlighting, with his characteristically meticulous scholarship, how Gandhi situated himself in the violence - non violence debate, which forms the core of *Hind Swaraj*. The introduction also mentions in detail Aurobindo's response to Gandhi's "Passive Resistance" in the Transvaal, but unfortunately, it offers no discussion on why Gandhi opted for the term in his English version of *Hind Swaraj*, in spite of the fundamental difference between his and Aurobindo's position on the basic philosophy of passive resistance. It does not seem likely that Gandhi could have been unaware of Aurobindo's definition of the concept, when he was evidently so familiar with the ideas and policies of the 'Extremist Party of India.' In fact Lord Amthill's disquiet at the possibility of passive resistance in the Transvaal being financed by 'sedition-mongers' in India - mentioned in the Gandhi-Amthill correspondence otherwise treated in detail in the introduction - was probably directly

informed by the fact of Aurobindo's unpublished last article on *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance - "Boycott,"* used as an exhibit for the prosecution in the Alipore Conspiracy Case of 1908, in which Aurobindo was an accused. An examination of this dimension would have been welcome. The introduction is marked by a few startling disclosures, such as, that even by 1909 Gandhi was 'not a believer in representative government for India, being fond of saying "that benign autocracy was the best form of Government"'. It is also forthright in linking Gandhi's 'tirade against modern/western civilization' to a 'phobia' imbibed 'during his student days in London'; elsewhere Mehrotra states that Gandhi's 'treatment of "ancient Indian Civilization" was, to say the least, unhistorical, and his call for a return to it unrealistic.' The detailed analysis of the circumstances surrounding the proscription of *Hind Swaraj* constitutes another positive virtue for the comprehensive introduction, although the repetition of the views of the Oriental Translator, mentioned once, could have been avoided. The introduction also probes the English psyche while discussing the validity of satyagraha. Even while having doubts as to the stated conclusion that the success of satyagraha depended substantially on the opponent, it is undoubted that the natural British inclination towards constitutional norms, outlined with such felicity by Mehrotra, left the conclusion of the Gandhian freedom movement much less in doubt, and so much more non-violent than may have been possible in a different political scenario. The closing section with its concise sketch of Gandhi's mind - 'a strange mixture of the Victorian liberal, Indian patriot, philosophical anarchist and simple-lifer' - dismisses through the sketch, the more trite and superficial criticisms of Gandhi's theories in general, and of *Hind Swaraj* in particular. The publication of this Centenary Edition of the *Hind Swaraj* is timely and relevant; its value enhanced by a scholarly and insightful introduction.

#### NOTE

1. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. LXX, New Delhi: Publications Division, 1958-1978, p. 242.

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Sheoraj Singh Bechain, *Mera Bachpan mere Kandhon Par*, New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2009, pp. 422. Rs. 695

Sheoraj Singh Bechain's recently published autobiography, in Hindi, *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par* (My Childhood on My Shoulders) is remarkable in many ways and destined to be placed among the best books in this genre. The writer courageously recounts some of the most painful experiences of his childhood which was full of unimaginable hurdles and hardships. While going through the pages of this voluminous book no one can remain unmoved. Reading page after page one feels the prick of conscience which makes deep bruises on the hearts of the readers, taking the reader into a socio-economic arena which is virtually suffocating. The moment the reader enters into the world of the author the reader is stunned and wonders if this the real state of our much-touted, India Shining? In the book Sheoraj not only describes his childhood with pathos with the sharpest edge of his pen, wielding his pen ed like a knife, he has also pricked the festering boil of social discrimination that persists in our country despite many reformist, constitutional and legislative initiatives

Sheoraj's childhood was a construct of the many interwoven threads of socio-economic disparity, class injustice, caste exploitation, the superstitious ways of rural India, and above all the callous indifference of those whose responsibility it was to eradicate these. The child that Sheoraj looks back towards from his present position has three childhoods mixed in one - first, of a child who has lost his father and is the member of a family that has three blind grandfathers none of whom with sufficient earnings to fill the bellies of the hapless family, the second, of a child who is an untouchable *chamar* by birth and is ostracized by his own caste people because his family still depends on the meagre earnings of the shunned occupation of skinning dead animals, tanning the skins and selling them in nearby markets; and the third, of a child who despite all adverse circumstances cherishes a dream to educate himself. A child in any of these three conditions would find it hard to survive, yet here in Sheoraj's life as a child all the three conditions extended their stranglehold on him.

This child witnesses the tragic death of his father, the only able-bodied earning member of the family at a marriage function at which some people forcibly induce him to consume country liquor as a result of which he contracts poisoning in his stomach dies. The patient cries out to be taken to some hospital but the family elders take him to *ojhas* who treat him with brutal beating intended to exorcise the so-called ghosts that they said had possessed him. As a result death snatches away his



father the child Sheoraj is rendered fatherless.

From this juncture of his life begins a hard journey of survival for his child. Just to earn one square meal a day for himself, he works as a farm labor, as a tanner, as a shoe-mender, as a hotel worker, as a *nimbu* vendor, as a domestic servant and doing many other menial jobs. The people of his own caste who castigate and ostracize his family for eating the flesh of dead animals and living off their remains never suggest or offer any alternative way to make a livelihood. In Sheoraj's own words, "Those days we were the victims of dual contempt. We had no standing among our own caste -fellows and hardly existed for the outside world. For our own *Jatav* people we were *chamar* and for *Telies, Yadav, Baniyas* and *Bamans* we were *chamatta* (a highly derogatory word for *chamars*)."

Carrying the load of utter penury and the legacy of *Chamar*-hood this child tells so many moving stories in the long narrative about his childhood that it would take another four hundred pages to discuss them all. What this child experienced only about thirty years ago and after about thirty years following Indian Independence is a sad commentary on the nature of Indian society, (especially in the countryside) even today, For instance Sheoraj recollects an incident from the village into which his sister was married. Because of heavy rains the village was flooded and the well from which *dalits* took their drinking water was contaminated by filthy waste drained out of the sewer pipes. The people of the lower castes approached the upper caste people whose wells were safe for drinking water but no one gave them even a drop of water. Ultimately and helplessly they had to drink the polluted water resulting in infectious that took many

lives. The writer himself was afflicted with a disease that proved hard to cure.

How this boy pursues his ambition of getting education is a story of both incredible struggle and undying perseverance. His family members, even his mother, do not want him to waste his time on educating himself at a time when his income is much needed to fill their hungry stomachs. His stepfather goes to the extent of beating him for going to school or reading books. However, he, with the moral support of an Arya Samaji teacher who never helps him materially but took some advantage out of him, by demanding services from him, goes on with his study plans and ultimately passes high school. This becomes a turning point in his life.

*Mera Bachman Mere Kandhon Par* is not a simple autobiography of *dalit* writer but is an authentic document of the lives of the most impoverished and deprived sections of India's populations. This book not only questions the traditional exploitative caste structure but also indicts the so-called reformist changes that sometimes prove equally ruthless in making life a living hell for the low-caste people. Those successful folk from the *dalit* community who, with the help of reservations and other affirmative action measures, have acquired respectable positions for themselves behave the same way as their upper caste counterparts. Sheoraj has not shied away from exposing them too.

This book written in a novel style explores the harsh social reality of our times and thus becomes a landmark in the history of Hindi *Dalit* writings in particular and of Hindi literature in general.

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