

Review Article

Freedom at Midnight Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre.

The saga of a nation is not always meant to be related as a story particularly if it seems that the various characters involved have not been accorded the due regard and respect their identity and individuality actually and deservedly calls for. This becomes somewhat more important if the narrator happens to be more than an ordinary story-teller, rather a scholar of the past, if not a qualified historian. Objectivity is an onerous responsibility especially if the issue in question is the writing of History when it becomes more of a duty and remains not merely a desirous quality.

History is said to be a record of the past, a field of research and study which demands devoted concentration and serious approach and which does not permit the dramatization of events, no matter how overwhelming the appeal of the latter might be. Concoction of ideas and distortion of facts is basically unjust to a discipline the writing of which is no less than an obligation and a commitment to posterity. A stern line must always be drawn between historical writings and literary achievements, even if the theme and underlying current of motivation happens to be the same.

The authors of *Freedom at Midnight*, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, no doubt seem to be conscious of the fact that they are handling a sensitive historical issue but surprisingly make not a single deliberate effort to be burdened with the responsibility that goes with shouldering such a task. They have certainly made a contribution though not to History, rather added to the extensive literature on India, already existing in numerous volumes. Such a work does not call for serious

comment, however, since the authors have attempted to indulge in aspects of the Freedom Movement that seriously threaten rather question the rights of one community against the others, it seems imperative that some sentence of truth might as well be added to the scenario. Shorn of their prejudices and acutely narrow perceptions, the writers of this book could have accomplished a major achievement on the subject, seen the effort and hard work put into it. But their unfortunate if not totally deliberate disregard of the basic requirements of writing history has relegated their work to the realm of literature and to that category of it which serious scholars are accustomed to simply designate as "light reading".

In an undivided India the British were the absolute rulers and the Hindus comprised the majority of their subjects. This can hardly be refuted and none of these communities can be denied their respective roles. At the same time the fact remains that the Muslims also enjoyed a reasonably important position, to say the least of their political status. Collins and Lapierre have agreed to these glaring realities of the Indian scenario with the difference that the former i.e. the Hindus are acknowledged, admired and exalted in all their pomp and glory, while the latter are merely accepted as constituent elements of the Indian population, who have unjust demands, stubborn leaders and unworkable, irrational ideas. The message though between the lines, could not have been more clear, and was perhaps intended to be transmitted to work upon tender and immature imaginations.

The book is virtually dedicated to Gandhi, frequent and rather over-emphasized references to whose exploits seem an article of faith with the authors, and of course to Lord Louis Mountbatten who is heroically exonerated of all those charges from which he could not escape from the scrutiny and historical penalty of more serious scholars even of his own country. Nehru's portrayal is also that of an unusually remarkable and gifted leader and so is that of Patel who even despite all his fanaticism directed venomously against a particular people, enjoys a favoured description. Jinnah's calibre and his reputation did succeed in winning over some restrained applause for him but nothing beyond that. In fact, the entire Muslim community seems to be a victim of an inexplicable prejudice, strangely

enough, coming from the self-titled pioneers and upholders of free and unbiased liberal thinking. In general terms, throughout the entire course of book, no laurel, no credit, no virtue becomes the merit of the Muslims. Their idea of independence and partition is portrayed as "sheer madness", their leader Jinnah as the "evil genius" and they themselves as "collaborators" and "conspirators". Whereas the British were the 'benefactors' who wanted to avoid partition at any cost. Though, in whose interests? That quarry may be indeed best left unanswered. The Hindus who were so magnanimous that their Mahatama even offered the highest rank to Jinnah in India after the British left, in case he also said no to partition, though what was to become of the Muslims once they found themselves in an independent yet a majority Hindu state? Is yet, another question that needs no elaboration. Thus salvation became a sin and Jinnah with the support and blessings of the entire Muslim nation was to them guilty of it and even today this unpardonable crime lurks in the haunted memory of many a Hindus and Englishmen. The book is a befitting product of their distorted imagination.

A considerably significant aspect that the authors overlooked or rather failed to realize was that in their desperate attempt to malign the Muslims in every conceivable manner, they unintentionally took upon themselves the task of uncovering the truth regarding the tacit collaboration of the Hindus with their friendly masters. The decision of Kashmir which was wrong by any standards of logic or history, the division of assets which made the new state a little more "moth-eaten"; withholding of Pakistan's share of the treasury without any qualms of conscience; and above all the Radcliffe award and the seeds sown by it leading to a prolonged and bitter conflict that cannot still be put to rest after decades of violent fighting and fruitless negotiations, are but a few instances of their ill-hidden malice and hostility. These are in themselves merely facts of History the blame for which can rest on many shoulders, but the real tragedy is that they have all been justified in one way or the other with a lot of appreciation and compliments for the political astuteness of their respective architects, be they Hindu or the British. All this was, as is clear, directed against a community whose folly lay merely in demanding freedom. Ironically, it was this word "freedom" which they chose as the title of their work.

