

He begins by talking of nomenclature and agrees with Rajkishore that time should come when both the terms *harijan* and *dalit* will fall out of use.

He goes on to say that India needs to put in a direct struggle in the style of Dr Ambedkar as well as Gandhi-like efforts at effecting a change in the psyche of the people. He does not see much hope in BSP politics led by Kanshi Ram and Mayawati as they are more interested in vote bank politics than in the welfare of the masses. Change of religion does not enthuse the author much either as all religions are equally incomplete.

Kunwar Prasoan then praises Om Prakash Valmiki's *Jhoothan* for its depiction of dalit suffering. But he draws attention to Mahashweta's story *Doulati* woven round the daughter of a bonded tribal labourer and says that her depiction of Doulati's sufferings is much grimmer and sadder as she lays bare the sordid details of her exploitation at the hands of her feudal masters.

Kunwar Prasoan however ends on a note of hope with the prognosis that a time will come when dalits will rule the country. But he also knows that for the liberation of dalits to be real, non-dalits need to be liberated too from the sin of oppression.

The slim volume is loaded with new and challenging ideas that have the capacity to shake us to our roots and deserve to be widely read and discussed. It is, however, marred by several printing and other errors which a more careful proof reading could have avoided.

NARESH K. JAIN
Retired Professor of English
University of Delhi.

Between Worlds: Travels Among Mediums, Shamans and Healers, by UMA SINGH, Penguin, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 200+photographs, Rs. 225.

Uma Singh's *Between Worlds* records her experiences among exorcists, spiritualists and faith healers as the sub-title of the book indicates. It would however, be limiting the scope of the work to just one-dimension were we to look at it from the magico-religious angle only, missing out on its other aspects that make it multi-dimensional. *Between Worlds* is, in fact, as esoteric as magic, as full of surprises as a travelogue and as gripping as fiction. It reflects on the socio-religious life of the community, gives valuable insight into ecological truths and offers a sociological and psychological treatise. It is a book you keep down only after you have read it from cover to cover, such is the spell it casts, and such is the rhythmic beauty of its language. It is born not just out of the prying curiosity of an outsider to probe an inner world of inscrutable secrets but because of the deeply felt urge to know, to comprehend and to grapple with a baffling reality whose existence may be doubted but cannot be denied; something that exists between two worlds—the known and the unknown, the natural and the supernatural. And there lies the significance of the title.

Those who happen to know Uma Singh may probably pick up the book with amused disbelief. Here is a Westernized young woman with part of her childhood spent in France, and adult life in cosmopolitan Shimla and metropolitan Delhi, energetically trying to uncover the realm of the ethereal, all agog to undertake the perilous journey not only through the difficult Himalayan

topography but also into the darkness of the unintelligible and inexplicable labyrinthine lanes of the magico-religious. In traversing the threshold of the rational, the solid, the known, the author reveals the basic ethos of Indian worldview, as underneath the Westernized veneer is located the persona who belongs to a culture nurtured in myths, legends and the sublime, and affirms faith in a deep human relationship with the earth—a relationship that comprises elements of mysticism, awe and an appreciation of the sacred in nature.

Between Worlds is based on Singh's research 'dealing with magico-religious beliefs and mythology,' in the Ravi river valley of Chamba, so the blurb on the book tells us. Chamba is the northern-most district of Himachal Pradesh. Though breathtakingly beautiful, it is strewn with intimidating geographical features—deep ravines, narrow eerie gorges, dark ancient forests and inhospitable peaks. The district is rich in history, folklore, myths and legends that form an integral part of the tribal culture. Conducting research on the fiercely guarded mystical practices can be a challenge as well as a dangerous adventure for an outsider to embark upon, both because of personal limitations and the hazards of entering a carefully shielded belief system. Some amount of resistance, suspicion, fear and hostility from the locals/tribals cannot be ruled out. Ms Singh records the few searing questions she encountered despite the active support and presence of the influential persons of Chamba: 'Koi chakkar to nahin hai?' (Is there a catch in it?). Or 'Why are you writing a book?' 'How much money will you get for it?' (pp. 65-64 and 103). She

also faced embarrassing situations when well-wishers, including the Aunts, suspected her motive, believing she had secret personal problems for which she was seeking primitive aid. To begin with, the author enters the precincts with due reverence and humble submission and by the time a reader has read the book half through, he/she tends to appreciate Ms Singh's ability to invert her 'outsider-inside' situation and discern her self-confidence in dealing with the mediums and exorcists on her own.

