

REVIEW

Treatise on Peace



BY SANJEEV CHOPRA

As part from the name, Shanti Parav: Treatise on Peace by Des Raj Kali, and translated by Neeti Singh is anything but a treatise on peace. It is an anti-novel set in the background of the twelfth Parav of the Mahabharat. While in the Mahabharat, it is a rendition of the concept of Dharma, rules of governance and the duties of a Prince (all of which are observed in default by the ruling members of the Kuru court), for Des Raj Kali, the Dalit writer from the Doaba region of Punjab, it is a treatise with recurrent manifestations of ‘statecraft and violence’.

The reason for calling this text Shanti Parav is explained by Kali in his conversation with Singh given at the end of the slim book of just 125 pages. He says: ‘For an understanding of the Bhartiya Manush, it is essential to understand the body of the Bhartiya myth. The Indian denizen is born in myth, and also dies in myth. Whenever I have tried to understand a character its roots, I have found, one way or another, lie in some myth. Therefore, the myth is a very significant part of my Sahitya. The old Shanti Parav had its own philosophy; my Shanti Parav will have another. Through this novel, I have dealt that twelfth book of Mahabharat a philosophical rebuttal. It is combat at every level – at the level of literary genre as well as at the level of philosophy. Just as the Shanti Parav of the Mahabharat is located in the post-war period, my novel has been conceptualized six decades post-independence. Just as Shanti Parav has been scripted with the intention of justifying the past and sustaining the hegemonic domin-

ion, the novel too is written with the intent of investigating the past, searching for underlying roots, and thereby forging a future that offers a new map and a vision.

This translation was short-listed for the PFC VoW book award earlier this year, and this reviewer has been in conversation with the translator on two occasions. As such, he can claim to have some understanding of this highly nuanced text in which seventeen stories by the protagonist run alongside ruminations on life by three ideologies: a comrade, a poet and a retired professor. This dual-narrative playfully challenges the reader to acquire new ways of reading and interpreting a text. The ‘fictional text’ in the upper half of the page narrates stories that recount the struggles and joys of the protagonist’s immediate, everyday subaltern world, while in the lower half run ‘realistic’, quirky, grand historical monologues by three iconic Dalit characters who offer (like Bheeshma Pitamah) their philosophical discourses on governance, peace and war. Like the characters in the Kuru court, while they knew what ought to be done, they failed miserably when it came to direct intervention.

Neeti Singh has done a great job in translating this text to English for a much wider audience. In fact, after the translation, the work has been discussed at many a literature festival, and is now an iconic piece of new Dalit writings in India. As she says: ‘standing in the shadows of its epic namesake, the novel Shanti Parav methodically maps and subverts the peace-claims of the epic treatise’. Through the polyphonic patterning of fiction, non-fiction, discourse and narrative technique, Kali spins a narrative around the day-to-day adventures of the Dalit protagonist – a journalist who struggles each day to bridge the dark distance between his Dalit past and surroundings with the curse of knowing that education and his profession have bestowed upon him. These are stories about love – both requited and unrequited, as well as the struggles of those

who live on the margins and of their hopes and bewilderments. At a surface level, even these seventeen stories do not connect directly, but all of them give a picture of the lived reality of Dalits in Punjab, and about their faith which is not aligned with the Santana Hindu or Sikh Khalsa tradition. The protagonist and his family are followers of Gugga Pir – the mystic Sufi saint in the Nirgunatradition which is closely aligned with the Kabir Panthis. Somewhere in the larger ideological battles between the Communists, the Akalis and the RSS, the discourse of the Dalit belief has been left out in the (so-called) popular discourse, and this is what the protagonist, a journalist himself tries to bring up through the crevices in his text. As the pages unfold, they open before us a poignant world of ailing, misshapen humans – poverty-stricken and burdened, and yet quite free in their emotion and humanity. ‘It is a Bakhtinian world where signification is richly dispersed, and the tenor is carnivalesque, anti-novel almost, and deeply polyphonic’.

She admits that translating the novel from the original Dalit Punjabi into English for audiences that presumably are more polished and located miles away from the harsh terrain of the caste-based narratives of lack, illiteracy and prejudice, was not easy. To quote Singh “I evolved several translation strategies – creating in the process, new syntax, new word coinages and new rhythms in the English language. Certain desi words from the original text were retained and sometimes new sentences were induced imaginatively into the text”

But this ‘labour of love’ has indeed broken new grounds, and made it possible for this work to reach a much wider audience. One hopes that not only will many more people read the book, but will also engage with it and hopefully get a better understanding and appreciation of how Shanti Parav actually rolls out for those who live life on the margins.

