

Of Tumult, Turbulence and Tribulations

Basti by Intizar Husain

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Basti by Intizar Husain, originally published in Urdu in 1979, is one of the powerful novels about Partition and its aftermath. It is only after its English translation by Frances Pritchett published by Oxford University Press, Delhi in 2007, it acquired wider acclaim and bouquets from the reading public both in our country and abroad. Considered a simply structured, multi-layered narrative, the novel about the post independence partition of India and Pakistan and is the emergence of East Pakistan as Bangladesh. Partition is the traumatic experience of all. Those living in the North and West Bengal are the worst hit. *Basti* is set in a number of places real and imaginary: Lahore and Delhi, Rupnagar and Vyaspur. Son of the Maulana Abba Jan of Rupnagar, Zakir (significantly meaning the one who remembers) is the chief protagonist. The Maulana is deeply religious, a Shiite, who stoutly opposed all innovations. Khvajah who has two sons Salamat and Karamat is Abba Jan's close friend who reveres him most. Bi Amma is Zakir's paternal grand mother. Ammi Jan's sister Khalah Jan has two daughters Tahirah and Sabirah all of whom come to Rupnagar. Zakir has five close friends, Afzal, Surrender, Ajmal, Irfan and Salamat.

This novel has references to the rebellion of 1857, the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the wars between India and Pakistan in 1969, the division of Pakistan and Bangladesh and the India/East Pakistan and Pakistan in 1971. The political disturbances are the backdrop for the tribulations of the characters in the novel where folk stories, epics and political turmoil people suffered in the past are dealt with in detail. The protagonists have no religious enmity between them as we see in Surrender's concern and affection for all his fiends who are Muslims.

Zakir's early childhood is spent in harmony with all in Rupnagar. Hindu Bhagat-ji's tales of Hindu epics, the events and heroes in them influenced him. His father a devout Shiite recites verses from the Quran and his friends revere and adore him. Even the Bible stories like the Cain- Abel story and the killing in it influence Zakir. When he asks his grandmother Bi Amma why Cain murdered Abel, he is told that it is a curse on his blood- it is thinner than water. When his friends ask Abba Jan questions, his replies convince them. Bhagat-ji recalls what 'whens' and 'whens' are illumined in Abba Jan's imagination. Here is one example:

"Maulana, when will Doomsday come?

'When the mosquito dies, and the cow is free of fear.'

....

'When will those who can speak fall silent, and when will shoelaces speak?'

'When the rulers grow cruel, the people lick the dust.' (pp.4-5)*

Words and dialogues like this shape Zakir's personality. Abba Jan dislikes all innovations. Electricity is one. When he did not go to the mosque one day Rupnagar gets connected to electricity. A very small

incident of his childhood influences Zakir. He touches Vasanthi's bare arm and she says 'Go away, you Muslim brat'. Rupnagar with its dust laden roads, trees, birds and simple men and women is his idea of happiness. He never forgets this idyllic place. From Gwalior comes his aunt Khalah Jan with her two daughters Tahirah and Sabirah. Sabirah is affectionately called Sabbo. Zakir gets the second shock from Sabirah.

'Come. Let us play groom and bride.'

'Bridegroom and bride?' She was taken aback.

'Yes, as though I'm the bridegroom and you're the bride.'

'Someone will see.' She was nervous.

Just then thunder rumbled in the clouds, scaring them both, and at once the rain came down so hard that before they got from the open roof to the staircase they were both drenched. (p.21)

People live happily in Rupnagar. Janmashtami is celebrated there. Laila - Majnun are remembered with equal ardour. Zakir tells Sabirah that Ramchandari's leaf plates after he finishes eating his food are tasted by the King of Crows. He says to her that he can even swear that in God's name. When Vasanthi goes to tell Bi Amma on Zakir she says: 'Why are you born in our house? You should've been born in some Hindu's house! Your father is always invoking the names of God and the Prophet – he doesn't realize that his son has taken to Hindu stories!' (p.25)

Abba Jan and his family move on to Vyaspur after his old mother (Bi Amma) dies. There are rallies on the roads and turmoil. There are sounds of gun shots. In Vyaspur from the terrace of their house one could see the burning ghat. In the new location Zakir makes friends with Phullo whose strange superstitions he believes. Abba Jan tells him that the train coming there (Vyaspur) from Moradabad goes to Delhi. Zakir makes friends with Surender. They study under the single mango tree in the school. Surender shows him the girl Rhimjhim from a distance. Once she says "Well, if it is not a Muslim brat!" Zakir is satisfied that he is taught something by Surender. Zakir tells his friend about Sabirah's lips. The two friends see turmoil through the train first.