The book is divided in sixteen chapters of moderate length, each titled appropriately as per its thematic focus. A short introduction and a shorter 'Preface' initiate you into the journey and set the tone; soon with subtle intensity the author begins to unfold a world of the eternal truths disguised as myths, legends and rituals. The symbolic representations speak for themselves as chapter after chapter, newer and more intense experiences are occasioned. There are trance mediums of Shiva, Devi and Hanuman, the exorcists driving away evils spirits, the knowledgeable *daagi* healing with mysterious herbs, the magical pot that could be energized to move with measured certainty to detect a malevolent spell and the "chosen" women who could drink blood of a sacrificial animal out of a slash made in its neck or drive away sickness and evil spells. Apart from these, the book describes the temples, the shrines and the scared spots, like the shrine of Kasse Wali Mata, the goddess of the forest called *Vankhandini*, and the legends associated with them. Uma Singh's descriptions are commanding and evoke the scenes vividly as in the account of her hazardous journey to the shrine of *Vankhandini* undertaken without due

preparations and proper company.

The mediums, *chelas/chelis* and the Matas get their calling from the divine source. Humans cannot will it, nor can they evade it. To be a medium is by no means a simple matter of acting out on the deity's behalf. The experience is painful, uncanny and abstruse, difficult to convey through 'human' language. Theirs is a 'lonely' world and they are often 'akela' or 'bebas' (helpless). The power and vigour acquired during a trance is extremely exhausting; it almost depletes them. Once it is over, the mediums fall down in a heap, fatigued and defenseless. Thereafter they are marginalized and ignored completely, left to recover as best they could, while the congregation continues with its rituals. This, Uma notes with obvious regret, is because of the inherent class and caste structure.

Uma Singh was a witness to some tremendously powerful trance possessions and she describes these in their entire awe-inspiring splendor. 'The Trance at Trilochan Mahadev' is an exceptionally compelling chapter. It has evocative imagery. The long trek through the slippery goat paths, the arrival at the appointed place lit with ominous-looking fire, the dizzying experience of perceiving the trance performance followed by an eerie silence of the mountains as it ends. Then with the break of dawn, one suddenly feels relieved, as if one has emerged out of a sinister cave to the world of light and human contact. Another incident that makes a strong impact relates to the banishment of a spirit called 'Banbir'. It is a spine-chilling experience that leaves the author dumb-struck and the inimitable Mohan Lal Ji, the medium, in a state of dead-alive for almost ten minutes.

The book is saved from being a monotonous and repetitive account of trance and other performances by the author's craft in bringing to life the various obscure practitioners—the bright-eyed Dhinoo Ram, the effervescent Waziroo Ram, the articulate Kishni and the disarmingly candid Nimmo Devi. People like the nostalgic Handa Saheb, the paternal Mohan Lal Ji, the aristocratic Mia Hem Singh and the not-too-brave Miaji, besides a number of women who guide and help her appear endearing as they flit past the pages. Uma has the knack of spotting humour even in the most trying of situations and observing life with tongue-in-the cheek manner but never when she is describing the rites and rituals. Here her tone is reverential. She never rambles, or gloats over; rather her expressions have the quality of a mountain stream—quick, short movement, sparkling through sunny passes with sudden plunge under-terrain only to rise up again like 'Kubla Khan's' scared river. The natural and the supernatural, the real and the unreal are intermingled with dexterity.

The hold of the magico-religious practices on the psyche of the people of Chamba is not to be scoffed at; in it is hidden the eco-spiritual wisdom of the ancients. The manner in which the simple Daagi worships the herbs before he plucks it delicately to heal a patient is reminiscent of the animistic practices laid down in the Vedas. Stating the urgency to preserve the rich oral culture of the region, Uma Singh categorically warns in her 'Introduction' that breakdown of the community's 'socio-religious systems would cause a fatal psychic injury' and that 'the dangers of alienating mankind from earth's other forms should not be underestimated' (p. xiii). To sustain

and preserve the 'finely wrought cultural fibre' she has made this laudable effort.

