

Book Review

M.J. AKBAR, *Blood Brothers: A Family Saga*, New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt. Ltd., 2006, pp. 350. ISBN: 81-7436-439-0.

Brotherhood is the hallmark of deeply entrenched blood relations. But at times the emotional bonding of blood ties is not purely a matter of genetic influence. Such bond is nurtured and nestled through the varied influences stemming from culture, society and the people. A confluence of these factors solidifies the individual into a bond of brotherhood. People rise above the differences emanating from caste, colour and creed and even offer their blood to lend eternity to the bond of brotherhood. These are the blood brothers. The under review family saga of M J Akbar introduces us to such noble souls who cultivated the feel of brotherhood in their hearts and nourished it with devotion and sincerity. Primarily, the book is an account of the life histories of Akbar's grandfather, father and himself. But it encompasses striking details of culture, history and the lives of those people who extended love and compassion to his family.

Prayaag is the first chapter of the book and also is the name of the grandfather of M.J. Akbar who opened a new chapter of life for his generations. The famine of 1870 in Behar ate up the entire village of Akbar's grandfather. Disease and pestilence ruled over the ashes of empty stomachs and provided hardly any escape to life. Prayaag was lucky to manage it. He had heard of a bunch of new jute mills along the banks of Hooghly River in a place called Telinipara. When the last of his family, his father, died he jumped into a train after cremating him. The journey from Chandernagore station where he arrived to his destination was a long one. But his hunger stricken thin legs carried him to the large iron gates of Victoria Jute Mills, where he collapsed. He was taken into care by the tea shop owner Wali Muhammad and his wife Din Jan Bibi. The couple was issueless. Prayaag received their attention and love.

Akbar here meticulously lifts the focus of the narrative to a broader level and the grand perspective of the social historic milieu of those days, has been vividly recalled. The narration of Talat Mian lends an interesting edge to the historical details of those times. However the life of Prayaag receives a new wave of change, when in order to get married to a Muslim family he converts to Islam. Prayaag becomes Rehmat Ullah, after undergoing circumcision. The innocence and simplicity of these people is amply reflected during the details of this event. Marriage opens new horizons for Rehmat Ullah. Increase in income, pleasures, desire for a child and a rich social life bring maturity and diversity to his personality. The presence of people like Talat Mian, Syed Ishfaq, Girija Maharaja, Bauna Sardar, and Burha Deewana add strength in his life and solidarity to the idea of brotherhood. He receives their invaluable love and care. All of them grow into a family of brothers ready to offer their blood for each others sake.

Desire for a child nourished in Rehmat's heart and increased his worries as the years rolled on. The prayers of the couple were granted. The spiritual support of Khawaja Muin ud Din Chishti granted them a son. Akbar Ali the father of M J Akbar was born in September, 1917. It was an important time in the political history of India. Hindu Muslim

relations were a subject of much attention. Consequently, the focus of the book moves closer to a study of the political dynamics of the important events. The author pictures a different reality. Communal differences are not taken to drive a wedge between the two communities. They were a part of occasional misunderstandings, minor religious differences and politicization of the issue. Akbar sees the society in composite terms. At least through the harmonized experiences of his family with other communities one gets a strong impression that life was sweet. The family saga also brings in its fold the details of Gora Sahibs. Mathew and Simon developed good relations with Akbar's father. Discussions between members of different communities highlight points of differences but not of antagonism. They were brothers to each other. When the calm of Telinipara was disrupted by the ripples of animosity on the eve of partition and the extremist Ram Chatterjee was on his way to exterminate Akbar's family, the blood brothers played their role. A mutual effort of T P Sing, Bhagwan Singh, Benoy Chaudhry and Mustaqim helped Akbar's family to drive away in Simon's jeep. The custodian of their house Bauna Sardar offered his life while protecting it. It was probably this love that brought Akbar's family back from Pakistan to India. M J Akbar writes, 'I asked my father, one dark afternoon, why he had returned from Pakistan in 1948. His answer told a long story in a few words. 'There were too many Muslims in Pakistan', he answered'.

Mubashshir Javed Akbar (M J. Akbar) was born on 11 January, 1951. In the very sentence of the book he writes that his 'grandfather died while he was playing on his chest. That was perhaps the first stroke of luck'. His father wanted him to speak English like Mathew and Simon. Therefore he was sent to St. Joseph Convent in order to cultivate a keen sense of language. Gifts of books by Uncle Simon increased his thirst for knowledge. He started writing articles in his school days and came out determined in his boyhood to opt journalism as a profession. M J Akbar writes about his own life till the time he got seventeen. He too was not short of blood brothers as his father and grandfather had. The most thrilling and deeply moving climax of the book comes in the last chapter 'Brothers'. Once again, after independence communal riots visited Telinipara. Targeted killings of Hindus and Muslims followed vindictive strikes. A wave of religious fanaticism swept across the community. In one of such revengeful incidences when Vishnu Teli tried to stab Akbar with his knife; his 'blood brothers' Mustaqim, Siraj, Ghaffar, Ghazi and Badri became iron shield against the assault. But it was Kamala who received the sharp knife that was actually aimed at Akbar. The book ends with a scene of the cremation of Kamala and leaves a lasting impression. The brothers like him were truly larger than life.

The book is certainly an important document for the purpose of discourse analysis in developing an understanding of Hindu Muslim relations. M J Akbar is above all the biases of caste, colour and creed. His account not only captures and preserves the glorious days of yore but also highlights the characters and minds of those legendary brothers who gave meaning to his life. The simplicity, innocence and the folk wisdom of that society, grieves the reader with a sense of loss. We ask so many questions from ourselves. The moral degradation, social chaos, economic exploitation, communal disharmony, religious fanaticism and lack of trust in society haunt us every moment. This book provides the causes and cures of those ills if we try to read between the lines.

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