

bhadraloks.

The essay 'Modernity at Home' is yet another attempt to explore modernity in another area of Bengali living - the emergence of the modern drawing room in upper class Bengali homes (with particular reference to the Tagore household) with the adoption Western décor and furniture, but indigenized by the use of native motifs and designs in curtains and cushions. What is missing in her essay however, is the domesticated modernity in the cramped one or two-roomed rented Bengali middle class households in apartments (known as *flat-baris*) that had emerged in Calcutta by the 1930s. In these households, the bedroom was turned into a drawing room in the evenings, with the newly introduced modern gadgets like the radio and gramophone entertaining both the residents and their guests, who shared the beds and a few skeletal wooden chairs that adorned those households - with of course the ubiquitous tea (which Chaudhuri mentions as another sign of westernized modernity) being served at every odd hour !

In the next essay 'Refashioning Milton', Chaudhuri juxtaposes the modernist reading of Milton with that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali poet Madhusudan Dutta in the present day, when comparisons are often sought to be made between Milton's tendency to use Latinate neologisms and Madhusudan's import of Sanskrit words in his poetry as a desire to return to the indigenous classical. Chaudhuri however appears to ignore Madhusudan's simultaneous forays in Bengali dramatic literature with his farces (*Ekei ki boley Sabhyata* and *Buro Shaliker Ghare Rmo*) where he lets loose a delightful flood of raw colloquial Bengali dialogue, as distinct from the artificial and heavily Sanskritized poetry of his *Meghnadbadh Kavya*. In fact, modern critics should explore this creative side of Madhusudan's as a social satirist (also expressed in his numerous letters), and the incomplete possibilities of his development as a modern playwright of contemporary Bengal. Another minor point. Madhusudan was not always "feted by educated Bengalis across the spectrum" as assumed by the author. One of his contemporaries, a minor poetaster, lampooned his epic poem by bringing out a full-fledged parody called *Chhuchhundar-badh Kavya* (meaning - an epic on the assassination of the mole), which was a popular hit in Calcutta in those days !

But it is the last essay ('The Flute, Gerontion, and Subalternist Misreadings of Tagore'), where Chaudhuri raises the more fundamental question of the controversial relationship between history and literature in both modern history writing and literary output. She picks up a particular text - Rabindranath's essay *Sahitye Aitihāsikata* (written in 1941) - and the numerous debates,

additions and alterations that surrounded it during his lifetime, followed by (mis)interpretations by the modern group of subaltern historians. She crosses swords with the doyen of this group, Ranajit Guha, expressing misgivings with his reading (in his 'History at the Limit of World History' - 2002) of Tagore's original thesis. Guha, she argues, misinterprets what was Tagore's main thrust against literary critics whom the poet accused of "preoccupation with history and realism," as a wholesale attack on academic historians in general. Taking a cue from this mistaken understanding of Tagore's viewpoint, Guha according to Chaudhuri, blurs "the line separating history writing from literary creativity, demanding that history be written in literary terms." Chaudhuri, on the contrary, feels that Tagore was "not really bothered about historians or the discipline of history and how it deals with facts; he is concerned, rather, about the business of creative writing and how that should deal with facts." Chaudhuri thus harks back to the old arguments about authenticity in the representation of past historical facts as well as the contemporary surrounding reality in literature - an issue that boggles the minds of both historians and creative writers.

An extremely well-researched book, sparkled by light-hearted narrations, Chaudhuri's work raises major issues relating to the tensions between modernity (derived from the West) and indigenous traditions in colonial Bengal. At the end of it, those searching for an authentic pure native culture will be disappointed. Whether you call it 'contaminated' (in a pejorative sense), or 'cosmopolitanized' (in an appreciative sense) by the West, modern Bengali language and literature had been a product of traditional acculturation of various streams - ancient tribal animist, later Buddhist and Sanskrit, followed by Persian-Arabic-Urdu influences, to end with the entry of the modern European. Modernity in Bengal thus drew its inspiration from both a hoary indigenous past and a complex corpus of European history.

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Rizwan Qaiser, *Resisting Colonialism and Communal Politics: Maulana Azad and the Making of the Indian Nation*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2011, pp. 374. ₹ 950.00.

