

Mahbabur Rahman, *In the Land of the Pandavas*. Kolkata: Writer's Workshop, 2014. 105pp. ISBN 978-93-5045-087-1.

This book is an English version of Mahbabur Rahman's *Pancha Pandaber Charan Bhumi*, written in Bengali and published in 2005. The writer has translated his own work and tried to keep the original content and the essence in his English version, and as he himself admits in the preface, it has been "an arduous venture" in regards to "handling language transfer" and "the elusive task of capturing its true spirit" (5). The title gives a historical perspective to the story as the land of Pandavas refers to the capital of the Pandavas, Indraprastha, which was situated near Delhi. The city had been the seat of power for the Saka dynasty, the Mughals, the Pathans and later the British rule before India became a free sovereign nation. The reference to the five Pandavas, sons of Pandu who reigned supreme over the land after they defeated the Kauravas in the epic *Mahabharata* raises the expectations of the readers of an epic proportion. Instead, there is a mock-epic depiction of the modern age metropolis Delhi, captured through the eyes of the child Raman, who grows up to see the last days of the British Raj, the Partition of India and Pakistan, the birth of a new nation Bangladesh and after many years captures his memories of the city in his narrative. It is Raman's Delhi of the 1940s and the boy riding his bicycle parallels his exploits and adventures to those of the Pandavas. It gives a mock-heroic overtone to his attempt just as it satirically points out that the modern-day Delhi is no land of the Pandavas, nor can Raman be a superhero like any of the sons of Pandu. Delhi in the 1940s is a city torn by the anguish and brutality of partition, the conflict of religion, and Raman is a common man who suffers because like so many others he becomes a pawn in the hands of the leaders and politicians.

There are ten chapters in the book that form the structure of the story from the childhood years of the protagonist to his ripe old age, giving it the shape of a *bildungsroman*. Raman gets to move to Delhi as his father is transferred from Calcutta to Delhi and thus begins his relationship with the city. The excitement of the little boy in travelling by train to a new city is beautifully captured as he imagines himself riding on a magnificent stallion (13). The details of the city life with its *tonga* ride and the singing vendors and the efforts to deal with the excessive hot weather by resorting to sleeping in charpoys in the terrace at night or the water soaked dampened screens of *khaskhas* in doors and window frames to keep the interiors cooler, bring the city alive to the readers. Memory is central to writing a memoir and as Raman reminisces about his unpleasant encounters for being from the Muslim community, the reader can feel the pulse of the child's anguish and anger at being abused and alienated by the society. Some common childhood regrets are also recounted candidly that speaks of the sincerity of the approach of the narrator in retelling memories.

Raman takes great pride of his school in Delhi and the schooldays are recounted with an air of veracity interspersed with humour and mimicry. The device of punishment of the Headmaster, the thick black ruler was named by the boys “Ma Kali” and the ruthless whacking was called “Ma Kali *ki Prasad*” (31). The teachers are nicknamed after hilarious incidents in which they were involved and tricks played upon them to evade punishment is bound to make any reader nostalgic of his/her schooldays. The memories of schooldays do not merely represent a boy’s childish and playful nature but also relate to children in school in general having the greatest fun of their lives. Raman appears to be a brilliant boy, studious, obedient yet playful and witty. One incident that gives a brilliant mock-epic undertone to the practice of hunting by the young pandavas is the killing of a bird by an air-gun and giving a heroic funeral to it by Raman and his friends. Reflecting on this apparently simple incident, the writer mocks at the politicians and leaders of the nation who galvanise common people and soldiers to die for a noble cause by their oratory and then pay homage to those who die like cannon fodders as “martyrs” (43).

The narrator takes a dig on how people use religion to fulfil their material interests by narrating the incident of *Gau Pita Ka Seva* (49). When a bakery shopowner’s son is inspired by the priest’s sermon to worship and serve the holy cow and applies it to feeding a bull from his father’s bakery in his absence, the father shrewdly teaches him that while indulging in the pious act of giving one should not overlook material things; rather neglect Devi Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. The tongue-in-cheek satire in the father’s preaching that financial issues should govern religious considerations brings out the hollowness of blind devotion. The narrator observes that such devotional services to the cow are restricted to certain parts of Delhi and not evident near administrative buildings or upmarket residential regions. He calls these well fed bulls and cows *Dharmer shanr* (52), lazy animals that benefit from religious piety. He finds it an oddity that a modern metropolis like Delhi is witness to such a strange phenomenon of “families of opulent cows and bulls, sitting unconcernedly... chewing cud or ruminating without a care in the world, while speeding vehicles cautiously adjust themselves, averting accidents as though with a magic wand” (53).

