

book review

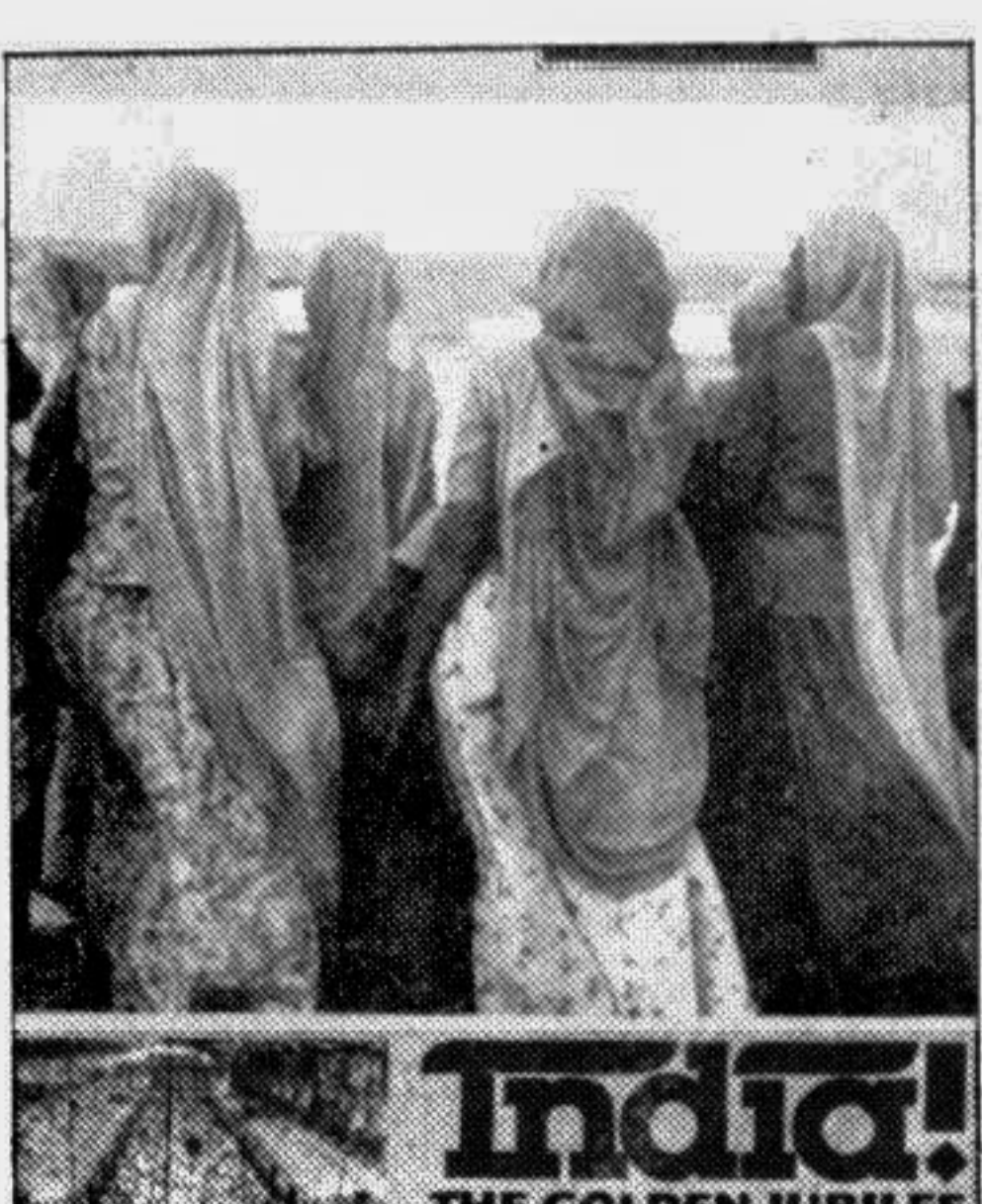
India at Fifty: Granta's Inquest

by Fakrul Alam

UNLIKE the *New Yorker* special double issue on the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence (reviewed in these pages on March 7) and the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (reviewed here on April 18), works which are, on the whole, celebratory in mood and quite "literary" in orientation, the 57th number of *Granta*, titled *India: the Golden Jubilee*, is a collection which aims to examine India from as many angles as possible. To this end, *Granta*, quite fittingly for a magazine distinguished by its cosmopolitanism, has assembled an international team of writers and photographers. To this end, too, this *Granta* number takes on something of the tone of an unofficial inquest into the partition of the Indian sub-continent and its political, economic, and cultural consequences.

