

SHORT STORY

Family Pride

JULIE REZA

It was one of London's grey, dank, end-of-summer evenings. The rain had drizzled all day, and weary commuters crammed onto the underground, feeling tired and miserable. Minu, tall, slim, and clad in a simple top and designer jeans, squeezed on the train just as the doors were about to shut. She looked around the carriage for somewhere to sit--without luck.

Groups of people leant against the doors and hung onto the rails, resigned to standing-up for the length of their journeys. Out of the corner of her eye, Minu noticed a man putting away his spectacles and fidgeting with his bag--a sure sign that he was getting off soon. Years of commuting had taught Minu to be alert if she wanted to sit. She nimbly manoeuvred past the lucky people with seats, carefully negotiating the bags and legs of those who were standing, so that she could hover near him. Sure enough, the man descended at Holborn.

Minu sat down. Good, now she could get the few minutes shut-eye that she desperately needed. She'd been partying all week. Tonight, Friday, would be no different. Yesterday she'd met up with her old college mates, and had been persuaded to go clubbing until the early hours. "I'm getting far too old for that sort of behaviour," she ruefully thought. Those undergraduate days were long gone!

She now had a 9-to-5 job at the BBC. Admittedly she didn't have a mortgage yet--and marriage still seemed a couple of years off. But she sensed she was getting ready to settle down. Anyway, first things first, she needed to close her eyes and mull over what she was going to wear tonight. It was her brother's 35th, and her family were throwing a bash at 'La Maroush' a trendy little Moroccan restaurant in Marble Arch. From there, she and her friends would head onto a bar in Mayfair.

Minu's brother was seven years older than her, an age difference that Minu would like between her and any boyfriend. In fact, she had someone in mind--Nasir, her brother's accountant friend. She'd noticed him looking at her once, and reckoned there was something there. So, what to wear? A silky, red, sleeveless dress, with the black Versace shoes she had bought at Selfridges's sale? Maybe with the jet necklace that her jewellery designer friend had given her? Simple, chic and understated. Definitely no gold! That should make her stand out from all the other Asian babes that would be at the party.

Idly, Minu thought of how proud she was of her parents and their achievements; they were educated, smart, well spoken. They knew how to behave with her English friends and their families. Although her mother had started to wear a shalwar-kameez she usually wore simple western suits, always with a bright coloured scarf, a token acknowledgement of her ethnic roots. Only when attending Bengali cultural events was sari preferred over suit.

Minu's dad, Masood, was a solicitor who had made a very comfortable living in a city accountancy firm. Her mother, Anika, rare for an Asian woman of her generation had her own interior design shops, set up with her own family inheritance.

Minu's dad had come to the UK in the 1950s with a prestigious scholarship to study law at King's. Her grandfather, a district commissioner in one of the larger cities of then East Pakistan, had also been generous with his allowances. Thus, 15 years later, when Minu's grandparents eventually found a pretty young graduate from a good family background for their son to marry, Minu's dad was set up very well--with a comfortable job and his own four-bedroom house and car. Married 'back home', Minu's parents were settled back in England within a few months, and Minu's mum soon became pregnant with Minu's brother.

English had always been spoken at Minu's home. The family bookshelf had held Wordsworth, Keats and Hardy, interspersed with a Tagore or contemporary Bengali writer. Classical western music was encouraged, although the Indian classics were not neglected. Both Minu and her brother had gone to private school--her brother had even been a boarder. University was taken for granted. Minu had graduated in Fine Art and History from Goldsmith's; her



brother had studied law and then done an MBA at LSE.

The train trundled along, getting quieter as passengers left. Minu was finding it hard to keep her eyes shut without falling asleep. The air was damp, and there was the strange smell of umbrellas that hadn't had a chance to dry-out fully. She opened her eyes and idly glanced around at her fellow travellers. Those opposite were asleep--some with their heads hung forward, others leaning against the back or side.

Minu glanced sideways, at the people sitting on the same side of the train as her. A teenage couple, and next to them a blonde, young mum, with a small baby barely visible as more than a bundle of blankets.

