

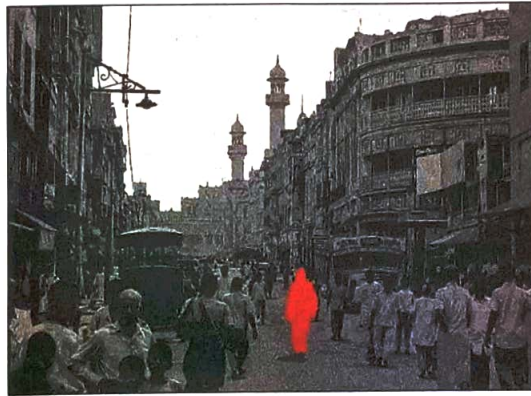
Links that defy erasure

REGISTER ME AS
KULBHUSHAN
By Alka Saraogi,
Penguin, ₹599

If we were to write an autobiography, how much of our life would we include in it? A better question perhaps is how much would we omit and how much truth would then remain? Truths about the choices we are not proud of, or about the versions of ourselves we could not become. *Register Me as Kulbhushan* by the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author, Alka Saraogi — it

East Pakistan who yearns for a home, a river and a land that is no longer his. Second, that of an overlooked son who is the subject of his family's pity, charity and also insolvency. Kulbhushan tries to escape both these identities by abandoning his name in a new city; he takes on the identity of a Bengali when he reaches Calcutta.

Partition stories often showcase the violence that its victims endured: the separation and the agony of leaving one's home behind with nothing but fear and a few bags in a new country. *Register Me as Kulbhushan* reveals a kind



has been translated by John Vater — attempts to answer these questions. The novel revolves around Kulbhushan Jain and his many avatars — Kulbhushan Jain, Gopal Chandra Das, Bhushan Chacha.

In the very first portion of the novel, readers are made aware that if Kulbhushan ever writes an autobiography, it would be full of lies. "No, Bhushan was no thief. And if he were to write a book on his life, he would surely not admit to stealing." He is not a reliable friend, family member, or narrator. Refreshingly, the author does not try to portray the protagonist as a spotless character who is a victim of the horrors of Partition and is thus a tragic hero. We see Kulbhushan in all his complexities and flaws — he steals, lies and cheats on his loved ones. Yet, all these immoral actions are justified in his mind because he considers them as his only way out of a situation; else, he simply forgets he commits these grey acts. A central idea of the novel is the "button of forgetting" that Kulbhushan's friend, Shyama Dhobi, introduced him to — he can "induce instant amnesia" to block out whatever causes him suffering.

However, beyond his lies and coping mechanisms, Kulbhushan is also someone who was once caught in the crossfire between two countries and two identities. First, the identity of a Marwari from

of loss that is quieter. Rather than focusing solely on those who fled, Saraogi sheds light on the tragedy of those who chose to stay behind, gripping tightly whatever is left — Kulbhushan's father, who stayed put to sell his ancestral mansion in Kushtia, is an example — but, in the end, are left with "... nothing more than a tattered lungi ..."

There is also the journey of Shyama who is no less than a second protagonist. The son of a *dhobi*, Shyama hails from a disadvantaged socio-economic class but works hard to become a trusted person of a wealthy Bengali aristocrat. While Kulbhushan handles the trauma by using his "button of forgetting" to escape reality, Shyama joins the freedom struggle, unable to forget.

The stories of Partition live on in our homes, our roads, even our names. The cover of the book, designed by Aakriti Khurana, depicts a man highlighted in red ink against a grey, monochromatic background. The only other element that is tinged with the same shade of red is the name, Kulbhushan. Kulbhushan Jain shape-shifts into Gopal Chandra Das to escape the reality of being a Marwari from Kushtia in Calcutta, but much like the man on the cover, finds that his identity remains tethered to Kulbhushan Jain, the man from Kushtia.

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