Ian Jack, who has taken over the editorship of *Granta* recently from Bill Buford — the editor of the *New Yorker* special issue — sets the tone for the volume in his Introduction. Jack recounts his years as a reporter in India during the seventies and eighties, a recent trip he took to the country, and the many insights he has had with Indians over the years, and concludes that the country represents a major "conundrum" for anyone attempting to make sense of its economic progress, its democratic institutions, and its handling of wealth and justice. On the one hand, India is undoubtedly developing and there is a vibrancy in parts of the country which is palpable; on the other hand, it is equally obvious that it is a country beset with immense and seemingly insurmountable problems; moreover, signs of disintegration and regression are not very hard to find. "The forces of economics and democracy," Jack concludes, "are opposed." In the essays and photographs he has assembled, Jack has endeavored to represent as fully as he could within the covers of his "magazine of new writing" something of the contradictions of India, from the time of the hopes and traumas of partition to its present-day aspirations, and anxieties.

The first piece of *India: the Golden Jubilee* by the Indian writer Urvashi Butalia reminds us that many of the sources of the sub-continent's present-day discontents are in the division which took place in 1947. Partition has scarred the psyche of the people of India and Pakistan permanently and it is easy to see that not all the wounds created by it will heal, and in some areas



India: THE GOLDEN JUBILEE

the severe lacerations are still on view. Butalia tells us her own story of the Partition. Her parents are from Lahore but what she has realized is that though her family had settled in Delhi a long time ago, "Partition was not," even in her family, "a closed chapter of history" for "its simple, brutal geography infused and divided" them still. This becomes obvious to her when she decides to visit Lahore and renew contact with an uncle who had stayed back, become a Muslim, and married into a Muslim family. Her discovery in this and subsequent trips is that the barriers created by the division of India were too solid to be broken down by individual effort. In the end, she can only conclude that whether in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, the "suffering and grief of Partition" have been occluded in the public memory and survive only in stories which rarely crossed the frontiers of the family or religious communities.

What does the freedom given to Indians mean to those of them who were young and alert in 1947 fifty years later? I found the montage of photographs put together by Sanjeev Saith in *Granta's* special golden anniversary issue on India a particularly insightful way of answering this question. Sham Lal, a Delhi journalist, has seen euphoria swiftly replaced by disillusionment but accepts the change from hope to despair stoically. Pachi Bewa, a Muslim housewife from Bihar whose fate seems to have incarcerated her in Calcutta, thinks freedom has proved to be an illusion and can only think of the consequences indignantly. But Shah Jehan Begum, a women's activist from Mathura who lost a few members of her family during the Partition riots, remembers all the horrors of history but

refuses to be overwhelmed by what she has witnessed.

Politically, the most visible scar (or perhaps it is best to call it a festering wound or a permanent blotch left behind by men in haste) caused by Partition, of course, is Kashmir. *Granta's* man in Kashmir is the prize-winning novelist and journalist James Buchan. The report of his visit to the valley of Kashmir in the 1990s makes for depressing reading. The fabled beauty of the place is no longer what attracts the attention of the world; the valley is now a perpetual source of anxiety, a base for terrorists and counter-terrorists, a source of seemingly endless casualties, an "utterly messed-up world." Srinagar is a city in paralysis, its air thick with hatred and mistrust, and as Buchan gets ready to leave the city at the end of his visit, the image that comes to his mind is that of "an amphibious civilization ripe for the bone yard."

Another depressing account of a partition wound which seems to have been reopened is Suketu Mehta's piece on Mumbai. The city is touted as the Gateway to India, as the "biggest, fastest, richest city" of the country (and one could have added the smartest), and yet Mumbai is where, in an act which can only be called atavistic, 1,400 people were killed in religious riots in 1992. Mehta uncovers a story of primeval hatred, of reversionary tactics, as he interviews Shiv Sena zealots who revel in their roles as agents of destruction. Mehta remembers the city he grew up in before leaving for the life of an expatriate in New York — when it was called Bombay before the name too had to regress — where "being Muslim or Hindu or Catholic was merely a personal eccentricity, like a hairstyle" and is appalled by his contact with people who seem to be facing each other from across faultlines.

