

Demons of complex past, present

MANDIRA NAYAR

KARAN MAHAJAN can't escape Delhi. He left over 20 years ago, but the city looms large in his books. 'The Complex', an instant hit, is his third foray into the city's literary landscape, and in many ways, his most ambitious, complex novel.

The book is a sprawling saga of a Punjabi family, a milieu that he is intimately acquainted with. Unlike the Delhi of Aatish Taseer, Arundhati Roy or Kiran Desai, this does not chart the broad road leafy avenues of Lutyens' Delhi. It is set in North Delhi in A-14 Modern Colony, 'the Complex' built by SP Chopra, the famous family patriarch, after Partition. SP had been a freedom fighter, a 'deity of the family', Governor of the Reserve Bank of India—a man who everyone wants to measure up to but never can.

The Chopra *khandaan* is large, dysfunctional and deeply entangled, especially as they all live together in this complex. Their entanglement—physical and internal—serves as the backdrop of the novel. Their desires, dreams, hopes, jealousy and frustrations play out in the space of the two squat bungalows of the Complex—and Karan's writing evokes the suffocation that each character feels. "The rest of the family was close—unlike the country, if the Complex had suffered no partition," he writes.

His characters are carefully etched. There is Sachin, who goes off to America to find a

better life and finally patents the squishy plastic bottle. His wife Gita, 29 years old when the story begins, an editor in a publishing firm in India, is unable to find a job in America. She discovers that her work experience in the "boonie"—India, her home—counts for nothing. Laxman, SP's ambitious son, is ruthless, a sexual predator and the heart of the novel. His wife Archana, who he cheats on, is entrepreneurial but with limited choices. Brij, Mohit's father, had gone into the Air Force, but wasn't cut out for it; he found himself stuck in a dead-end job and constantly angry. His wife Karisma—compliant, attractive—is an equal match for Laxman's ambition. Her own entanglement with Laxman becomes the trigger of a violence that is inescapable. The book begins with a bang. Brij, in jail for

killing his uncle Laxman, is being set free after 25 years. His son, Mohit, the narrator, is gently advised by family members—who he had not spoken to in years though they all "resided in the same ramshackle complex"—that his father stay somewhere else.

It is at the end of what will be a "manusha" for the family that the reader enters the book and the Complex, poised very much for an edge-of-seat thriller. Karan has everything that can go into it hit show—murder, secrets, a not-so-secret scandalous affair, rape, betrayal and blackmail—everything that you would want in a family saga.

But what Karan does is transform this into a reflective deep-dive—the shift in the dynamics of the family mirroring the changes in India. It is intense, deep, complicated, layered, vividly told.

In his dense 400-odd page book, Karan has captured post-Partition Delhi tumbling through the politics of the 1960s—whether it was the Mandir, Mandai or the mass murders of Sikhs in 1984 to the arrival of Hindu nationalism. Karan recreates the turbulent decade. It is a fictional journey that feels real, but lies in the shadow world conjured up by Karan, amid thinly disguised leaders of the BJP—TTP in the book—and real people.

To confuse the reader further, Karan's note at the beginning of the book suggests that this is a posthumous collaboration between Mohit, the narrator, and him, who made him his literary executor or by leaving him an unfinished novel of the Chopra clan in his 'draft'



THE COMPLEX
by Karan Mahajan.
HarperCollins.
Pages 413, ₹799



BACKFLAP



INDIA OUT OF WORK
by Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati Parida.
Bloomsbury.
Pages 338, ₹699

With barely 15 years left of its demographic dividend, India faces a stark possibility: growing old before it grows rich. Millions remain unemployed, underemployed, or trapped in precarious, low-quality work—acrisis that cannot be ignored. The authors argue that India must sustain 8 per cent annual growth by 2047 to secure its future and offer solutions to achieve it—job creation at the rate of nothing short of 10 to 12 million new non-farm jobs per annum. India must address the challenges of a structural economic crisis and simultaneously, its employment and education crises.



THE GREAT KANCHANA CIRCUS
by Vishwas Patil.
Westland.
Pages 392, ₹599

World War-II is at its peak. The famed Great Kanchna International Circus is touring Burma when Japanese fighter planes bomb Rangoon and Mandalay, razing the British administrative and military installations to the ground and killing the local population. Kanchna Sarang Shinde, proprietor of the circus company, risks her life to ensure a safe passage back to India for her 300-strong troupe, walking through treacherous mountains and jungles.