At the end, sat a couple of Asian men--no, a boy and elderly man. The man had an orange beard and hair. He wore an ill-fitting checked jacket and crumpled tie. The boy looked nervous and awkward. She immediately recognised them as Bengali like her--but dissimilar in every other way. Minu knew what type of family they were from! She even knew the origins of the bizarre, carrot-shaded beard and hair--henna!

She looked at the young boy. There was faint fuzz above his lips. He must be fourteen or fifteen, she mused. The man was clearly his father. "From the type of family who have children when they're young," she thought (and grimaced)--so she reckoned the boy probably had lots of older siblings. She noted the boy fidgeting, constantly looking uncomfortable. Probably had a telling off from his dad, Minu supposed. Yes, the man looked like a strict, authoritarian father--"hmm, typical"--she also spat to herself. The man looked grim, and every now and again murmured something to the boy.

Yes, Minu knew the type of family. Uneducated, living in a council flat--probably getting all sorts of benefits (thanks to taxpayers like her, she thought). The mother would be at home, sari tucked in at her waist, cooking and clearing up after her squad of children. She could imagine the home: ghouly patterned carpets; plastic mats and protectors all over the place. The kitchen would be

caked in sticky grease, some sort of curry constantly on the boil. The bathroom would be damp from the constant drying of towels. The children would be taken to school every day--but to no avail. Although encouraged to learn, they'd not be given the 'proper environment'. That was especially true for the daughters--doubtless expected to cook and clean; probably discouraged from mixing with their western schoolmates, prevented from attending after-school classes.

Minu looked as closely as she could at the man and boy. With pity? No, she had to admit to herself, with disdain. "These are the people that give Asians a bad name," she thought. "Why couldn't they try to improve themselves?" she wondered. After all, they were exactly like her parents--immigrants. Why couldn't they have adopted the new country and its ways, in the way that her parents had? And what galled her most of all--why did this man insist on having that ridiculous colour of beard? "Doesn't he know what people think of him?" she wondered. She exhaled deeply.

Thankfully, she wasn't that type. They made her feel embarrassed to be Asian. She looked around the carriage again, at the teenage couple, at their pierced noses and ears, at the young mum, at the sleepers, now gradually waking one-by-one, and hoped that when those people looked at her they wouldn't think she was from a family like that.

Meanwhile Abeer shifted in his seat. He wasn't happy. In fact he was feeling desperately sad. Having his father sitting stiff and prim next to him made him feel even worse. Every time Abeer moved, his dad looked at him, and murmured. They'd had a long day. His dad had been wearing that best jacket and tie of his all day--instead of his usual looser clothing. They'd set out at nine that morning. It had been drizzling even then. Getting caught in the rain was probably what had made Abeer shiver so badly at the hospital. Or at least that was what Abeer had told his dad.

Abeer had been in and out of doctor's surgeries the last few months. He'd had fevers, and had been feeling weak and sick. He seemed to be losing weight, and his mum had insisted that his dad took him to see the doctor. Blood tests, biopsies and scans had been done. Today he'd had another appointment with the specialist. As Abeer was only fifteen they'd suggested his dad accompany him. Abeer didn't really understand why--his dad's grasp of English was extremely limited at the best of times, and he certainly wasn't familiar with medical language.

Even Abeer, born and brought up in England, didn't understand everything the doctor mentioned when Abeer had asked about the test results. Hodgkin's disease--what was that? Lymph nodes--what were they? But, nevertheless, Abeer had understood enough. He knew what cancer was--well, not what it was, but its significance. And he knew what the doctor had meant when he'd pulled up a chair opposite Abeer, gently touched his forearm, looked him in the eyes and quietly sighed "Abeer, I'm sorry, it looks far, far more serious than we had hoped."

Thankfully, his dad hadn't been paying attention just then. His dad had just nodded quietly throughout the consultation, even when the doctor had asked if he had understood everything, even when they'd had the meeting with the counsellor. Both professionals must have thought Abeer's dad was a reserved man. They were probably relieved that they didn't have to deal with any heavy emotions. They knew what Asian relatives could be like.