At times in the *Granta*, was seen to be embarking on narratives bent on taking us into the heart of darkness. Such at least is the impression given by William Dalrymple's account of his visit to Bihar in "Caste Wars." Mehta had taken us to a city riven by religious hatred; Dalrymple introduces us to a state split by caste politics. Once again, the impression is of a chunk of India sliding into anarchy, of a country reversing the steps into a brave new world it had taken with independence. In a state "wracked by violence, corruption and endemic caste warfare" the people in power, as in Mumbai, have grown callous on their souls and resorted to cynicism as a way of life. The climax of Mehta's visit to Bombay — and its moral

lowpoint — was his meeting with that representative of contemporary thugery, Bal Thackeray; here the nadir is reached when Dalrymple encounters Laloo Prasad Yadav. What is particularly worrying is the possibility that "as the ripples of political and caste violence spread from Patna out into the rest of the country, it seems equally likely that Bihar could be not so much backward as forward: a trendsetter for the rest of India."

Reading these tales of journeys into regions which give us a sense of the dissolution of civilization, of a world where the center seem not to be holding, and where anarchy appears to have been loosed upon the world, Nehru's stirring speech to the Constituent Assembly on the eve of India's independence ("At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom") rings ironically in our ears. In some aspects at least, it becomes obvious, India has moved away from the ideals which struggled to disseminate. The point is made throughout Trevor Fishlock's visit to Gandhi country in "After Gandhi." The "consensus answer" to questions about the role of Gandhi in present-day India is "Gandhi has practically been forgotten, and his legacy squandered." Gandhi might have given the people "an identity and dignity, a part in the play [of independence], an idea of India," but as far as Fishlock can see, he is no more than "a distant parent now, a fading photograph on the wall" even in his hometown.

Nevertheless, *Granta's* special issue on India's golden jubilee introduces us to not a few people who continue to believe in the country and are hopeful about its future. A marine engineer Fishlock meets in his quest for Gandhi during his trip to Gujarat points to the dynamism of the ship-breaking industry along the coast and concludes that for all of its problems, "India just goes on" and, in fact, was merely "taxing on the runway," ready to take off to dizzying new economic heights. Dalrymple recollects even as he sees the sorry spectacles of the breakdown of civil society in Bihar that the country had at present "around 150 million people with spending power greater than that of the average Briton." But the most striking testimonial to India's future that I came across in *India: the Golden Jubilee* is in Mehta's hopeful epilogue to his dark portrait of Mumbai. Here Mehta reports his conversation with Asad Bin Saif, "a scholar of the slums," who points out to him the enduring im-

age he has of the city: people in overcrowded commuter trains stretching out their hands for no one in particular, so that latecomers may be able to get on board, oblivious of religion or caste or class or origin, as if to say through their stretched hands "come on board... we'll adjust."

Is the faith in India demonstrated in parts of *India: the Golden Jubilee* only a version of Samuel Beckett's cryptic formulation: "I can't go on, I'll go on," that is to say, "life in India can't go on at this rate, but it has to and therefore will go on"? Many of the pieces collected by *Granta* for its special issue on the country are much more positive than this reluctant endorsement of life. It is something of a revelation to find that those quietly affirming life in India are its artists while those who find a country regressing into the past or only barely surviving or a conundrum are foreigners or expatriates. Thus the pulse of life can be discerned easily in the extract from the great nonagenarian novelist R K Narayan's thirtieth book, "Kabir Street" while Amit Chaudhuri's delicate evocation of middle-class Calcutta existence in the extract from his forthcoming novel *Freedom Song* is eloquent testimony of the resilience of life and the poetry of the quotidian in the sub-continent that one finds when one looks for it. Even Anita Desai's "Five Hours to India," a tale of an exasperated truck-driver who has brought traffic to halt in a Simla highway, ends with everything restarting, albeit at the urging of policemen "flourishing their canes" and bellowing "Get on! Chaloi!" But the most positive testimonial to India's future in *India: the Golden Jubilee* are the photographs by Dayanintha Singh of upper-class families. A professional photographer who has to cater to a foreign clientele, Singh declares that she can get tired of meeting demands of shots of slums and prostitutes and exploited child labourers. Instead the photographs she has given to *Granta* are meant to demonstrate that "there are many versions of India" and hers is the world of happy, well-dressed, well-fed, tradition-conscious, cosmopolitan people.

