

Introduction

This issue is devoted to literary works that foreground the community rather than the individual. The individual does not vanish; nor does his or her individuality. But individualism as a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions is not accorded primacy. The choice of the theme was dictated by the fact that, barring some very honourable exceptions, the most significant works in our modern literatures continue to "cling" to the community even while they thoroughly critique it.

The over-pluralised phrasing of the theme – images of communities – may appear awkward, but it correctly draws attention to our multi-community situation. Single communities do figure in some of the essays in this issue, but they are seen in relation to other, often larger, communities. The other essays deal with inter-community relations, tensions and transactions. The communities are freely defined by the contributors themselves so that we have, in addition to those defined along class, religion and region, some that are defined along status or predicament, e.g. child-widows, lovers across the communal barriers, refugees, Indian immigrants in Canada, and the Dalits. This suggests literary works of limited range, but it is often in such "limited" texts that the macrolevel processes, tensions and contradictions find a most lucid expression. To know about a community, as one of the essays suggests, is also to arrive at an understanding of how a nation makes or writes itself. Indeed, to know our nation through its "limited" community texts is sometimes more rewarding than to know it through great Indian novels. A fascinating account of how a marginal community makes an intertextual use of Gandhi's emancipatory discourse by creatively incorporating it within its own communal *tamasa* and *teohar*, Ipshita Chanda's essay on *Dhorai Charit Manas* not only helps us understand better both Gandhi and our people but also holds important lessons for all those who, irrespective of which part of the country they belong to, wish to "reconstruct" the masses into political beings.

"How does a writer write a community?" The basic question is posed by M.G. Vassanji. The answer he provides is based on his own practice as a writer of community fictions. Without in any way diminishing the importance of the community and its history in his fictions, he is clear about his priority which is aesthetic, imaginative, mythic. Bhisham Sahni's emphasis is different, though he is no less committed to his fictional form and pattern. In quite a few essays the opposing pulls of the form and the contingent historical facts upon a writer receive attention. Rupinderjit Saini is intrigued by the "partition novel" compulsively "inventing" an idyllic inter-community ethos before introducing riots, rapes, and killings. She does not quite like

these "inventions" but is right in arguing that in these novels facts are tampered with for the sake of the form.

Together with the community, history is one of the protagonists in the texts discussed in the essays. The community-history interface provides for one of their most valuable aspects, namely their concentration on "the underside of history," as Urvashi Butalia puts it in a recent issue of *Seminar* devoted to the oral history of the Partition. In a number of texts discussed in this issue, it is through marginal people such as refugees, prostitutes and lunatics, poor villagers, British-patronised clerks, simple Muslims utterly bewildered by the rhetoric about Pakistan, and children subjected to tonsure and branded widows that communities are shown interlocked with history.

Perhaps even more than in the portrayal of the community, it is in portraying such marginal sections that a writer takes a political position. This is quite evident in the essays of R.K. Jain, J.K. Nayak and H.S. Mohapatra, Harish Narang, Sudhir Kumar and C. Rajgopal. Being emancipatory, the texts chosen for discussion by both Ayyappa Paniker and B. Chandrika are no less political. And although E.V. Ramakrishnan's essay on modern Malayalam literature does not directly deal with communities, his focus on literary trends such as progressivism, modernism, high modernism and critical modernism should alert us to the fact that all such images are also mediated through the writer's literary stance.

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The groundwork for this journal was begun during the fag end of Professor J.S. Grewal's term as the Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study and during the first few weeks of Professor Mrinal Miri as its new Director. Both wanted it to be comprehensive in its range and inter-disciplinary in its nature. The inaugural issue is less than comprehensive because several of our literatures and several communities are not represented here, although we did solicit contributions on and from all regions of the country. Maybe, a "promised" journal does not inspire as much confidence as a "realised" one does. The appearance of the journal should solve this problem.

J.