From time to time nationalist political processes and the individuals in its centre have interested historians, scholars and writers into interpreting and analysing the significance of their historicity. Nonetheless, it is

important to mention that historical processes are greatly shaped by idiosyncrasies and ideological trajectories of individual(s). The narrative of India's political struggle is replete with many such examples, though there are several that have not yet been examined, thus circumscribing the scope of historical narration. The book under review attempts to address such issues to highlight the achievements of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the leader who always remained in the vanguard of India's struggle for freedom shaping nation's destiny in pre and post colonial eras.

The inexplicable silence on the eventful political life of Azad has prompted Rizwan Qaiser to produce this book. At the very outset, the author objectively discusses the strengths and weaknesses of earlier works on Azad including those by Mahadev Desai, A.B.Rajput, Ian Henderon Douglas, V.N.Datta and Syeda Saiyidain Hamid to name a few (25-31).

In this seminal work Qaiser attempts an authentic, critical and insightful assessment of Azad's political career through one of the most eventful phases of Indian history spanning several years of tireless resistance to colonialism and communalism. For nearly six decades of his life, Azad waged relentless and uncompromising resistance to communal and colonial forces, which is well documented by the author. Through this narrative, Azad emerges as a versatile figure, a humanist, a Muslim, an intellectual, a nationalist and more importantly as a nation builder.

Salience of Maulana Azad's political articulation acquires prominence since he encouraged Muslims' participation in the freedom movement even before it had assumed a nationalist manifestation after Mahatma Gandhi launched the Champaran Satyagraha (Bihar) in 1917 and later the Non-Cooperation Movement in early 1920s. Involvement with *Yugantar* in the heyday of anti-Bengal partition agitation of 1905 was Azad's initial tryst with nationalism. But what launched him frontally was *Al-Hilal*, a journal that Azad initiated in 1912 with commitment to arouse consciousness within his community on political and religious issues, followed by another journal the *Al-Balagh*. These journals were Azad's mouthpieces through which he addressed all major upheavals impacting national and communal lives including pan Islamism and colonialism successfully establishing 'political dialogue' with the community while himself scornfully earning epithets of "*well informed*" yet "*dangerous*" man (54) from the British. It is argued by the author that Azad invoked the authority of religion in order to galvanise Muslims' political action against colonial oppression and in articulating such a resistance, maintained his focus on Hindu-Muslim unity.

Perhaps, this model brings him closer to Gandhian concerns as the latter's emphasis on religion was to invoke popular participation yet was deeply concerned about the unity of the two communities.

In the years 1923-34 Azad was increasingly drawn toward the Indian National Congress. It was also the time when the larger phenomenon of Gandhian impact became evident, yet ironically communalism too manifested itself in its ugliest form. After the collapse of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement alliance, it was leaders like Maulana Azad who devoted themselves to sustaining the cause of composite culture keeping optimism of the people alive in the national movement that had suffered a jolt after the Chauri-Chaura incidence of 1922. In such vitiated scenario, Azad chose the path of 'integrative politics' that was also to serve as a political tool for the next crucial decades of political struggle directed at instilling confidence among Muslims in larger nationalist framework, particularly in the Congress. The author maintains that the challenges of communal incidences, riots, shuddhi-sangathan, the Rangeela Rasool controversy (118-19) posed serious impediments to Azad's framework of integrative politics. Widening communal polarisation coupled with declining power sharing were alienating Muslims from the Congress and Qaiser argues that these unaddressed issues made the viability of Muslim leadership vulnerable in the eyes of its own community that also circumscribed performance of Azad to his best. Azad's endeavour to seek Muslim support for the Congress by founding the All India Nationalist Muslim Party in 1929 too failed to generate the desired result. The nationalist Muslims were pushed to the margins and felt alienated that weakened the nationalist force in the wake of which Muslim League became active and relatively strong. It is argued by the author that even as Azad emerged on the political horizon as leader of the Muslims to soon acquire national prominence, paradoxically he found the grounds shrinking within his own community as his rank in Congress grew and as freedom movement progressed. This paradox is succinctly encapsulated by Qaiser in the following words "*the greatest tragedy in his (Azad's) life was that at the dawn of independence, politically he did not have a following in his own community as well among his countrymen*" (265). Insensitivities shown by Congress in safeguarding issues of identity and culture, inability to check the growing incidence of communal riots, dwindling fortunes and failure to accommodate Muslims within its gamut of power structure were some very basic reasons responsible for lack of confidence of Muslims in the Congress and its leaders. Intricacies of challenges and possibilities experienced by Muslims in the process of

accommodation and assimilation are explored through exposition on Azad's political trajectories by the author.