Once the country is partitioned Zakir goes to Lahore along with his parents. Lahore becomes Zakir's scene of action now. He teaches history in a college. The Shiraz, a tea-house, becomes the den for Zakir and his five friends, Afzal, Irfan, Salamat and Ajmal and Surender. These are 'regulars' in the Shiraz calling themselves mice. The waiter Abdul treats them as his masters. All the turmoil, tumult and turbulence of the war are seen only in this background in a sense since the protagonist's life and character take the centre stage. People's lives in all the places, Lahore, Delhi and even Dhaka are presented and the turbulence is vividly portrayed. The Shiraz is the centre for the friends and the way each views it is different. Salamat, the son of Khvaja Sahib hates all who do not fight. He wants to change the system. Here is a bit of conversation between Khvaja Sahib and Abba Jan:

'.. Maulana, now what times are coming upon the Muslims?'

Abba Jan raised his forefinger toward the sky: 'Only He knows'.

'Maulana! Let me tell you one thing: we're destined to endure bad times at the hands of our sons. I tried to make Salamat see reason: "Son, your wits are wandering. Why do you ruin your throat yelling slogans?" And what answer does he give me, but "We are going to change the system!"

Abba Jan said gravely, Khvaja Sahib! In this world there have lived one hundred twenty-four thousand Prophets, and has the world changed?'

"No sir, it hasn't changed." (p.57)

The discussions of the friends reveal war scenes as they see, understand and suffer them. They talk about processions, slogans and destruction. At a distance from the regulars a white haired man sits alone at a table and comes to ask them news of the goings on in the turmoil. His explanation of the whiteness of his hair is this to the young people at another table:

'When I set out from my home, my hair was black. And I wasn't at any age at all, I was only twenty or twenty-one. When I reached Pakistan and washed myself and looked in the mirror, my hair had turned entirely white.'p.64.

This is the experience of the man who after the partition moved from India to Pakistan.

Irfan becomes a journalist and Surender the director of All India Radio, Delhi. Ajmal given to drink also hates his father. Zavvar, who appears to be cynical, makes it to the ICS. Zakir, a professor of history, is asked in the class by a student, whether among the Mughals all brothers are step-brothers. Zakir snubs him. He feels there is no distinction between stepbrothers and brothers. Cain and Abel weren't step brothers. He begins to think of his own first day in Pakistan later when the white-haired man swims before his eyes. He could not sleep after seeing Anarkali Bazaar and Shamnagar. A Hindu leaves Pakistan after he is humiliated by the police. These give us a rough but poignant idea of how partition is felt and experienced by people. Zakir remembers Sabirah. He hears Auntie Sharifan telling his mother about Sabirah refusing to leave Delhi and hoping to get a job there. Zakir is encouraged to write to Sabirah, but he does not. Half heartedly he tries to angle his student, a research scholar Tasnim first.

'Tasnim!' I finally opened my mouth.

In response she lifted her eyes to me, but I didn't know what I'd wanted to say. I was lost, dissolved, as though I didn't exist at all.

Finally she rose. I too rose, confused and flustered. I escorted her to the door. As I was leaving the room I said softly, 'Tasnim!'

She paused, but I was struck dumb. Then with the speed of lightning she left the room. I was left standing there.

She didn't come again. (p.86)

Even with Anisah, the girl who returns from London with a new elegance, he makes a weak effort. They go to the Imperial which too has gone further downhill during the turbulence. Anisah says to him that when she left it was rally at its peak. Zakir begins in his usual way:

'That's the trouble with peaks. Those who are on them never even imagine that they could be brought down from such a height! And when the decline starts, it can't be stopped halfway. The decline doesn't stop even for a moment, until it reaches its limit.'

'You've started talking about the decline of nations. I was talking about the Imperial.'(p.89)

She asks him if he has made some experiments in love since she has left. He follows her to her place. The two have small talk but Zakir could not succeed in his ineffective overtures after going with her into her place. He returns, but goes again only to return without going in. That is Zakir, the feckless lover. The reader is convinced that he is a chip of the old block, his father, who never approved of and allowed any change, deviation or innovation to come up. It is right that Anisah says that he has become an intellectual.

At the turbulence front Lahore comes under the spell of a new two-word slogan painted on all vehicles: 'Crush India'. The friends in the Shiraz argue, shout, and blare. Salamat yells against Afzal:

"Reactionaries! Imperialist stooges! Boot-lickers of the capitalists! Your day of reckoning has come. Your day of reckoning has come." ...

'Yar, these revolutionaries will ruin us. And how much that mouse talks!'

'This is the time for people like him to speak,' Irfan said.

