

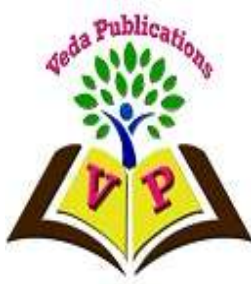
MARWARIS OF KOLKATA IN ALKA SARAOGI'S NOVEL "KALI-KATHA: VIA BYPASS"

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ABSTRACT



Calcutta has been a favourite locus also for Marwaris from Rajasthan. The famous bilingual author, Alka Saraogi belongs to this community of Rajasthanis who are contemptuously called 'Marwaris' by the local people. *Kali-Katha: Via Bypass* is about the protagonist, Kishore Babu and four generations of his family, tracing the human stories of hopes and pains behind the emigration of Marwari community from the deserts in Rajasthan in North-Western part of India to Calcutta in the East under the British colonial rule. Against such a wide canvas, with broad-brush strokes, the story touches the changes in the society and the struggle against the British colonial rule through lives of individuals. Alka Saraogi recounted the history of the Marwari Diaspora – of their ancestry, their tradition and their family structure. She wrote about India's colonial and postcolonial history. Calcutta was also the stage for the conflict between Hindus and Muslims which led to the division of land between India and Pakistan. The novel is replete with so much information about the periods and personalities.

Keywords: *Marwaris, Generation, Diaspora, Postcolonial.*

Calcutta has been a favourite locus for Marwaris from Rajasthan. They are the people from the Marwar region of Rajasthan in India. Though Marwari as a genre originated from a place name, the Marwari people have spread to many regions of India, and even to neighbouring countries, as they expanded their business and trade networks. In many locales, Marwari immigrants over time (and, usually involving many generations) have blended in with the regional cultures.

Marwar is the largest region of Rajasthan, located in central and western areas. The residents of Marwar region are called Marwaris, irrespective of the caste. The term 'Marwari' has a geographical connotation, so there can be a Marwari Baniya and a Marwari Rajput and so on. Many people from Marwari vaishya/baniya/business caste went to distant states for trading and became successful and famous. Since the vaishya/baniya caste is present everywhere in India, for people in other states, the distinguishing factor of a "Marwari baniya" person was "Marwari". Hence, with human tendency to speak short, the term "Marwari" caught on across India's other states to refer to a businessman from Marwar.

Most of the business icons of the country arrived to Calcutta years back to try their luck. The best thing about Kolkata is its adaptability. From the Sahibs of the East India Company to the squatters outside Howrah station, the city has played host to a startling range of dramatis personae. Among those who, in turn, changed the face of Kolkata were the Marwaris from Rajasthan – astute businessmen, traders, bankers, but culturally insular. Some of them may be listed as Birlas, Goenkas, Poddars, Khaitans, Piramals, Lohias, Ruias and many other distinguished industrialists in the corporate world.

In the late 18th century, the Marwari inhabitants of Calcutta were few in number. The influx of Marwaris in the city, started from the early 19th century. After the introduction of railways, the Marwaris started flocking here in large numbers. Most of them chose Burrabazar as their habitat. Calcutta was a dreamland for them to make money.

Alka Saraogi, the novelist belongs to this community of Rajasthan who are sometimes contemptuously called 'Marwaris'. Her *Kalikatha: Via*

Bypass on the life of Kolkata's Marwaris, is a milestone in contemporary Hindi literature. Born and educated in Kolkata, Alka Saraogi, 52 has published three novels and two collections of short stories. She was recognized as a startlingly original voice in Hindi literature when her first novel *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* (1998) was published. It won her the Sahitya Academy Award in 2001. Like Prabha Khetan, one of the eminent writers in Hindi Literature, she too has dealt with the Marwari life in Kolkata. Both these writers have opened Marwari life to readers.

The award winning work, *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* is a novel that spans four generation. The greatest strength of this work is that it takes the readers along with it, making them experience events that took place during the latter half of the nineteenth century, introducing them to locales that vary from the Rajasthan desert to the lush green Bengal country side and the sprawling metropolis of Kolkata. The keyword of the novel, "Bypass" is a symbol which is meaningful comment on the short cutting culture prevalent in modern society.