The argument that partition was unavoidable given that in the 1946 election Muslims were overwhelmingly in favour of creation of Pakistan can be contested in the light of the assertion that success in any election cannot be treated a final verdict in justifying such momentous decision as partition. During the time, voting right was based on the considerations of property, education and taxation that enabled only those who successfully fulfilled the above criteria to vote in elections and hence election result did not represent the sentiments of the majority that actually stood disfranchised. It is no less than a mere hastily drawn conclusion in justifying the decision of India's partition by disproportionately placing it in the context of Muslim League's electoral success in 1946. It can be further argued as how can a handful votes validate partition that determined fate of millions who got trapped in the traumatic holocaust for no fault of theirs? Responses of secular individuals, religio-cultural institutions and regional tilts that ran counter to partition are ignored when the rubric of Muslims' monolithic support is employed in defence of partition. Creation of Pakistan was not the result of consensus of a community but more a product of intransigence of M.A. Jinnah and Congress' acquiescence to the same with colonial representatives hastening the process. Had the Congress put up a tough resistance to the demand of partition by Muslim League, the result could have been different.

Also, partition failed to check the lurking dangers (Noakhali in Bengal and regions in Bihar were already in the grip of gory communal conflagration in 1946) and violence in all forms, that human mind could hardly fathom, were unleashed on innocent minorities, women and children across the borders without the slightest sense of remorse or repentance by its perpetrators. A.G. Noorani bemoaned that "*the partition of the sub-continent of India deserves to rank as one of the 10 great tragedies in recorded human history... it is not only the loss of human lives and property but the near-fatal blows on cultures that mark its distinctively hideous features*"<sup>1</sup> It can be argued that for India, being a repository of composite culture, communalism proved more damaging than colonialism, though it is another fact that the latter furnished fertile ground for the growth of the former. The venom of communalism which has been spreading over the years has caused irreparable damage to the psyche of the people. Partition caused untold misery to the people, leading to insane killing of innocents, displacement of millions, uncertain fate of *Muhajirs* (migrants) and minorities across the border, problems of rehabilitation, relocation and repatriation, Bangladesh crisis, Indo-

Pakistan wars and the Kashmir issue.

Qaiser laments that Maulana Azad's resistance to partition has not been objectively and justifiably assessed and historians have considered the partition of India as a failure and defeat for Azad. Qaiser argues that '*Azad never wavered in his conviction that religion could ever become the basis of formation of nationhood and therefore communities would have to be coalesced into a single nationhood*' (352). Ever strident in contesting colonialism and communalism, the unity factor had always been the major concern for Azad that he valued even more than independence of the country. Azad had once exhorted that "*even if an angel were to descend from the high heavens and proclaim from the heights of the Qutub Minar to abandon the mission of Hindu-Muslim unity and swaraj will be awarded within twenty-four hours, I will refuse the swaraj. The delay of swaraj will affect Indians but the end of our unity will be the loss of the entire human race.*"<sup>2</sup> Such proclivities of secular leaders particularly Muslims were definitely ignored by the Congress at the time when decision to partition was taken. Qaiser not only makes a breakthrough in this regard but his work revisits the issue of partition, analysing the basis of its logic and the aftermath.

Post partition, Maulana Azad provided the much needed healing touch by his constructive role in shaping India's future. Indian secularism is ingrained in its cultural strands and perhaps it was this experience that Maulana Azad was able to harp upon in the interest of the nation. As Minister of Education, Azad initiated several educational, scientific and cultural programmes and institutions that are discussed elaborately in the last chapter of the book. Qaiser particularly asserts that Azad accomplished the task of ushering India into realm of educational, scientific and cultural advancements despite the fact that he never had the privilege of attaining formal education himself nor had training in the art of setting up such institutions. The author rightly observes that "*these institutions were product of Azad's imaginative anticipation, visualisation and planning and was ably supported by men of standing like S.S. Bhatnagar, Humayun Kabir, Dr. Tarachand and K.G. Saiyidain*" (327). The setting up of Sahitya Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, IIT Kharagpur, the University Grants Commission, Visva Bharati earning status of Central University are some landmark testimonies of Azad's commitment and service in the fields of education and culture.