'When shoelaces speak, and (sic) those who can speak fall silent. He (Zakir) was startled. Nowadays this kind of thing was happening to him. Some forgotten saying of Abba Jan's, some remark of Bi Amma's, would suddenly come into his mind and at once slide away again – the way a snake would raise its head from the grass, then vanish again in an instant.'(p.97)

When the manager asks Zakir if there would be a war he only says that he does not know. He walks and walks even when there is turbulence in the city.

'No noise, no voice, no sound of footsteps, no nothing, only the sound of gnawing coming from all sides, as though many mice were gnawing something... walking along one lane, he found the lane ahead closed... a cat standing up on her hind legs opened the door (of the mansion), looked at him intently, and closed the door. The light changed from green to red. He began to cross at the crosswalk, and then hesitated. The waiting cars, scooter-cabs and motor bikes suddenly rushed past him as though a dam in a river had burst.' (p.103)

The derailed condition of Zaki's mind changes when he gets a letter from Sunder who works as the director of AIR in Delhi. The long letter tells Zakir that Sabirah is working in the radio station in the news room just minding her work. Sunder sees her for the first time in the news room after partition. Soon

they recognize each other. One day they talk to each other and she tells Sunder that her people are in Karachi, some in Lahore and some in Islamabad. Surrender writes how he has very carefully tried to probe Sabirah's ideas about Zakir. The conclusion is suggestive.

Yesterday when I was drinking tea with Sabirah, my eyes fell on the part in her hair. How elegantly straight a part she had made. I saw that among the black hairs one hair was shining like silver. So hurry and come here. Come and see the city of Delhi, and the realm of beauty, for both are waiting for you. Come and join them before silver fills the part in her hair and your head becomes a drift of snow, and our lives are merely a story. That's all.

Surrender (p.111)

Abba Jan remembers about the valuables in their storeroom in Rupnagar, his father-in-law and his prayer carpet brought from Madina and the tablet of healing earth from Karbala. Hearing about all this Zakir remembers Surrender's praise and adoration for the power of the grave for Muslims which gives tremendous importance for shrouds. Outside there is noise and lights have to be switched off. The way the turmoil is worsening while men and women are preoccupied with personal problems and worries make the reading of the novel thrilling. The war of 1971 makes people become motionless holding their breath.

Zakir's wartime diary makes the novel wonderful reading conveying two things: the horror of the war suffered by the people and secondly Zakir's nature, his dreams, visions, and his remembrances of the epics, history, folktales. The roads, the vehicles, the railway platforms, the Shiraz all portray shock and pain. Zakir wonders where people are going. He has his own thoughts of the Jataka tales and Buddha's subtle teachings. Zakir feels thus:

The primary point of writing this diary is that during the long wartime nights it will help me discipline my distracted mind ...I see another advantage of it as well I'll be writing my wartime autobiography. ... I ought to preserve the record of my lies and my cowardice.(p.125)

News of happenings flow on:

Amritsar has been taken, the airport at Agra has been totally destroyed... the Imperial has been erased like a redundant letter from the city's slate. The buildings, the places that hold our sorrows in trust are reduced to nothingness in a moment by one single bomb ... Rupnagar and this city have merged together inside me, and became one town. (p.127)

Zakir remembers his father telling his mother once:

'Zakir's mother,' Abba Jan said gravely, "Death is everywhere. Where can a man go to flee from it? It is a saying of the Prophet that those who run from death, run toward death instead.' (p.128)

The chief protagonist Zakir's mind is suggestively dislocated at times. He feels perturbed. Birds are gone. The guava trees have plenty of fruit unmarked by the beaks of birds. The war has thrown life into

confusion. Inside Zakir times and places get topsy-turvy. Sometimes, he feels, that he has absolutely no idea where he is and in what place. The college being deserted with no classes he goes there once and comes to the Shiraz. During nights he suffers dreams, visions and strange kind of nightmares. His diary entries, dating from Dec 5th to December 16th, make the novel powerfully communicative to the perceptive minds of readers. His visions are illuminating. In one he sits in a cave and out side there is black night with its jaws opened wide. War sound and noises are not heard. He is encircled by fear. Times and places scrambled within, he wonders where he is going while every direction confuses him with places around disordered. Emerging from the forest he enters a town where he sees a lake amidst which an elephant and a tortoise fight with each other – neither winning, neither defeated. It would be a worthy experience for the electrified readers to think of war, of India and Pakistan, of the enmity between nations and the horrors suffered by people.

In one vision Zakir sees a faqir who tells him a story about the chief of a town who before his death calls his two sons and tells them that he divided his knowledge and his property between them equally cautioning them that if they seek for more than one's right it would bring disaster on the Lord's creatures. The brothers differed sometime later and cursed one another: one became a tortoise and the other an elephant and they began fighting. Asked about the outcome of the battle and what finally happened, the faqir replies:

'The water of the lake will become muddy.'
I said 'That has already happened.'
He replied, 'Even muddier,'
'How muddy?'

