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One Week in One Day

A Weekly dedicated to Art, Culture & Entertainment

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Essence India

Aditya Vyas

The nation has grown to be 60, conventionally the diamond jubilee year for India being a republic. As one would expect the erstwhile dominion of various princely states and tribal areas amalgamated, grew and metamorphosed into a federal state. The evolution of such a diverse land is actually quite unique. The best part about being in India is that the diversity is centuries old and unity is relatively new found. A central governance system as it exists today was unheard of in ancient times. Some would say that under the Mogul rule India was to an extent governed by a single power but it was more of feudal kind and they governed the internal workings of their own state. Hence there was no unity as what would be desired in a "nation".

It was the opposition to the British that paved the way for Indian nationalism in the modern sense of the word and patriotism found a new meaning at the hands of giant leaders such as Lokamanya Tilak. Culturally the initiative to begin a festival like Ganesh festival was a stroke of genius because it was celebrated in households of Maharashtra. This paved the way to bring the classical arts in the public eye, hitherto bound in the confines of the royal palaces. This was just the beginning as the historic national movement started to entwine patriotic elements it also unfolded the cultural diversity and unified it keeping the diversity intact.

The innumerable art forms in India have been patronised by the government to a satisfactory level and it is also evident that many corporates give munificent support to the arts so the vibrant cultural aspects of the country have been nurtured. It is the responsibility of artists to further train the new generation and encourage them to pursue these vocations is the onus of the people who serve art to create a culturally rejuvenated India.



Pic : Menka Shivdasani

An insider's view

Nayantara Sahgal tells Menka Shivdasani that we should create the right atmosphere to encourage the arts in India

Few writers in India have had as much of an insider's view of the Indian freedom struggle as Nayantara Sahgal. As Jawaharlal Nehru's niece and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's daughter, she was in a unique position to view a changing society in vital, and often, painful, ways.

Sahgal, who was born on May 10, 1927, published her first book, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* in 1954.

Subsequent novels include *A Time to Be Happy*, *This Time of Morning*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, and *The Day in Shadow*.

Her other books include *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power*, *A Situation in New Delhi*, *Mistaken Identity* and *Rich Like Us*.

Among other things, Nayantara Sahgal was an advisor to Sahitya Akademi's Board for English from 1972 to 1975, and a member of Verghese Committee for Autonomy of Radio & TV in 1977-78.

She was awarded the Sinclair Prize for fiction in 1985, Sahitya

Akademi Award in 1986, and Commonwealth Writers Award in 1987. She was also a Fellow member of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, from 1981 to 1982. In addition, she has served on the jury of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1990 and 1991.

As the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, and daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, you have seen the world of politics close up from your earliest days. Could you tell us about your childhood and how the turmoil of the freedom struggle affected you? When you look back, which incidents made the most impact on your writing in later days?

My mother Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was Jawaharlal Nehru's sister. My first book, *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, was an account of my childhood, and what it was like to grow up during the struggle for freedom. It has just been brought out in a new

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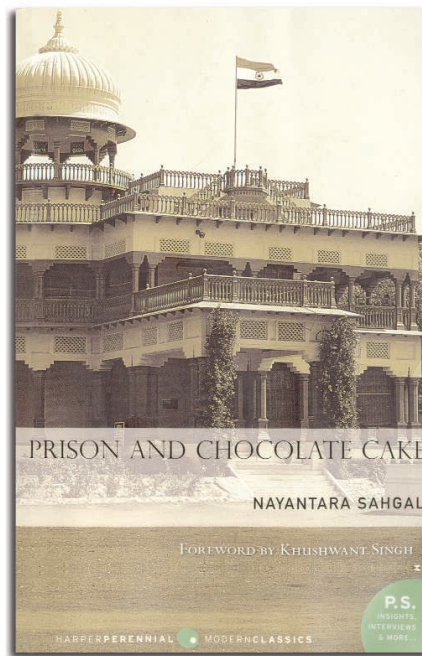
Interview

edition and I can do no better than recommend it to those who did not read it earlier because it captures the mood and atmosphere of the time, apart from being a very personal family memoir.

No particular incidents made an impact on my writing. What made a lasting impact was the culture of the national movement for independence, which cut across region, religion, caste and gender to create a powerful mindset that laid the secular foundations of modern India. This is the "culture" I belong to and it has influenced all my fiction and non-fiction.