After the consultations Abeer had taken his dad aside in the waiting room. Quietly but clearly, he explained in cockney-accented Bangla: "Baba, I have an.....allergy..... a very bad allergy to some.... foods. This means that I will be sick a lot.....but the doctor will give me medicine and treatment. At first some of that might make me sick too. But they say I will back to normal health in just a few.....months. Do not worry Baba."

Abeer's dad had nodded. He placed his hand on his son's thigh and said "I understand. Son, you must explain to us what the doctors said about your allergy. You are a smart, educated boy. You must tell us what you can eat. Your mother will cook whatever you need. Tell us whenever you feel unwell--your sisters will look after you. We pray for swift recovery. Any pain that you feel, your mother, sisters and I will feel too."

They had got onto the underground for the journey home. Abeer, desperate to get back home to his mum and sisters, thought about death. His dad had been quiet, ruminating over Abeer's words, every now and again turning to his son and to say: "Tell me son, will you still be able to eat chicken?"..... "Tell me son, can you tolerate spice?"

Abeer turned away. Maybe he'd get closer to his elder siblings: the siblings whose death had devastated his parents; the siblings whose footsteps still trod through the life of his family; the two brothers and the baby sister that had died in the Bangladesh famine of '74.

His parent's had been poor village people then, with no schooling or education. They'd lived off the land, not needing pencils and paper to tell them what, or when, to plant. Heartbroken over the deaths, the couple had left when a distant relative suggested they come to England, where Abeer's father could work in the kitchen of his restaurant. Abeer's mother could learn to sew, and stitch things from home. They could borrow the money for the trip from family and friends. That was what they did, their extended family accompanying them all the way to the airport in the capital, standing silently, as the plane with Abeer's mum and dad took off for a new land.

Once in England, Abeer's parents had found themselves overwhelmed and homesick. But it was their chance for a second life. Fellow countrymen rallied round, and they found work. They toiled hard, saved money, learning from the many others that had settled before them.

After a while Abeer's mother became pregnant, but miscarried. Many more years passed before, eventually, Abeer's parents had more children--Amrin, Abeer himself, then Anwara--and they had learnt to be happy again. Abeer, their boy, grew up to be polite, and, according to his teachers, clever too. The girls were also clever, although mischievous. "Maybe they will go to University and become doctors," Abeer's dad would always comment. Abeer could pay the way. They could find him an educated wife, and they would be looked after in their old age. Everything seemed so settled. They had a future of hope. This 'land of opportunity' certainly had been that to them--and they were grateful for that. They had become a complete family, with everything a family needed, or could ever need.

Abeer shifted in his seat, and looked around the carriage, not really seeing anyone. The tears were in his eyes, but he had to hold them back. He thought about his family--how wonderful they were. And he thought of how proud he was of his parents and their achievements.

Julie Reza is a doctor/writer who lives in the U.K.

Book Reviews

Successful re-legioning

AZFAZ AZIZ

Religion, Violence and Political Mobilisation in South Asia, edited by Ravinder Kaur; New Delhi: Sage Publications; October 2005; 228 pp; Rs. 280

Over the last 50 years, religions have so successfully re-legioned their herds across the world along political lines that one is compelled to seriously doubt the validity of what one knows as the 'historical' outcome of the Second World War. Generalissimo Mussolini and Führer Hitler did lose the war, but did they lose the peace, too? The doubt and the question did not manifest that strongly until the disintegration of Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, or, in other words, until communism was disgracefully reduced to the status of a temporary usurper of the temporal authority of theocracy.

In the foreword of the book, Professor Francis Robinson of the University of London puts it thus: "Through large tracts of the world, old social and political elites, often of a 'secular' persuasion, have come to bring their hands as activist believers of one faith or another have come to substantially influence, if not dominate, their politics. There are few Muslim countries where political discourse has not been transformed over this period by the rise of Islamist movements. In some, of course, this has been accompanied by the use of terror and organised violence. The politics of Israel, while acknowledging their complexity and the divisions amongst believers, are profoundly informed by a religiously motivated right wing. Those of the US are much influenced by an evangelical Christian right wing which is willing to firmly place a literal reading of scripture above the claims of modern science. Then, in former communist Eastern Europe, the Protestant and Catholic

churches, in particular, played a role in undermining Soviet hegemony. To the surprise of many, in recent times, through much of the world, religion has elbowed its way to the front of affairs."