The setting of her multifaceted novel is Calcutta. After a bypass operation, the seventy two years old Marwari patriarch Kishore Babu becomes a vagrant as he wanders the city streets, along the tracks of his long suppressed memories for idealistic days of the freedom struggle. Calcutta, once the second capital of the British Empire, was the seat of the East India Company and thus attractive to immigrants. She not only narrates the story of an old Marwari man up against a lack of understanding from idealism of his youth. She also recounts the history of the Marwari Diaspora – of their ancestry, their traditions and their family structures. Above all, she writes about India's colonial and post-colonial history and also about the trials and tribulations of Marwari settlers. Calcutta was the stage for nationalist independence struggles (inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose) as well as the bloody conflict between Hindus and Muslims which led to the division of land between India and Pakistan. In apparently spontaneous flashbacks, the author interweaves historical facts with the protagonist's own memories, who, becoming a wise fool after a heart bypass, poses uncomfortable questions about postcolonial Indian identity. It is a

quest of a restless soul who due to a head injury shuttles through three phases of his life. None of the characters has been painted in black or white but in shades of grey. She has focused on the Marwari section that struggled to no end and lived on the margins.

The novel begins with the hero, Kishore Babu, descendent of a Marwari family undergoing a heart bypass in 1997 at the age of seventy-two, developing a lump at the back of his head due to the negligence of the hospital staff, and thereafter obsessively wandering back to scenes of his earlier life, especially to the politically turbulent period of his youth in the 1940s. Besides the two contrastive modes of the 1990s and 1940s, the novel also radiates back to the 1860s to fill the story of Kishore Babu's grandfather, Ramvialas Babu and his father Ghamandi Lal, who was the first in the family to leave the silver sands of Marwar and come to the green Shasya Shyamal planes of Bengal.

Kishore Babu has lived three lives in one. He had led one kind of life till the country won independence, when he was twenty two. Then began his second life – a life of full fifty years. This second life did not bear the slightest reflection of the first. In his new third life after his heart bypass, he looks on his second life as if it were a new birth. In a way, one could say these fifty years of his life have been rather like the fifty years of the sovereign democratic state of India, which haven't retained even a vestige or sediment, even the slightest lingering flavour, of our fight for freedom.

The opening of the Delhi-Calcutta rail link gave a fillip to the migration and the new migrants started lining up for jobs in their newly adopted places of work. They were helped immensely by the early Marwari migrants whose operations had expanded by this time, and who needed all the help they could get. Foreign companies willing to sell finished British goods in India required agents to represent them and offered good brokerage. The resourceful Marwaris recognizing the potential of colonial trade moved into the ports as brokers and amassed a great deal of wealth.

Kishore's great grand father, Ramvilas Babu came to Calcutta to try his luck. He established good relationship with Hamilton Sahib. The Sahib had real

respect for his honesty and efficiency. Sahib would treat him with an affection that is hard to find even for one's own brother. The Sahib had profound faith in his integrity.

Usually Marwaris would come because of famine in their harsh land – Marwar. The generic place of origin of all Marwaris is after all the place of *maru* (death and dust). Leaving the women behind, the men folk would come away to the large cities of the British Empire in the single-minded pursuit of money. They migrated to different parts alone. They never brought their families with them. Many left their families behind and migrated to Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, which were gaining importance as main trade centers. There they had great financial success. When Ramvilas Babu was just three years old, the railway-lines were laid between Delhi and Calcutta. That was in 1863. Ramvilas's mother tells him:

These were the rail lines that took away your father to distant lands and that Hamilton Sahib! Left for Calcutta himself and took away your father too... The idiot said in his strange, faulty Hindi – 'Come with me to Calcutta. I will make gold shower on you. Bas!' Off went your father... Our lives are even worse than those of gypsies, roaming in the desert with their camels. At least, their family stays together. We are not so fortunate. And what shall we do with all the money? Can man not survive on dal-roti without butter? True is the saying – Better to eat half a roti at home, than to have a whole in a foreign land. (33-34)