THE SEA GAVE IT BACK
by Rajesh Chander Sharma.
Ukayto Publishing.
Pages 242, ₹270

In 1955, a tiger shark at Sydney's Coogee Aquarium vomits up a human arm. It was tattooed with two boxers mid-fight. It begins as a grotesque curiosity, but quickly unravels into one of the most bizarre and chilling murder cases. Detectives Harris and Collins are drawn into the mystery when the arm is identified. They dig deeper. They uncover a dangerous web of lies. There is blackmail and betrayal within Sydney's shadowy underworld.

Women's Himalayan burden Cracks in Canadian dream

ANIL K JOSHI

PUBLISHED by Doon University, this is an extremely well-researched book, compiled under the 'One University, One Research' concept mooted by the current Governor of Uttarakhand. Broadly speaking, it focuses on the problems faced by women in the state of Uttarakhand, which has completed 25 years of its existence, and has, therefore, been dedicated to them.

Economic self-reliance has long been regarded as a marker of women's empowerment, more so in states like Uttarakhand, where the means of livelihood are limited, scarce and are diminishing by the day on account of a variety of factors.

A hill state with rugged terrain, Uttarakhand has comparatively less scope for productive agriculture or other profitable enterprises. With a major chunk of men preferring to join the Army or paramilitary forces, the womenfolk are left behind to fend for themselves. The state

embodies ecological fragility, demographic volatility and gendered labour burdens.

Divided into four sections and spread over 14 chapters, this voluminous work purports to present a gendered view of women's livelihoods in the Himalayan region and the myriad challenges confronting them.

The problems related to women's livelihoods have been quantified and analysed through an exhaustive district-to-district survey, factoring in indicators such as population ratio, intra-regional imbalances, caste dynamics, literacy, health, hygiene, nutrition, access to government schemes, etc.

The alarming issue of migration, which is the bane of life in the hills, has pushed more and more women towards agriculture. They

sweet it out in the fields while also tending to cattle, foraging fuelwood from forests and collecting fodder from grasslands. The yawning gap between formal education and employment-worthy skills aggravates their plight further. Arable land being scarce, judicious land use becomes paramount, and this has been discussed at length.

Most interesting is the correlation between rural road connectivity and migration, which establishes that poor transport infrastructure leads directly to high out-migration, not merely because of the dearth of livelihood prospects, but also because of poor access to critical services like health and education.

Despite progress in formal skill training in Uttarakhand, women at large remain wary of availing the opportunities on offer. The lack of aspiration for self-employment reflects systemic barriers, including inaccessibility of credit, absence of mentorship and weak market linkages. This is borne out by district-wise data showing the distribution of micro and small enterprises in rural areas, including diverse means of livelihood such as dairy farming, vegetable production, poultry farming, tourism, etc.

The study rightly notes: "Uttarakhand occupies a transitional space as compared to other Himalayan states, as it is seen to be moving away from dependency on agriculture-dominated livelihoods towards a more balanced income composition with rising formal wages and non-farm activities." While underscoring the plethora of problems related to women's livelihoods, the authors present a model for remedial action, which may not prove to be a panacea for all troubles, but could become an economic multiplier in the long run, provided government bodies and stakeholders work in tandem.

One does not come across many shortcomings, barring the sheer volume of data, which at times arrests the flow of the narrative. On the whole, the book is an absorbing work of serious and purposeful research.

—The reviewer taught history at Kumaun University

SONYA J NAIR

LINDSA PEREIRA'S 'Super' is a deeply disturbing book. Not only because it talks about the darker side of the politics of immigration and the entire industry it has spawned in parts of India, but also because it vividly presents the sense of claustrophobia and anger increasingly visible online among white males.

The novel centres on Sukhpreet, an immigrant from Jalandhar, working as an assistant superintendent of a residential building in Toronto. The sense of loneliness, alienation, fear and the problems of language, all compound in the figure of this young man, who has come so far away to help his mother recover their land from creditors.

There is Hameed in India, whose parents have pinned their hopes on her scoring well in IELTS and getting a visa to study abroad and snag a good match. An entire culture has sprung up around migration where the sole expectation is that children will leave home. Pereira, whose works I have closely followed, has made each voice stand out.

There are characters such as Deepanshu, Sukhpreet's cousin in Canada, and Diego, the superintendent of the building, who represent the various rungs of the immigration ladder and whose presence furthers the narrative rather than serving as mere garnish.

At 213 pages, the work is fast. There are two standout aspects. One is Maynard Wilson, the disenfranchised white male who embodies the dangerous tendencies of those who feel their opportunities are being taken away by immigrants. Pereira gives an interesting shading to Wilson through his ailing dog, Woody, and attempts to present the story through Wilson's lens as well. The other is the long-term effects of the economics of the immigration industry and what it might possibly be doing to Canada's economy. The issues the author presents are now talking points in Canadian politics and society.