This description reinforces the perception that fascism and nazism had not been routed, but re-emerged under religious and ethnic disguises, and even advanced by some members of the very alliance that claimed victory in the world war. Such political mobilisation based on crude religious or ethnic polarities--'us versus them,' 'either friend or foe' (a la President Bush in his so-called war on terrorism), 'good or evil' and 'black or white'--could not take the centre stage of world affairs as long as the overriding communism-capitalism duel went on. So, "the surprise of many" that Robinson mentions is really rooted in a lack of analytic foresight.

Perhaps to understand this 'surprising' situation the Department of International Development Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark arranged a two-day workshop on 'Religious Mobilisation and Organised Violence in Contemporary South Asia' in 2003. This book is a compilation of seven papers presented at that workshop plus a foreword by Robinson and an introduction titled 'Mythology of Communal Violence' by the editor, Ravinder Kaur, a research fellow at the university.

Among the paper writers, Professor (Emeritus) Paul R Brass of the University of Washington is a leading proponent of the 'instrumentalist' school of communal violence. Renowned anthropology experts like Professor Jan Breman of University of Amsterdam, Professor Dipankar Gupta of Jawaharlal Nehru University and Professor Thomas Blom Hansen of Yale University are also among the contributors. They have

explored and analysed a wide spectrum of issues related to religious violence, organisations and their national or transnational linkages at the empirical and conceptual levels. The issues dealt with in the book include the myths, scale and nature of religious violence, organisations and process of religious mobilisation for politics, the role of state machinery, etc.

The workshop's, and the book's, focus on religious mobilisation and violence in South Asia is very pertinent, as amongst all regions the re-legionisation has been the most pervasive and intense here and in the Middle East, perhaps because they spawned almost all the major world faiths. In these two sub-continent, the economic, political and other conflicts between the peoples almost always appear dressed in religious theories.

Giving an overview of the South Asian situation, Robinson says, "In Sri Lanka politics came to be dominated by a Sinhala exclusiveness with the Buddhist revival at its core, which was happy to use violence against the Tamil minority, leading to Tamil separatism."

"In Pakistan," he says, "the whole tone and colour of politics has been altered by the rise of Islamist groups within the state, first to positions of leverage and then to ones of power." Acts of violence against the minority Ahmadiyyas, Shias and Christians are common, where recently Baluch separatism has also emerged. "Individuals have increasingly been mobilised for politics less on the old patronage networks of landlords and more on those of religious schools of thought. Indeed, the networks of one, those of the Deobandi madrasahs in the NWFP and Baluchistan, fashioned the



Taliban who, for a time, came to rule Afghanistan," Robinson notes. India has suffered worse. After the Sikh separatism in the 1960s, it witnessed an intense emergence of Hindu revivalism in the 1980s that has now become one of the most dominant forces in Indian politics. The bloody communal riots carried out by Hindu bigots also have stoked Islamist fanaticism to a great extent. "We now live in a political world, which the founding fathers of the main independent countries of South Asia--Nehru, Jinnah, Senanayake--would not recognise," Robinson observes sadly. But, a reader cannot but wonder about what Robinson means by "main independent countries." Do not Bangladesh or Nepal qualify for the category?

The writers belong to three schools on communal violence--the instrumentalists, the primordialists and adherents of frame theory. According to the instrumentalists, objective differences between communities and between their revivalism do play a part, but not an essential one, in generating communal conflict. Members of the conflicting communities choose opposing or different paths subjectively and rationally, standing apart from their cultures and traditions. The view of the primordialists is just the opposite. They consider

communal conflicts as results of historical, cultural and other differences, not of consciously made decisions.

The frame theory stands at a mid-point between those two poles. According to this school, framing means conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action. Communities, it says, develop ideological frames to diagnose social problems, prescribe solutions and motivate participation of their members in materialising those. What is crucial for effectiveness of a frame is its capacity to "resonate" in a particular context. To achieve resonance, it is not enough for the political agenda to be based on the religious precepts concerned; the leaders also must have authority to which the followers must be receptive, and all must be held in a network of social relationship.

