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Interview with Dr. Sucha Nand



Dr. Sucha Nand with his wife Surinder

Dr. Sucha Nand superannuated as a Professor of Medicine from Loyola University of Chicago, U.S.A. To him "Writing Fiction has been both a joy and catharsis." He has written poems, short stories, and The Partition: A Novel (2007). In the recent past he has written A History of the Brahmins in two volumes.

Dr. T.S. Anand and Dr Kalpna Rajput spoke to him about his engagements with creative literature and the issues that inform his oeuvre.

TSA/KR: The Partition of India took place in 1947 when you were not even born. How come you produced novel about it when you didn't actually live the brutish experience of the holocaust that engulfed the Indian subcontinent?

SN: I was born about 18 months after the partition. The subject of partition has always fascinated me. It was a tragedy born out of pettiness and selfishness of national leaders, haste and indifference of the rulers and utter thoughtless and lack of planning by all. The fate of the subcontinent and its people was decided by a man who had never set foot in India before. Once underway, the partition brought out the beast in all. It is incredible to see how quickly human beings revert to their animal nature.

TSA/KR: There are a number of novels on the theme of partition by Indian English novelists and regional writers which have portrayed the horrendous times in which human values were at discount. Your narrative does throw instances of humanness of the people living on both sides of the Wagah border. Any special reasons for this side of humanity during the darkest hours?

SN: I also believe that in all societies, there are people who remain unaffected by the hatred and venom around them and are able to act on their good instincts. Hence, the humane characters in this book.

TSA/KR: *The Partition: A Novel* is basically the story of two friends, Ram Dass and Chaman Lal, together during the ordeal of partition but parted due to some misunderstanding. Women are thrown into your narrative, but they seem to be mere adjuncts to the male protagonists. Why are female perspectives missing from the narratives on partition? Your novel too falls in this slot. Any comment.

*SN: I did not try to make *The Partition* male-oriented narrative. Actually, I never thought in those terms. I wrote the story as it came to me. However, you are right that most of the literature about partition is male-dominated. The only two exceptions that I know of are the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa and Amrita Pritam.*

TSA/KR: The force of memory has produced literary works of enduring value. Whose memory you were relying on when you set out to write this novel in the first decade of 21st century?

SN: This book was inspired by the stories I heard from my own parents, grandfather and other people in our village. My father was in Karachi at the time of partition and was lucky to come back alive.

TSA/KR: Locating your novel in the time frame of 1975 you have successfully employed the flashback technique to focus on the drastic changes that have gripped the life in the countryside -- drying and choking of canals, disappearance of familiar fauna and flora, growing menace of drug addiction, environmental pollution etc.

SN: *I left India in 1975. Like most people who have emigrated, my image of the country is frozen in that period of time. Even though I have visited India frequently since then, I am unable to erase or update those last impressions. I grew up in a small village and my concept of the land is securely tied to rural life in Punjab. The changes that I describe in the book had been taking place for many years before my departure. The deterioration of country life, which probably had not altered much for centuries, and the loss of lush green vegetation, were bothersome.*

TSA/KR: How did you feel after writing this novel? When should we expect another piece of creativity from you pen?

SN: *I found out that writing a novel is more difficult than writing a medical text or a scientific paper. Creating villages and people, making them talk and behave in particular ways and keeping the sequence and timing correct can be very taxing. I knew how I wanted to tell the story but fashioning it required revising it about 20 times. After finishing it, I felt a tremendous sense of relief. Even though I have some ideas on which I could build further, I have not made any immediate plans for putting these on paper. I am currently involved in a research project on acute leukemia. Once it gets going, I will have more time to devote to my other projects. May be in a year or so.*

TSA/KR: You have already published short stories, poems and a play. What are the possible writerly concerns of yours reflected in these creative outpourings?

