

Generations of school-going children have been reared on a strictly sanitised nationalist history whose narrative is propelled by the Congress' struggle for freedom, Jinnah and the Muslim League's machinations and the coming of independence. The terrible human costs of Partition were viewed as collateral damage and the fruition of the British policy of divide and rule. Such a historiography displays an unshaken faith in the fledgling Indian State's secularist commitment. It was left to the poets and writers to lament "the mottled dawn"—to chronicle the horrors and bestiality of Partition; the moral depravity of individuals, communities and nations that accompanied the redrawing of boundaries and the biggest exchange of human populations ever.

Anis Kidwai found herself in the middle of this bloody vortex in 1947. Her husband, Shafi Ahmad Kidwai, administrator of Mussoorie Municipal Board, was killed on his way to work. Heartbroken, she turned to Gandhi, and transforming her grief into courage became Gandhi's foot soldier in those mad times. *In Freedom's Shade* is Anis's testimony of that dark period — a time she records out of a sense of bounden moral duty, to "reawaken in readers the memories of those poisonous times that we have excised from our hearts and minds". And what a searing and poignant account it is.

Portions of the translations of Anis's original account have been published earlier in Mushirul Hasan's *India Partitioned* (Roli Books, 1995); a feminist retrieval of the lost chapter of Partition relied on her memoirs — most memorably in *Borders and Boundaries* (Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, Kali for Women, 1998) and *The Other Side of Silence* (Urvashi Butalia, Penguin, 1998). We are familiar through these works with Anis Kidwai largely as a loyal subject of a newly independent State, recovering the lost and abducted women, restoring them to their rightful community and custodians. Towards the end of '47, an inter-dominion conference was held at Lahore, following which a Central Recovery Organisation was constituted under the leadership of Lady Mountbatten. In Delhi, the task fell to the women's section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation. Though Rameshwari Nehru was formally in charge, it was Mridula Sarabhai who really drove the project. Feminists have interrogated the State's policy of recovering women — and the complicity of women activists like Mridula, Sushila (Nayyar) and Anis — calling into question this paternal welfarism which arrogated to the State the role of a parent, casting these women as passive citizen subjects, divested of agency. Indeed, Anis's memoir is redolent with the dilemmas she battled in the face of women who refused to return to their families, reluctant to be plucked from their new homes and families. Partly, Anis says, it was sense of loss of honour, shame, fear of rejection, but also occasionally loyalty towards her rescuer, and love too.

This, however, is merely a fragment of Anis's memoirs, comprising only one of the 18 chapters. The story

# A mottled dawn

In Freedom's Shade

By Anis Kidwai

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MANISHA SETHI

she tells us does not show her as a conduit of the State; it is instead a very different portrayal of how the fledgling Indian State abandoned the ideals of secularism, displaying rank communal partisanship. Early in her memoirs, Anis is alarmed by the presence of Brahmins, summoned from Benaras, and the mandatory token maulvis and Buddhist bhikshus at the Independence Day celebrations at the Government House. She saw these as a portent of things to come.

This is also the story of Delhi and its transformation through Partition. The Delhi she arrives in, in

the Hindu and Jain trader cracked under the weight of the violence. Local government officials, writes Anis, ensured that the stream of Muslims to the camp never dried up. Anis distinguishes the first rush of Muslim sanctuary seekers who had been attacked and rendered destitute when violence first broke out in August, from the second wave of refugees, who started to arrive in camps towards the end of the year. These were people whose property had not been attacked — their migration had been forced by exchanges of properties between

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the October of '47 is barely a city — but a graveyard over which circle vultures and kites, eager to pounce at the faintest scent of blood. As trains snaked into the city, carrying half crazed and tormented refugees, ruined, beaten and burning with fury for revenge, waves upon waves of Muslims were driven from their homes into the two camps of Purana Qila and Humayun's Tomb. Supplies were always short — and waylaid by corrupt officials — spaces cramped, and disease rampant; privacy, clean clothes and full stomachs were a fantasy. An estimated 80,000 to 1,00,000 were sequestered in the Purana Qila camp run by the Muslim League and around 60,000 sought refuge in the Humayun's Tomb Muslim camp. A large number of these displaced Muslim families had never expressed an enthusiasm for Pakistan, nor any desire to leave for the new country — and yet they were hounded out, through economic boycotts and coercion. Muslim government employees were asked to leave for Pakistan even when they were keen to return to work.

Karol Bagh, New Delhi and Connaught Place quickly emptied of Muslims. The symbiotic relationship which had existed for centuries between the Muslim artisan and

landlords. The Muslims (and Dalits) of Tihar village, for example, were rendered homeless, after their landlord entered into a deal with the Deputy Commissioner of Police, MS Randhawa, to exchange 13,000 bighas of his land for the 40,000 bighas of land owned by Randhawa's family in Multan and Sindh. While the Muslims "decided to follow their land" to Pakistan, the Dalits who had worked on these lands were also thrown out to settle the refugees. Indeed, Anis's memoirs provide a rare glimpse into the changes wrought in the Delhi countryside.

There was another type of Muslim sanctuary seeker: propertied and relatively affluent who had made arrangements to sell his home and business, and gather his belongings. The flight of rich Muslims created a problem for the poorer Muslim neighbours as newly arrived refugees would take over the property, who would then, abetted by the local administration attempt to change the demography of the locality. So severe was the problem that Gandhi had certain neighbourhoods designated as Muslims zones where evacuee property could be handed over only to Muslims. This pronouncement was however only informal, not backed by law or ordinance and

the police and government in Delhi cheerily ignored it.

Far ahead of her times though Anis was, she was ultimately, as we all are, a product of her times. She launches occasionally into a defence of societal norms, upholding the rules of caste and gender hierarchies. Her work and writing seems pervaded by a strong civilisational and welfarist mission. Though she herself urges for a sensitive understanding of abducted women who refused to return out of a fear of rejection and doubtful futures, she wrote also of the women, who having sampled the "pleasurable nectar of sin", revolted against a return to staid domesticity. These were women who had demonstrated their "open-mindedness" even before the riots. "How", she asked, "could social workers ever hope to reform such sophisticated sinners?" Elsewhere, she and her comrades were not above resorting to invoking the privileges of caste taboos in mobilising Dalits to remove a buffalo carcass.

But perhaps it is because the anomic times that Anis was witnessing — when the moral order on which her world rested, dissolved into nothingness; when earlier values and norms which defined and prescribed social interaction between communities wasted away — that she clung to the familiar. What appeared oppressive to her earlier now seemed comforting: she speaks nostalgically of the time when Muslim and Hindu did not eat with each other but were "fast friends" — but as these proscriptions disappeared, they had no compunction in killing and raping each other.

*In Freedom's Shade* offers a scathing condemnation of the Congress's role in fomenting and controlling violence — or in relief and rehabilitation work. Gandhi once asked Congress workers how many party workers had died in controlling riots. The answer, of course, was none. No Congressi, rues Anis, was to be seen in the bylanes of Muslim mohallas when they burnt; even loyal Muslim Congressis were abandoned to their fate. The Congress government not only allowed the RSS to hold a rally in Delhi, even as the city teetered at the brink of uncertain peace, but the rally was even addressed by Sardar Patel. It seemed that Indian secularism was held together precariously by the moral power of Gandhi, the ideological strength of Nehru and a motley cast of Socialists, Communists, heroes of the famous Kakori case and young idealists of Jamia (I can't help but note with a tinge of pride the stellar role played by the founders and students of Jamia Millia Islamia, where I teach, in preserving peace in Delhi in the aftermath of the Partition).

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