In the end, what impresses about *Granta's* golden jubilee portfolio of India, like its subject matter, is its variety. Singh's images of opulence can thus be juxtaposed with the oral narrative of Viramma, an agricultural worker and midwife in south-east India. Her story has been transcribed by a French couple, and is presented here in a lively translation. It is a story of a world filled with evil spirits on the prowl, indica-

tive of the unpredictability of the life around her, but in the portrait which accompanies her text, she is smiling, as if to acknowledge her good fortune in surviving to old age. And at another extreme is the "apology" for his writing contributed by Nirad Chaudhuri, "My Hundredth Year." This most amazing of survivors would no doubt have had a fit to be described in the same paragraph as Viramma, but he is positively sparkling too in his defense of his literary career. Contributing to the variety of the volume also is the urbane recollection by Ved Mehta of his return to India after an Oxford education in the late fifties; Mark Tully's account of life as a "box wallah's" son in Calcutta in "My Father's Raj," and Jan Morris's meditations on the Raj and its residual life in Britain occasioned by her visit to Clive's castle in Wales. But the most unpredictable piece in the *Granta* volume surely is the Australian Philip Knightley's story of the way he became involved in the "spy vs spy" skirmishes between America and Russia — in Bombay! — while pursuing a career as an expatriate journalist in India at the height of the Cold War.

Over the years, *Granta* has lived up to the reputation it had acquired early in its existence as a magazine devoted to representing the world vividly through a galaxy of cosmopolitan writers and through fascinating verbal and visual images from all corners of the globe; certainly, its fiftieth number, *India: the Golden Jubilee* is proof of the magazine's continuing vitality and ability to put together a unique, thought-provoking and delightful miscellany in any one issue. The Indian sub-continent, with all its contradictions, is alive in all the pages of this wonderful collection, as evident also in the *Jeux d'esprit* of a poem by Vikram Seth, which I cannot resist reproducing the *Granta* special issue as I conclude this review:

Sampati
A Petrarchan sonnet based on a character in the Ramayana
"Why do you cry?"
"I flew too high undone, all see me fall."

cinema

Patrice Leconte, Everything Save Ridiculous

by Sylvie Bullo

EVER if he claims not to make films to be rewarded but to appeal, Patrice Leconte did not conceal his delight during the ceremony of the Césars held in Paris last February. No is he a man to unduly display his emotions. Patrice Leconte smiled broadly and uttered a few pleasant words when Annie Girardot, the chairperson of the festivities, handed him the César for the best French film for "Ridicule". At last, this director who had been forsaken by the Césars, this "specialist of unconfirmed nominations" as he himself put it, had been acknowledged.

His bad luck started in 1987 with "Tandem". He arrived with seven nominations and left with the César for the best poster! Louis Malle's film, "Au revoir les enfants" had won all the awards. Two years later, Patrice Leconte was back in the running with "Le mari

All his films, or almost, have been successful. Yet, it is only this year that the French film director Patrice Leconte has been acknowledged by his peers with "Ridicule", which was awarded the César for the best film. It is a success story.

de la coiffeuse", but it was the year of "Trop belle pour toi", one of Bertrand Blier's great successes. In 1990, Jean-Paul Rappeneau's "Cyrano" won all the prizes. Leconte and "Monsieur Hire" had to content themselves with the César for the best sound. That's how it was and Leconte never took it badly and was never bitter. "The public is always right and one is quite wrong to consider it as a bunch of idiots. A film which does well is obviously a success."

This is the case with "Ridicule" with which the Cannes Festival opened and which achieved more than two million admissions in France, won the big prize at the Chicago Festival, was nominated for the Golden Globes, was selected to

represent France for the Oscars, was nominated twelve times for the Césars and is starting on a promising career in the United States.

