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Exploring the Human Psyche

Vinay Lal

WE HAVE ARRIVED IN AMRITSAR AND OTHER STORIES

By Bhisham Sahni

Translated by Jai Ratan

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Although Bhisham Sahni is known to many Indians as the author of the novel *Tamas*, subsequently televised as a serial, to Hindi readers his name has long been familiar as a writer of short stories. Eight collections of his short stories have been published over the last three decades, and here and there one encounters one of his stories in English translation. *We Have Arrived In Amritsar*, however, is the first full-length volume of his stories to appear in English translation, and it leaves little doubt that Bhisham Sahni is a modern master of the short story.

The work of the Sahni brothers, Bhisham and Balraj, has in the public imagination at least been linked to the theme of the partition, and the blurb at the back of *We have Arrived in Amritsar*, perhaps just as much as the title, gives the erroneous impression that this collection of stories is likewise set against the backdrop of the cataclysmic events of 1947. The partition serves as the theme of only two stories, and even here Bhisham Sahni is more interested in exploring the processes by which communalism takes hold of men's minds, and the psychology of human relationships at times of acute stress, than in 'what happened'. It is a motley crowd of working men, middle-class housewives, domestic servants, and some rather more unusual characters, that fills the pages of the remaining eleven stories. At one moment we find Sahni writing about a Chinese monk in India; then we encounter a thief and his victim, locked together in a bizarre relationship, in surroundings that can only be described as Kafkaesque; and elsewhere the nature of political opportunism, with its crass reliance on votes and promise of power, and its failure to even recognize—much less respect—the realm of the sacred, is vividly brought to the fore.

Whatever the broad canvas to which Bhisham Sahni applies his strokes, his stories express two central concerns, the first posed as a question, and the second perhaps as an article of belief. How far is man free to act as he will, endowed with the agency to shape his world, and how far is he a mere

puppet on strings, a grain of sand blown hither and thither by the fury of the storm? The lives of Sahni's characters are marked by a continual tension between destiny and freedom, between the large forces which appear to leave us powerless and our own desire and will to achieve. Sahni, insofar as he is represented by the philosophically-inclined narrator, inclines to the view that the outcome of this struggle between freedom and restraint is a foregone conclusion: our decisions are made for us. "One's course in life is decided by one's poverty, one's limitations or inclinations", he writes in the story "The Only Way"; "One never chooses; one just gropes along blindly" (p. 209).

This didactic voice would surely have agreed with Schopenhauer that though one can will, one cannot will to will. Yet the young woman in this story, abandoned by her brahmin husband, and subsequently left to fend for herself in the big city, is despite a lame left leg at last able to take the resolute step to stand, literally and metaphorically, on her own feet and thus defy those forces of destiny which seem irrevocably poised at the edge of victory. Likewise, the eponymous protagonist of "Radha-Anuradha", takes the bold step of eloping with her lover to prevent her father from marrying her to an old widower. In Sahni's stories, the didactic voice of the narrator, which would have us believe that the range of human action is circumscribed, is frequently at odds with the courageous behaviour and spirited actions of ordinary women and men.

The tension between freedom and restraint in Sahni's stories is equalled only by the tension between speech and silence. What emerges is a belief in the incommensurability, not only of viewpoints, but of different worlds. Words communicate, and yet they don't: they simply hang in the air. Human communication is pregnant with possibilities, and yet it fears to be fulfilled. No one person can ever fully understand another: a perfect commensurability is not possible; but is it desirable? Chacha Mangal Sain, in the story by the same name, is taken away by his nephew, from the lane in Sabzi Mandi where he used "to live in a room like a hovel", and installed in the comfort of a suburban home. The nephew's wife is scarcely

happy: the old man, recovering rapidly from his ailments, shows himself "in his true colours." He clears his throat noisily, spits all over the place, drinks his tea with a slurp, and takes to gossiping with the servants and neighbours. The wife contrives to keep the drawing room out of bounds for him; gradually he is prevented from leaving the house; and eventually he is confined to his room. Then, one day, he just vanishes. Many months later the nephew returns to Chacha Mangal Sain's neighbourhood, and finds him seated outside on a cot, exchanging remarks with the *mohalla* women, bantering with the boys. The lingering image, as the nephew leaves his chacha, is of three small boys dancing around the old man's cot, "while he lay there brandishing his lathi at them, and making threatening noises" (p. 208).

