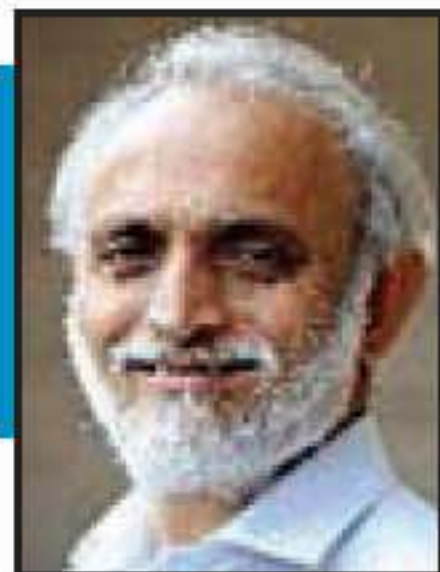


Identities that cannot be erased from individuals and communities



Parsa Venkateshwar
Rao Jr
review

Kishalay Bhattacharjee combines the virtues of a reporter and an academic to breathe life into what could have been arid political controversies about identity by foregrounding first person accounts with a subjective dimension — which is a taboo in any social science discourse — and at the same time retain scholarly rigour to provide historical background and a fact-sheet. And he begins the story where he was born and brought up — Shillong. And he sees the idyll and the fault-lines co-existing. His father moved there after Partition in 1947. There was a distant memory of ancestral home. And he

describes how that home of memories got snapped when his father moved to the border to visit the place in 1971 after Bangladesh was formed. His father turned back at the border after hearing that “Muslims’ had plundered the town, but did not touch the Shiva mandir inside their home. After all they had been ‘friends’. He did not look beyond the check-post guards but turned towards ‘India’ and started walking. By team-time he was ‘home’, because this was home. What used to be ‘home’ was now alien. ‘Deshbari’ had lost its spatial existence and remained only in memory and nostalgia. At 91, he remembers only the name of the

village. He says everything else is a dream interrupted.” The chiselled individual experience stays like a rock even as they are sought to be explained away by historical developments.

Bhattacharjee extends the narrative when he seeks out individual voices and narratives to show the painful chasms that exist in individual lives even as political and historical — history at the macro level — changes submerge them in the sweeping tide. The other instances of belonging-yet-not-belonging are chosen in the book to drive home the point that legal fiat do not coincide with what individual identity is about, which follows a different trajectory of its own because individual identities and memories are also the outcome of history. It is the effort to build nations and redraw boundaries at national and regional levels, splicing through cultures that stands out as a painful incision.

His dialogue — and this book has many with several individu-

als and it brings in details of immense value — with Tora Agarwala, the *Indian Express* correspondent in Guwahati shows clearly the dilemmas of identity. Her ancestors came from Churu in Rajasthan in 1826

because of a fight with the zamindars there, married into Assamese families and assimilated into the local culture, with no traces of Rajasthani culture left. Her granduncle Jyoti Prasad Agarwala was a cultural icon of modern Assam. And she raises the simple and crucial question: “But coming back to the question of being accepted as Assamese — is complete cultural assimilation or contributing to the growth of Assamese literature the only way? Can’t you just be a regular person who chooses to make Assam home (and is active in its cultural growth as the average Assamese) and still be accepted?”

The other instance of origins and assimilation is raised by Dr Yashoda Thakore, a Kuchipudi dancer. She tells Bhattacharjee: “I was born here in Hyderabad. My schooling has been here, and I got married here. Everything is here. But my origins are not in Hyderabad. They are in the Godavari district, which is in Andhra Pradesh.” And she

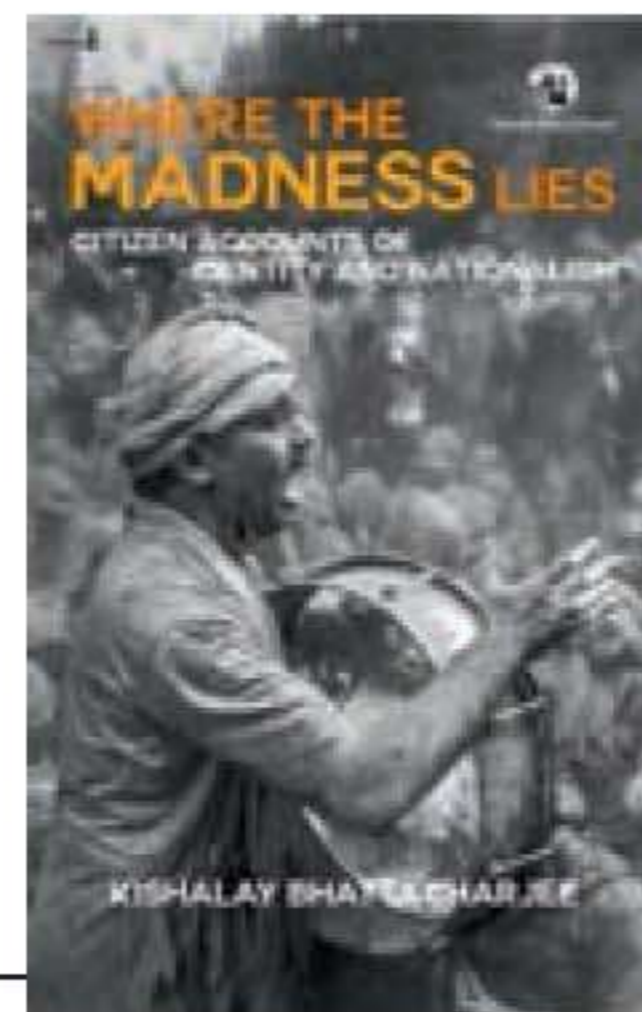
expands on the cultural marker of the linguistic register: “It is not the Telangana dialect at all. My mother was very particular that I don’t get influenced. At home we never had a Telangana dialect. We have a very strong hint of coastal Andhra.” She explains what the Telangana dialect is: “Telangana Telugu is the one which is not Sanskritised, and even though it is looked down upon, I like it... it is the non-Brahminic local Telugu.”

After the formation of Telangana in 2014, the new state did not accept Kuchipudi as its danceform because the Kuchipudi village was in Andhra Pradesh. They found that Perini Lasyam is the Telangana dance form. Dr Thakore translated *Nritta Ratnavali*, a treatise on dance written in Warangal, which is in Telangana, and she found acceptance with the university authorities. She says that the Kuchipudi dancers at the university who were Brahmins from Andhra Pradesh had to say that they were from

Telangana to retain their jobs. She says that if she was forced to make a choice, she would move to Andhra Pradesh, and it would be Telangana’s loss. There is also the social teaser. Her family belonged to the community of temple dancers, called Kalavanthulu, and their women were treated as prostitutes. Dr Thakore was determined to be in the Devadasi dance tradition.

It is by encapsulating voices like that of Tora Agarwal and Yashoda Thakore that Bhattacharjee shows the cultural and social complexities which laws like the NRC and CAA brought by the BJP-led NDA government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi tries to erase, but which refuse to go away from the minds and hearts of individuals who have no political axe to grind. Bhattacharjee makes his case passionately for the humane dilemmas lying beneath legislative and political commands.

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WHERE THE MADNESS LIES

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