— something the granting of which had become so agonizing and painful for them that they did not hesitate to call it a "parting curse". This in itself was affront enough to the zealous fighting spirit and long-cherished ideal of all those people who had endured and sacrificed so much for so long.

The faults and sins of the Muslims did not end here. Jinnah's justified decision to become the Governor-General of the newly created state of Pakistan came under heavy fire who could not in their opinion, even as a dying man, resist the "pomp" and "gaudy" ceremonials attached to the highest office in the state. Perhaps Mountbatten's attempt to perpetuate the same for himself was to them a 'necessity' justified. Again it was Jinnah, who in their opinion, was badly humiliated when his cheque to the British Overseas Airway Corporation bounced for "insufficient funds" and not a sad reflection on the Hindu and British mentality which was responsible for throwing Pakistan into such dire straits, by not honouring their word, using the ridiculous excuse that if Pakistan received the promised sum, it would be to "kill Indian soldiers". Similarly Jinnah's refusal to lend his personal aircraft to the task of lifting refugees so as to avoid creating a precedence was severely criticized with insulting overtones. But here the question is, did Mountbatten's favourite York MW102 devote any of its flights to the said task in India where the condition of refugees was no better? and whose newly and self-appointed Governor-General he was; for if there is to be a comparison let it be at the level of the Governor-Generals themselves.

The basic point that has been over-looked is that if the Hindus looked upto Gandhi, Nehru and Mountbatten in their own three different capacities the Muslims had all combined in one — Jinnah who was to them a source of remarkable guidance, charismatic leadership and unflinching courage and was also their first Governor-General. It is therefore, sad to come across such intense apathy and negligence on the part of the authors not only to the interests of a strong community but also to concepts of objectivity and credibility in history.

The mention of history leads us to yet another major flaw not paid much attention to in this otherwise interesting and captivating work. In fact this very appeal and interest is created

and maintained till the very end by the simple language and style which no doubt extremely readable, but lacks the touch of serious scholarship. It is especially in the description of massacres that were the immediate consequence of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh riots following the declaration of independence, that the dialogue oriented language leaves much to be desired. Instead of highlighting the gravity of the situation and diligently portraying it in historically realistic terms the feeling that is ultimately aroused is little short of going through a thrilling novel. The book does at certain points provide extremely good reading and also a fleeting acquaintance with pre — and post — partition days in the sub-continent but beyond that it offers little. In view of this it would be quite inadvisable to give any quotation or to use it as authentic source material, for the simple and obvious reason that most of the facts seem only to be decorative and cannot be substantiated.

Finally, there is little hesitation in saying that the book is written with a strong bias which did not escape to arouse the attention and condemnation even of those critics who otherwise adhered to the view-point of the authors. Gandhian philosophy, not to mention the unnecessary details of his life and death, dominate the entire course of the underlying thought process, which take the theme a little away from the original title. The whole work is no doubt a tribute to Gandhi but an unfair one to the other equally deserving stalwarts, the contribution of whose sacrifice and effort need not have been so cruelly minimized.

In many respects, it is a rare piece of work for it covers a wide range, penetrates into a variety of important issues, deals with the fate of not one but many nations, and appeals to the interests and fascination of a large audience all over the world. Even after the passage of considerable time it continues to initiate and invite all sorts of criticism, positive as well as negative, at times bordering on condemnation while at other occasions little less than open admiration and appreciation. The theme, the style and the tremendous effort that went into making the work a success initially, even today keep the book from being long forgotten and vanishing into the back shelves. The credit must, therefore, go to the authors for producing a book that has not, over the years, failed to inspire generations of readers, a fact that needs little elaboration keeping in view all

those forces that prompted the writing of this review article at such a late date.

Perhaps the reasons behind this ever-present interest are the issues the authors have addressed themselves to, that seem too pertinent and relevant to be ignored and over-looked even in the present-day scenario and their continued appeal to a vast range of students and scholars. Especially the manner in which facts of history have been related, rather distorted, demands not merely a keen observation and understanding but a detailed and if necessary, critical analysis of them. Though the lapse of time makes it a rather out-date study, yet the work needs a comment; for there could have definitely been better ways of treating history.

Rabia Zaman