Your father, who died in prison during the freedom struggle, was a barrister and classical scholar who translated the Kashmiri epic *Raj Tarangini* into English, from Sanskrit. Could you describe the literary milieu in which you grew up?

He translated three Sanskrit classics into English - *Rajtarangini*, *Mudra Raksasha*, and Kalidasa's *Ritusambhara*. Yet he was not just a "literary" person. He was a gifted linguist who spoke several Indian and European languages, an enthusiastic sportsman, a lover of Indian and western music, a passionate patriot, and above all, a lover of life. So the atmosphere of our home was many sided and vibrant with ideas and influences from everywhere, not merely literary, though as a child I had access to the wonderful library in my home, Anand Bhawan, and grew up reading a great variety of books.



You have been a political journalist, and your fiction is imbued with politics as well. In your view, what is the role of fiction in providing critiques of society? What is the line between telling a story, and conveying a message? Where does writing about the 'personal' aspect of life - relationships between men and women, for instance - fit into this?

Fiction does not provide critiques of society. It just tells a story and a story has to be about people, the times they live in, the problems they face, their loves and hopes and fears.

Relationships between men and women are part of life, and therefore, of fiction. "Messages" have no role to play in fiction. My own fiction has used political settings because politics is the material I grew up with.

You are sometimes seen as the spokesperson for the western-educated Indian who is uneasy against an 'Indian' background. What does the concept of an identity crisis mean to you?

Whoever sees me as "uneasy against an Indian background" has never read anything I have written, or met me. I am not only Indian by birth, but of choice and temperament. I have never wanted to be anything else.

India has been the main character in all my writing. I would feel very uneasy as part of a diaspora, or if I had to live in any other part of the world.

Could you describe your literary journey? How did the writing first begin for you? How, in your view, has your writing evolved?

My writing began with *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and went on from there. But I have never been a "driven" writer, there have been long spells when I have had to concentrate on earning a living, as I was impoverished by the divorce that ended my first marriage.

I have never been able to spend as much time as I would have wished, on fiction. I wrote political commentary for many years, for Indian and foreign papers, as a matter of conscience, to say what I felt needed to be said, but fiction was always my first love.

At a series of workshops with Indian women writers, the overwhelming reaction was that censorship and self-censorship stop women from writing about three things - religion, politics and sex. Your own writing clearly belies this. What would you say to these writers? To begin with, do you see yourself as a "woman writer"; should such distinctions be drawn?

All writers come out of their individual backgrounds. Mine was a liberal emancipated background where I was taught to think for myself and express myself in a truly democratic family atmosphere. All women are not so fortunate and may feel constrained by both family and society in expressing themselves. No, I don't think writers should be divided into women and men. The creative impulse has no sex. Writers are writers. I don't think painters or musicians are divided by sex.

How, in your view, has the literary scene in India changed in the last decade or so? What changes would you want to see in the future?

I can't comment on this as I do not keep up with the "literary scene". All I can say is that there should be an atmosphere in the country that encourages the arts, including literature, to flourish, and that translations will enable the Indian languages to find a world audience.

I also hope that the goons who vandalise works of art, burn books, and threaten the lives of artists and writers, will be dealt with by the law and not be allowed to go unpunished.

Do you think Indian writing in English has been given its due? What would you say to those who believe that one must write in one's mother tongue for it to have any value at all?

One should write in whatever language one wants to write in. English is recognised as one of India's languages. All of them enrich Indian literature. No one language has more value than another.

The point is not which language one writes in, but whether the writing is good or bad.

If you were to rewrite your autobiography today, what, if anything, would you want to change or add, in terms of new experiences or perspectives?

I have not written an autobiography yet, and I don't intend to. I have written two autobiographical memoirs which covered my life until the time of writing.

I have also published a correspondence called *Relationship*, now available in a new edition, which is purely personal and autobiographical.

Other than these, readers will have to find me in my fiction and my non-fiction.

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Editor and Publisher:
Shashi Vyas

Advertising and Marketing:
Vinit Ganjwala

Distribution and Public Relations:
Vaibhav Patil

Editorial Co-ordination:
Menka Shivdasani and Raju Kane
The Source, 107, TV Industrial Estate, Worli,
Mumbai: 400018.
Tel: 24901330
e-mail: everytuesday@editsource.com

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