The British era came to an end with India gaining independence in 1947; but that also meant the Partition of India and Pakistan. By the Indian Independence Act of 1947 the Indian states were provided with the option of either joining the Dominions or remaining independent. The narratorial lens widens as the political history of the period comes under observation. The transfer of power and the anguish of partition caused a mass holocaust in the sub-continent. The indiscriminate killing of innocent people in the name of religion by both the Hindus and Muslims is a shameful chapter in the history. The narrator provides a detailed study of the political movements and observes upon the situation that prevailed during that time; at times he puts in his own insights as he says: “On

hindsight, it may be said that if the above formula (grouping of India into regional autonomous units) had been accepted by the Congress, it might have averted an immediate partition of India..." (59). However, in the subsequent events that followed resulting in the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 proved that history could not have avoided a repetition. The details of the escape of Raman and his family along with fellow Bengali Muslims trapped in Pakistan due to job postings reads like an authentic report from any concentration camp. The efforts of the Pakistani government to prevent their fleeing so as to hold them hostages and use them as pawns to release Pakistani soldiers who surrendered in Dhaka reveal the cruelty manifested against one's own religion. It is not religion that provokes inhumanity and killing but it is the fanaticism in the name of religion that is laid bare in such incidents. Another interesting point that the writer makes is that home is not defined by religion, but by the feeling of security and comfort; so, as Raman reaches Delhi from Pakistan his "heartbeat quickened with an unspoken thrill" (84). The way Raman can connect to the city where he spent his childhood is unparalleled to any other city in the world where he may put down his bags; it is Delhi where he has left his roots and so he keeps coming back to the city again and again.

In Delhi he tries to contact his alma mater and is greatly surprised to find his old teacher and overwhelmed by the warmth of the welcome that he receives in the school. He also reconnects with some of his old friends and acquaintances and relives the good old days of childhood. Even on his way to Dhaka, his new homeland, en route Calcutta he ruminates about future visits to Delhi. Raman's later visits to Delhi in 1983, 1984 and 1985 were besought with some disappointments as he himself has grown old and learn that some of his teachers have already crossed the mortal world. In 2002 Raman in an official visit to the city ends up landing in the hospital for an emergency bypass heart operation and has to stay back for a month for post-operative care. His last visit to Delhi in 2007 nostalgically traces his emotional connection to the city and the school and though he could trace the earlier warmth lacking in the new age students and teachers he could also see the possibility of a new age of connectivity through the internet.

As Raman approaches the twilight period of his years, memories flock in his mind and he delineates some post-operative hallucinating experiences that he had encountered. As he dozes off due to the effects of medicine he dreams of a bygone period; he goes back in time to the Mughal era, "he found himself in an enchanting setting facing a Mughal-style hall, covered with plush carpets on the floor and glittery, gossamer-like curtains cascading down the walls" (99). Though Raman represents a common man, he has the gift of imagination. His rich imagination enriches his living, helps him to deal with betrayals, pain and anguish. Above all his love for Delhi, his school, his teachers and his friends shines

through the pages in all the layers of memories and experiences interwoven in the memoir.

Mahbabur Rahman has gifted the readers a wonderful story in the form of a memoir that has also a mock-heroic undertone. Raman is the prototype of a common man who runs from Calcutta to Delhi, Delhi to Pakistan and then to Dhaka en route Delhi and Calcutta. As he travels he carries his bag of memories and experiences that takes the form of a memoir. The period may not be the glorious period of the Pandavas but an important period in history when there was a partition based on religion and birth of new nations on the basis of religion, language and culture. Since it's a translation it shows the writer's clarity of thought and expression as he is adept in both the languages.

The book is worth reading also for its get-up; it is a limited edition by Writers Workshop hand-bound in gold embossed, hand-stitched handloom sari border that provides a visual beauty and a touch of ethnicity that cannot be found in hard bound books with glossy jackets. The calligraphy layout and lettering by Prof. P. Lal gives a touch of sincerity of effort; it makes the whole book an artefact itself that reaches out to touch the heart of the readers.

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