The writers from their different standpoints try to explain the widening and increasing incidences and processes of communal violence and religious mobilisation in the sub-continent. The primary focus of the papers is the situation in India, with that of Pakistan getting a secondary place. Only Björn Hetme in his essay gives very brief overviews of the situations in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives, which makes, considering the content, the title an absolute misnomer. Sage editors would have done better if they had replaced 'South Asia' with 'India and Pakistan' in the title.

The typographic and page make-up is very good. While the book's language tends towards the pedagogic, it will surely help the students of sociologically-oriented disciplines enrich their understanding of the subject.

Azfar Aziz is senior sub-editor, The Daily Star.

On Naxalites and Nirad babu

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Interesting Times in India: A Short Decade at St. Stephen's College by Daniel O'Connor; Delhi: Penguin India; 2005; 234 pp; Rs. 295

Interesting Times in India is an absorbing book by an English missionary who arrived in 1963--on the good ship *Caledonia*--to teach English literature to "midnight's children" at Delhi's St. Stephen's College. At a time when white missionaries are under attack as having been active connivers in empire-building and in the subjugation of nonwhite races by Europeans, Daniel O'Connor provides substantial evidence that genuine idealism also permeated their ranks. Though the book does go on for a bit about the author's postcolonial soul-searching about the Anglican Church's role in India and its "flock," as well as shoot off on a tangent regarding arcane (to the non-Christian South Asian reader, that is) liturgical debates and historical missionary personages, it is nevertheless a quiet-toned, modest and intriguing account of an intriguing time: beginning from the last days of the Nehruvian era through a wide circle of friends and long hours of classes to the dramatic eruption of the Naxalite movement. On the latter topic the book is fascinating to read, as it probes, with warm fellowship and sympathy, why some of the best minds of one of India's most prestigious educational institutions left to 'join the revolution.' Though as a man of the cloth O'Connor clearly abjured violence, yet his humane sensibility, especially during a decade when liberation theology exerted intellectual influence, clearly empathized with incendiary social consciences. No wonder that even after most of the revolutionaries retreated into being 'ex-revolutionaries,' he kept contact with them.

This is also an account of an entire family living, unfazed, cheerily, on very modest means, where every pice had to be calculated in an era of "food rationing, shortages and fluctuating prices." There is a lesson here for all of us.

Some of the best passages in the book are also its most light-hearted, as in his portrayal of Nirad Chaudhuri, then living in Delhi, and which deserves, at least for Bengali readers, to be quoted at some length:

"Another speaker was Nirad Chaudhuri--we got him to the SCM (Student Christian Movement at the college) twice, in 1966 and 1970. I met him first at the Brotherhood House, where he was a regular visitor and user of their



library. He was working his way, when I first knew him, through the several volumes of Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake's *Beginnings of Christianity*. It was at about this time, according to his *Continent of Circe*, that he used the rather specialized knowledge he had thus gained to score an exegetical point against Dr. Radhakrishnan (first president of India and professor of religion at Oxford). If that was all, it was a small gain to achieve from such a vast read, but he loved scoring points against almost anyone.

From time to time, Nirad babu called on us, and I enjoyed visiting him and his wife, Amiya, at their home... They lived just within the Mori Darwaza, having the top apartment in a residential block known as P&O Building, named not after the shipping line but after the two sons, Percy and Oswald, of the Anglo-Indian owner of the property. High up in their flat, looking out over the city wall, he would watch for my coming on my scooter, my bald head flashing in the sunlight, he alleged, like a heliograph. Though we occasionally resorted to his roof garden to sit among the Japanese bonsai which he cultivated, we usually met in the room he called his salon, the air filled with his French quotations, and the walls lined with many books and a large, gilt-framed reproduction of the Rokeby Venus of Velasquez. On one of my visits, Nirad babu completed the improbable picture by sporting a white lace cravat and cuffs, gear that I have only otherwise seen worn, though equally improbably, by the moderator of the general assembly of the Church of Scotland on ceremonial occasions..."

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.