Rizwan Qaiser's book on Maulana Azad is well researched and comprehensively documented. The author deals with several dimensions of the personality and political career of Azad making it a mandatory reading for students of modern Indian history and culture



and in particular for those interested in historical developments in South Asia. A number of sources have been provided in Urdu bringing to light details of Azad's political career dispelling several myths and ascribing Maulana Azad his rightful place in history.

## NOTES

1. A.G. Noorani, 'Horrors of Partition' in *Frontline*, 9 March 2012, p.73.
2. Shabi Ahmad, 'The Making of a Nationalist Muslim: A Study of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and the Foundation of his Political Views' in Mahavir Singh (ed.), *Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: Profile of a Nationalist*, Kolkata: MAKAIAS, 2003, p. 90.

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*Survival and Other Stories: Bangla Dalit Fiction in Translation*, edited by Sankar Prasad Singha and Indranil Acharya. Hyderabad/Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012, pp.180.

Alongside the slogans proclaiming 'shining India,' 'incredible India' and the like, there exists an India that defies these adjectives. A large chunk of India living under the flyovers of our glittering metropolises or in ghettos or along the railway lines or in *bastis* in villages is what we tend not to take note of. However, those who live on the margins have finally found their voice and call for our attention. And once we hear them, we are bound to realize that their legitimate cry cannot be questioned; they may express themselves bitterly or mildly, with a whimper or with a roar, with rage or with anguish but they *do* have the potential to make us aware. This writing coming from the oppressed sections of the society has made its presence felt in a way which no academician or litterateur can afford to ignore. The book under review *Survival and Other Stories: Bangla Dalit Fiction in Translation* contains short stories providing "a wide spectrum of issues and concerns that dalit people encounter in contemporary social interactions," to quote the editors.

The eighteen stories that make the anthology come from divergent sections of the dalit society of Bengal – small cultivators, fishermen, landless farmers, women, the untouchables and their sub-castes, the nomads and the Hindu migrants from Bangladesh. These are the

voices of dissent and resistance coming from those living on the edge. The word dalit here does not refer only to those listed under Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes; it has been used in its broader sense to include all those who are 'crushed' or 'ground'; all those who are culturally marginalized, economically exploited and politically oppressed.

The beauty and appeal of fiction lies in the fact that it does not "tell", rather it recreates. Recreation goes straight into the heart and has the force to evoke empathy. The pain and struggle of the oppressed that we but vaguely understand and sympathise with become real as we read these tales of suffering, hopelessness and dejection and occasional revolt. When little Munnali, the eleven year old protagonist of the story 'Munnali' flops down like "a broken basket, neglected and discarded," because she is not acceptable in the kitchen of the "bhadrak", the upper caste people, we are left with a queasy feeling: "how can we help her and the likes of her for whom all doors are closed because of the disadvantages of the caste they are born into?" But read on, and Maunnali's trouble would appear minor as compared to what we encounter – myriads of more burning problems, more negations and more harrowing experiences as in the story 'The Other Jew'. Yet these unfortunate ones are broken but not defeated; they have the guts to survive and fight; they are resilient only to bounce back and defy the system as in 'On Firm Ground'. Like Edwin Markham — of 'The Man with the Hoe' fame— the dalit writers seem to ask: what will happen to the future when "this dumb Terror shall rise to judge the world/After the silence of centuries?"

Each story offers a different spectrum of experience; each story recreates a world of emotions in their varied forms: fear, anger, pity, compassion, affection, fellow feeling and despair; in each story the human interaction takes place in wide-ranging locations; and each story provides valuable insights into human nature and the dalit consciousness. In the process the customs, attitudes and activities of the people get illuminated sometimes leaving us with bewildering questions. In 'Reincarnation of Parashuram', for example, the author Anil Gharai shows the ignorance and superstitious mind-set of a tribal family who fall in the trap of a witch-doctor (the Gunin). At his behest, the son chops his old and ailing mother to death believing her to be a witch who is out to devour his infant son. Unfortunately, these people cannot see the obvious that the child was suffering from malnutrition. Though the title of the story is a pointer towards the mainstream power structure and the need to resist it, the message is clear: it is the lack of education that is