Calcutta, as the Bengalis would love to remember, may be missing here. Calcutta is here as the Marwaris live it – always attached to "des" – the Rajputana, Marwar. For some people exiled from Rajasthan, living in Calcutta is a punishment. Ramvilas's friend Vasantlal cannot forget for a moment the sand dunes at his home at Sardarshahar in Bikaner. He says:

My desert land is what I cherish. The white sand dunes, the white spread, that shines in the moonlight like silver, is what I hold dear to my heart.(42)

He goes to Bikaner every year for the two months of Ashwin and Kartik, just before winter. The fruits of Kakri and Matira beckon him to go. He says:

To have an outdoor feast of dal-bati near the pond! What is there to cherish in this crowded city?...Lord Rama was exiled for fourteen years, only he knows how long we are to live here. But I too will not live here for a day more after fourteen years. I will wind up my business that very day, profits or no profits! (42)

People, who come to Calcutta, want to earn their livelihood and do not even think of going back to their native land without earning anything. Ramvilas finds his friend Vasantlal talking to a person in the Burrabazar area of Calcutta which is full of migrants of all ages who are on the look out for any small job or brokerage. That person is from Churu district of Rajputana and his mind has gone haywire for some reason. He can speak a few sentences in English. His incoherent ideas in faulty English are a perennial source of entertainment for the passers-by. Vasantlal gives this young man some sweet-meats and tries to ask him why he did not Calcutta without earning anything"? (44)

In Marwari community women keep themselves behind the veil. They do not go unveiled anywhere. This is their custom in native place. Even when they are taken to cities they do not come out publicly nor are they educated. They are also superstitious. Even Amolak, Kishore's friend asks his father:

Why is it that Marwari men roam free like unshackled bulls, but the women must live under all sorts of restriction?... What a pity that even in Bengal the Marwari women are so backward. When I see Bengali girls in saris with red borders and long flowing hair, sing patriotic songs from the stage at public meetings, I cannot hold my tears. When, oh, when, shall we wake up? The Bengalis are quite justified not come out of that rut. They follow all traditions and customs. For males, when they see other caste women, they feel surprised because they have never seen before. Their women do in calling us names

like Medo and Khotta. We are a deeply abased community. (91)

Two cultures, one developed in the desert sand of Rajputana and the other in the greenery of Bengal have mingled here. This land has accommodated people from the distant desert, people who have their roots going back thousand of years, never severing ties with those roots. Like an ever watchful invisible eye, their society is severe with those who violate its codes of conduct. Thus they abide by them and yet let themselves also be imbued with the culture of their adopted land. The two cultures here do not run parallel to each other, as in Calcutta but overlap for the most part.

It has woven the outer and the inner worlds of Calcutta's Marwaris. It also recounts the Marwari Diaspora – of their ancestry, their traditions, and their family structures. Above all, Saraogi writes about India's colonial and postcolonial history. Calcutta was the stage for nationalist independence struggles. In spontaneous flashbacks, the author interweaves historical facts with the protagonist's own memories.

'Kalikatha' denotes a story of Kaliyuga, the last "leaden" era, but it is also a pun on Calcutta or in Bangla 'Kolkata', where the novel is set. Saraogi narrates over 150 year time span, the internal diaspora of her community, the Marwaris – a trading caste perhaps rather more notorious than celebrated for the industrious and prosperity – from Rajasthan and Haryana to the new British capital, Calcutta; the high idealism of three young friends in three contrasted shades of ideology at the height of the nationalist movement, and finally, the crass and cynical materialism of the post-independence generation – all presented in a remarkably sophisticated and knowing narrative that even includes a couple of parodic nods in the direction of that other, more globally diasporic postcolonial writer, Salman Rushdie.

Her novel *Kalikatha: Via Bypass* revolves around the Marwari settlers in Calcutta, about Marwari diaspora. It is a story of displacement. Saraogi has succeeded in portraying the ups and downs of the Marwaris, through the family of Kishore Babu and his ancestors on a "humanistic" plane. As she herself belongs to the community, she has an



insider's view of the "dynamics" of the community and a reasonable detachment as well. Initially there was a period of romance when the lush greenery of Calcutta city appealed to the eyes of Marwaris who used to see the arid region in the desert. But after settling down in the city they encountered hardship and prejudices. She has seen Calcutta as the Marwaris live it.

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