Like the journey undertaken by the mediums, *Between Worlds* is the author's voyage in time and space – mentally. She has tried to convey her experiences as best she could but as the trance mediums often assert, it is not possible to transcribe the experience in mundane idiom.

Published by Penguin, the book is a valuable addition to the library of any book-lover. It is authenticated by photographs and has a useful glossary at the end. However, there are a couple of printing errors (eg. P. 51 On for One; p. 136 'Hema's began her whispered introduction' for 'Hema began' and bare for bear), which one wishes were not there in a Penguin production.

DR. USHA BANDE
Former Fellow, IIAS, Shimla.

Unity in Diversity: The Indian Experience in Nation-Building, by MS GORE, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2002, pp. 246, Rs. 475.

This collection of eleven essays by Professor MS Gore are either commemorative lectures or seminar papers given by him between 1986 and 1995. These were delivered or presented at different times, different places, on various occasions and for different audiences. Given the compulsions of the situations and constraints of such addresses, it is difficult to find one continuous stream of argument in these essays. Nevertheless, since the author is singular, it is possible to identify not one but a few streams or some issues that are central to his thought.

Gore himself points out: 'Most of the papers in this collection deal with one or more of the problems that

our society is facing in consolidating itself into a nation and in living up to the ideals of democracy, secularism and social equality.' (p. 8) This pursuit in itself is laudable since it comes from a senior sociologist who has reflected on those issues that are central to contemporary India. More importantly, unlike the sociologists of his times who believed in value neutrality and abstained from giving prescriptions or solutions, Gore is both critical of the societal afflictions and also provides his own prescriptions for correcting the wrongs.

The book opens with 'The contemporary social situation' and ends with 'India's unity in diversity' traversing through discussions on Nehru and Gandhi, Indian nationalism, ethnicity, secularism, social transformation and social development. All these issues are central to our polity and society that is trying to consolidate itself into a modern nation-state in its postcolonial phase.

One issue that stares glaringly at the reader is the range and intensity of problems that the Indian nation has developed over the last fifty years. No doubt, as Gore points out, that there are numerous achievements too to our credit, like sustaining democracy and avoiding authoritarian rule, increasing development of science and technology and manpower, raising literacy and certain other indices of modernization. But these achievements are belittled in the face of communal riots, social polarization, increasing violence, in fact 'breakdown in the process of social development'. He puts blame not only on the politician and the government, but 'the entire elite in our society—the politician, the bureaucrat, the professional, the financier, the industrialist and the rich cultivator—must share that

responsibility.' (p.22)

What is most striking about this collection is Gore's comments on the very title of this book that makes the last chapter. He writes: 'our claim to having achieved unity in diversity is at best patchy.' (p.238) 'What we have succeeded in achieving is a state without a religion but not a political system which is insulated from religion. We have not been able to secularize our social life.' And finally, 'Unity in diversity thus is not a contemporary social reality.' (p. 239) This remark to my mind is to be taken seriously in the light of the post Godhra political developments in Gujarat especially when the Hindutva is trumpeting the rich cultural heritage of 'unity in diversity' and Hindu pluralism.

When Gore discusses Gandhi and Nehru in two chapters each, I believe this speaks of his underlying streak that addresses to the problems of Indian society and polity. If I may say that when reference is made to Gandhi he means by it that politicians in particular and other elite too should practice idealism, high morality, personal integrity, simple and clean life and service to others. If we are able to produce such statesmen like we had before independence, only then we may see India developing and prospering.

And, when he refers to Nehru and quotes at length from his *Discovery of India* to throw light on his concept of nationalism, he seems to argue for a strong nation-state with a strong centre which is what Nehru stood for. Gore not only supports Nehru's viewpoint but also criticizes D.L. Sheth for questioning the utility of the very concept of a nation-state as the social-political model for India. He argues: 'If Indian leaders had opted for a loosely knit and weak centre with greater autonomy for the