There have been some defining works of



SUPER: A NOVEL
by Lindsay Pereira.
HarperCollins.
Pages 217, ₹699

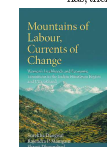
migration literature in recent times that have been India-centric, such as Sanjeev Sahota's 'The Year of the Runaways', which go beyond nostalgia and discuss migration as a social symptom. 'Super' does a 360-degree recon of how young people leave their countries through honest or fraudulent means and come to Canada in search of better opportunities.

They find empty colleges, no native Canadian students (read white, in the understanding of students like Sukhpreet); they work for less than minimum wage and discover that more of their own ilk have swamped the job market and the housing sector, making everything unaffordable while reducing the value of their labour.

The book makes one think: why are our young people still leaving our shores in such large numbers? Economics, sociological history, politics and much more lie at the heart of the answer. The absolute absence of First Nations people from the novel points to how little they matter Wilson, at one point, rants about how his father and grandfather built this 'great nation', and one cannot help but raise an eyebrow in consternation.

'Super' is a brilliant book that leaves one breathless—because of the depth of the calamity it portrays and the indefatigable sadness of what the world has now become.

—The reviewer is the author of 'No Blushes: Renju Renjinar'



MOUNTAINS OF LABOUR, CURRENTS OF CHANGE
by Sureka Dangiwal, Rajendra P Manganj and Shrutu Dhaundyal.
Doon University.
Pages 334, ₹2,499

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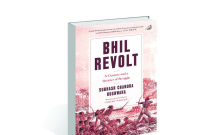
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struggles of the Bhil community for their dignity, livelihood and identity.

Bhils, as a large tribal community, were scattered across much of central and western India, in present-day Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Traditionally, they were nomads, peasants and forest dwellers. Their nomadic pursuits led to their dispersal across a large area. However, they remained internally connected through cultural ties. Numerically a very large community, they also developed their own political structure and small principalities, ruled by chieftains.

Through much of their history, the Bhils moved about voluntarily. Their first major encounter with the outsiders happened when the warrior Rajputs, riding their horses, entered into what later became the Rajputana region, from 11th-12th centuries onwards. As a result, some Bhils retreated to the hills and forests. Some other Bhil chieftains entered into alliances with the Rajputs and became their subordinate partners in the new political system.

However, a much larger and qualitatively different encounter developed closer to mod-



BHIL REVOLT: A CENTURY AND A QUARTER OF STRUGGLE
by Subhash Chandra Kushwaha.
Translated by Naresh 'Nadeem'.
Niyogi Books.
Pages 428, ₹750

ern times. The British were interested not only in political domination but also in complete control over their natural resources. One such region, Khandesh, attracted the British because of its fertile soil and cotton cultivation. The region was prosperous and so was its Bhil population. Whereas the Bhil-Rajput encounters had created new alliances and political arrangements, the nature of the

encounter with the British was different.

The medieval Indian polity, prior to the arrival of the British, was centralised at the top but at the regional and local level, accommodated various groups and interests which retained their autonomy. The traditional Indian sovereignty was both diffused, negotiated and shared across regions. The British, by contrast, introduced an impersonal bureaucratic system, in which various stakeholders had to either become subordinates or face total marginalisation.

Many Bhil chieftains responded by rebelling. The new system endangered not just their traditional rights over jungles and mountains, but their very lifestyle. Thrown off their natural habitat, and deprived of their dignity, the Bhils had no option but to take to violence. This often led to their being declared as criminal tribes.

The book by Subhash Chandra Kushwaha, written in Hindi, and brilliantly translated into English by Naresh 'Nadeem', tells the stories of rebellions and protests by the Bhils. These struggles were only superficially against the Rajputs, Marathas and the British. Deep down, they were against a new

economic system that had begun to be established in the 19th century, in which all the natural wealth was seen as investible resource to be utilised in the service of the industrial economy.

The original custodians of this natural wealth were the victims in this venture. The marginalised and displaced tribals revolted and it took many forms, ranging from open warfare, non-payment of taxes, violation of rules to theft, kidnaping and dacoity.

One weakness of the book is that it adopts a very unselective and omnibus approach while studying protest and violence. The British designated all protests as criminal activities. This book has gone to the other extreme and designated every act of individual theft and robbery as protest and protest. The trouble with both these approaches is that the supreme importance of protest as a critique and a questioning of the system gets overlooked. We need an account of the tribal protest that makes a distinction between genuine protest and routine acts of crime and violence.

—The reviewer is a visiting faculty at BML Munjal University, Gurugram