SN: *My writings do not reflect any specific philosophy or impart any messages. I am infinitely fascinated with human beings. We are remarkable creatures capable of ideas and actions of endless variety. We create objects and thoughts of unparalleled beauty but we also inflict horrible pain on each other. We explore the universe on the wings of spacecrafts but we are also capable of destruction and annihilation at grand scale. I could go on and on. But the point I am trying to make is that, in my writing, I simply describe what I see of my fellow men and women. I do not judge them. What they do, makes great stories.*

TSA/KR: Play-writing is a different genre and demands different kind of literary discipline. Was it the force of circumstance/compulsion that you ventured into play writing? What was the play all about? Did you ever think of staging it?

SN: *I completely agree with you. I wrote one play when I was in Medical College. It was published in our Medical College magazine. But I did it as a lark. I never made any serious attempt in this area.*

TSA/KR: How do you divide your time between your calling and your passion for writing? Any special constraints when it comes to creativity?

SN: *Medical profession still claims the bulk of my time. I devote my evenings and weekends to literary endeavors.*

TSA/KR: Your ethnicity and actual geographical location make you what is today called Diasporic writer. Did you ever feel the pangs of alienation, discrimination, homelessness, strangeness, existential angst and identity which characterize the literature of the Indian diaspora?

SN: Like all immigrants, I went through the transition of exchanging one culture for another, and experienced the usual difficulties that come with such shifts in one's life. Being a physician helped in this regard. It is a fairly sheltered profession and one is spared the harsher realities that others have to face. Interestingly, I have not felt much change in my own perception of my identity after coming to the U.S. I have been and am very comfortable with how I look, talk or interact with others. There is no question that I am different now than I was in 1975 when I migrated, but I have changed on my own terms.

My adopted country has been good to me. But I do miss the one I left behind. It was there that I experienced the truest of joys - of friendship, love, comfort, warmth, family and a sense of belonging.

TSA/KR: How do you explain the transition from medicine-to-creative writing-to-history of Brahmins?

*SN: For me it was not a transition as I was practising medicine and writing *A History of the Brahmins* simultaneously. Five days a week, my attention was focused on treating patients, teaching students, residents and fellows, and doing research. The weekends were reserved for non-medical activities, i.e. writing this book. This division of labor worked for me because practice of Medicine was more of a duty whereas gathering information for the history of the Brahmins, and writing it, was a hobby. And like all hobbies, this one was enjoyable. It took me thirteen years to complete this project of history writing. I must give credit to my wife and sons for helping me gather the necessary materials for the book which came from India and many universities across the US.*

TSA/KR: What were the motivating factors for you to extensively explore multiple dynamics of the history of Brahmins?

*SN: There were two factors that pushed me along the path of writing *A History of the Brahmins*. One was that I am a Brahmin by birth, which automatically brought along the curiosity of knowing more about my own community. The second reason was that, for a small minority of the population of India, the Brahmins have had an outsize influence on the history of the subcontinent. The Brahmins make up about 5% of the population of India. If, then, one looks at the royal dynasties, list of prime ministers, the Nobel Prize winners, distinguished achievers in arts and literatures, one finds the Brahmins holding a much larger share. For me, the question became: what drove this small community to distinction that lasted millenia? To be sure, the Brahmins contributed significantly to the failures that have haunted India during much of its history; hence what were their contributions to the failures?*

TSA/KR: For the benefit of our readers please state briefly the distinguishing features of the book and how *A History of the Brahmins* is different from other books on the same subject?

*SN: The features of *A History of the Brahmins* that distinguish it from other books on the subject are these: a) I am not aware of a similar book on this subject, b) The book was written in partnership with my brother who died in 2012. Most of Sanskrit translations were done by him, c) Since both authors are Brahmins, there may be an element of bias towards the Brahmins. We tried*

our best to be objective but absolute objectivity is an impossible goal. The Sanskrit term for history is 'Itihasa' which means 'This is what happened.' Since 'iti' is also used to end quotes, the implication is that itihasa means 'This is what happened as stated by others.' Hence, no history can claim to be completely impartial.

I want to thank both of you for your interest in my writings and hope I have answered your questions fully.