"Ridicule" is, first of all, the story of a bet and of love at first sight. When he received the scenario from a completely unknown script-writer, Rémi Waterhouse, Patrice Leconte threw a fit. "It turned me right over like a pancake. I immediately phoned the producer forbidding him to make the film without me." However, the story is not his cup of tea. "I made the film of a dunce. At school, in history lessons, I had the impression that I was being told stories about Martians. It is not because I was going to make a film about life at Louis

XVI's court that I was going to start frequenting the Bibliothèque Nationale. I wasn't going to do research to check if the script-writer had done his work correctly!" Yet, behind the casualness and ease of the film director, there is a meticulous man who had a taste for detail and a passion for things well done. He is simply reluctant to give an image of himself as an industrious man.

He loves being overburdened with work. To the past, he prefers the present which he lives as a gift. He does not seek society life and only goes to Cannes or to the Césars presentation ceremony if he has a film in the competition. On such occasions, he gets out his dinner jacket which he bought ten years earlier at the time of "Tandem".

Patrice Leconte, who has been 49 years old since November, follows his path, zigzagging on different registers. He is very fond of comic strips and made his first film "Les vécus étaient fermés de l'intérieur" based on a Gotlib comic,



with Jean Rochefort and Coluche who was making his debut. It was a complete flop. "This failure stopped me from in-

toxicating myself with success later on." Two years later, he returned with "Les bronzés". It was a triumph which he first of all attributes to the troupe of Le Splendid. "It was the producer Christian Flechner who made me break out of my good habit of only making one comedy film a year, by asking me to make an action film, "Les spécialistes" with Gérard Lanvin and Bernard Giraudeau. It was a smash hit which made me want to do very different things. Each film ought to be a prototype. You can't do the same thing twice. The public is quite astute and realizes if you try to serve up the same soup reheated."

Today, Patrice Leconte is getting ready to start shooting another film written for the producer Christian Flechner. "I can't say anything about it. I have promised." He simply agrees to say that the film will bring together Alain Delon, Jean-Paul Belmondo and Vanessa Paradis.

pomes

Gratitude

by Helal Kabir Chowdhury

She is complacent
Not a badgering spectre
Does drudgery
Works, shops and cooks.

I remain silent in a sanctuary
No work just Philosophise
I am imbecile & indolent
But not a coward.

She loves me
She is a mother

No hangover for my failure.

She preaches affection
Adores the aesthetics
I share her presence

Love has earned her
endless patience.
She is my company
and love.

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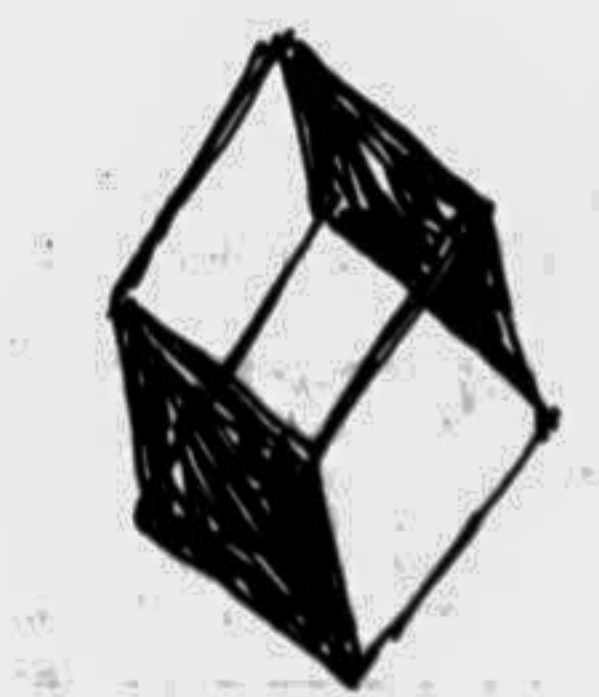
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Realisation

Helal Kabir Chowdhury

Dawns now of late but never
Gives a painful feel of despondency
Can the past be brought back
And do away with follies and frolics
Yes, their impact is everlasting.



Can this mortal life be remodelled
at forty.
You say it begins now
Do not argue.
Belief is not an optimism
Draining of energy
it sinews empty.

Why not live a compromise
Shrug of the mosses
May be it is lighting
It is brewing
It is rejuvenating.
It shall renew
The lost life
will again begin.