He said, 'So much so that lake will become a swamp, and dust would blow through the town.'(p.134)

This fable, parable or call it whatever you will, becomes very instructive. Then there is a vision of a fountain of paradise and beautiful women in all grandeur.

Balconies, mirror-walled rooms; a delicately beautiful woman swings in a swing, glancing at her lovely face in a tiny mirror - ring ... one abode of beauty wears a robe of flowing-water fabric, so that the gaze travels clearly through it from one side to the other. One rose-faced woman has dark collyrium around her eyes, a dark red colour-paste on her lips, a bosom in full flower, a veil slipping down from her shoulders, a belly like a tablet of sandalwood, a navel like a golden cup, below it a place like a juicy sweet. Beyond this the curtain is drawn, modesty holds sway. 'Guess from my garden what my spring time is like.'* He who has Fortune for a helper, and courage by his side, let him dive in and bathe in the Ganges of accomplishment; swimming is auspicious for the courageous. (pp.134-35)

*In a note it is said that this is a famous line of Persian verse, used like a proverb.

Zakir continues his walks, his dreams continue also. He has visions like an old man telling him how their king's shoulders have two snakes eating the brains of people chosen by a cast. He dreams of a Shiva-like one in contemplation with a Nandi like bull standing before him. Then there are all kinds of rumours

among people, of the Seventh Fleet, Persian Army and Chinese Army coming. There is a talk about the coming of the Lady in Green who would fall on the enemy like a bomb.

Afzal and Zakir sit in the Shiraz and talk about birds and trees. Afzal expects land from the administration for raising beds of roses and mango orchards where koels sing. While the hopes of beautifying Pakistan are being discussed there is rumbling in the sky loud enough to make the ear drums burst. Zakir loses his mind further and talks, meaningfully though, of the 1857 war and Tantiya Topi.

When the war is over, Khvajah Sahib comes to Abba Jan with good news. Someone tells him of seeing his (disappeared son) Karamat in Bangkok. He goes from place to place to find the one who is said to have seen his son. Zakir's mother asks him to write a letter to Sabirah. The narrative comes down to personal problems, desires and interests. Abba Jan discovers an old bag with things he always cherished along with the keys of the storeroom in their house left twenty-five years ago. Afzal's old granny (whom he has been all the time telling her that the floods would not allow them to go back home) dies when she is told that the floods are there then on their, Pakistan, side. Zakir's father dies. Khvaja Sahib tells Zakir that his father's grave has subsided and asks him to go to it immediately. This makes him distraught and he remembers the parable of the tiger and his cub which Buddha narrated to his disciples. When the tiger roars the jackals shook themselves. Later the jackal's howls arouse the forest, the tiger remains silent:

'Oh my father! You, so brave, the king of the forest – it's surprising the jackals are making so much noise, and you are silent.' The tiger replied, 'Oh, my son! Keep one word of your father's close to your heart: when jackals speak, the tigers fall silent.' (p.198

Zakir remembers the old saying that when the wise fall silent the shoelaces speak. He records and utters his reflections on the nature of things he sees around and within during the turmoil and tribulations. He remembers many things related to or quoted from the epics like the Mahabharat, from the Bible and Urdu and Persian poetry. At the end of the novel he sits with Afzal and Irfan on the sidewalk by the ruined Shiraz.

'Yar,' he (Zakir) said to Irfan 'I want to write her a letter.'

'Now?' Irfan stared into his face.

'Yes, now.'

'Now when –' There was no telling what Irfan wanted to say; in the midst of his sentence he fell silent. (Perhaps, he remembers Surender's letter and his words about Sabirah's hair.)

... ..

'Why are you silent?' Irfan was gazing steadily at him.

'Silence.' Afzal, placing a finger on his lips, signaled to Irfan to be silent. I think we will see a sign.'

'A sign? What sign can there be now?' Irfan said with bitterness and despair.

'Fellow, signs always come just at these times, when all around -' He paused in the middle of his speech. Then he said in a whisper, 'This is the time for a sign -' (p204)

Now it is for the readers to guess, to hope, to imagine. A sign - for 'what' - can never be clearly known for sure – it may be for a situation, turmoil fading out, and tribulations coming to an end leading to Zakir and Sabirah getting together. The open ending of the novel is brilliant, sparking ideas and suggesting feelings to the reader for thinking up of solutions and changes to bring in joy. One recent thing that all the readers would be happy to note is that after this novel is published in the U.S. for the first time, Intizar Husain scaled another peak, won another distinction, becoming one of the ten finalists nominated for the 5th Man Booker International Prize, 2013.

Works Cited

Husain Intizar, *Basti*, (translated from Urdu by Frances W.Pritchett) Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi, 2007

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