"Chacha Mangal Sain" is not only a story of how men are set in their ways, constrained by certain habits and modes of thought, or of how the

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generation gap is a tangible and visible barrier to communication. Nor can we reduce it to an expression of the conflict between a self-assured modernity and the contentment that adherence to tradition provides. The

story is all this, and more: the old man lives in the only way that he knows, and that is his authenticity and the authenticity of the modern world, which may be just another name for efficiency and bureaucratic management, cannot substitute for the authenticity of an old man who knows he belongs in the streets and byways of life, not in suburbia with its sanitized satisfactions.

As the problem of authenticity is a species of the larger problem of incommensurability of different worlds, so is the question of religious intolerance. The Hindu boy Pali, in the opening story of the volume, gets separated from his parents as they leave a refugee camp for India, and is brought up as a Muslim by a childless couple. His biological parents, now across the border, make many attempts to recover him; seven years later they succeed. Once he was circumcised; now a tuft of hair is left in the middle of his cropped head. So is he a Hindu or a Muslim? While the men fight it over, somewhere one woman weeps. Sahni doesn't waste words on religious shibboleths, yet one can scarcely doubt that he would have agreed with Kabir:

*The Muslim's namaz is as different from a Hindu's puja
As a bracelet's gold is from gold in an ear-ring.*

If we knew that the gold in the bracelet differs not from the gold in the ear-ring, would these different worlds be reconcilable then? A more

Vinay Lal is a freelance writer.

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arresting, not to mention chilling, perspective emerges in the story, "We have Arrived in Amritsar". A train is on its way to Amritsar; somewhere along the way, at a wayside station, a Hindu family tries to enter a compartment, but is prevented from doing so by a couple of Pathans. The train pulls out of the station; and no sooner has it left, then the platform becomes a raging inferno. An "oppressive silence" reigns over the compartment, but as it approaches Amritsar, the supposedly effeminate Hindu passenger, hitherto a silent spectator of the Pathans' callous behaviour, hurls the most abusive words at the manly Pathans. At Amritsar station the Pathans leave the compartment, but later, in the dark silence of the night, the Babu does to death with an iron rod a Muslim who tries to enter the compartment at a station. The job is done; the revenge is complete. The Babu smiles his "horrifying smile"; the train carries on.

We know that men are moved by a complex of motives, that passion is unctrollable, and that the fragile threads by which webs of communication, understanding, and existence are spun can snap at the slightest excess of stress. We think we understand why the Babu acts as he does, but in reality this understanding can never fully be ours, nor ought it to be so. To be able to fully explain evil is to provide its rationale, its justification. Ultimately Sahni's stories leave us with the feeling that there is, and will continue to be, something inexplicable and ineffable about human behaviour. Life, in this sense, is something of a mystery, something of an accident—and indeed both these motifs figure largely in many of the stories.

With the publication of Bhisham Sahni's stories, his work should become more widely known in the English-speaking world. It is only to be regretted that the expertise and long experience of Orient Longman has been put to such poor use in the production of this book. We are told by Jai Ratan that "some" of the translations are the author's own, but any further information in this respect is withheld from the reader. Moreover, such collections should provide, as this one does not, the original title and date of publication of each story. Numerous printing errors, sloppy proof-reading, and poor editing will do little to enhance the reputation of the publisher (see, for example, pp. 47, 68, 87, 95 and 157). Surely Bhisham Sahni deserves better? □