

A Saint in Search of a Nation

Aroup Chatterjee

It is difficult for an outsider to take this in, but when I was growing up in Calcutta in the 1960s and 1970s, Mother Teresa was neither a household name nor a celebrity. She became well known (better known) upon getting her Nobel Prize in 1979. Her reputation among Indians skyrocketed in the 1980s. Indians have an abnormal fascination for the Nobel Prizes and for their awardees: Amartya Sen, an obtuse academic economist, was mobbed at Dum Dum airport when he returned from Stockholm in 1998. Yet Mother Teresa, when she returned in 1979 (via Rome and Delhi), did not encounter any crowds.

Though not a public figure, Mother Teresa did have her select fan base in Calcutta. They were upper and upper-middle class Calcuttans, the small Anglo-Indian community, and a few anglicized Calcuttans. The English language daily *The Statesman* has been her steadfast promoter, because this newspaper had always promoted Western (English, in reality) values and was an unabashed apologist for the British Raj in India. It mistakenly assumed Mother Teresa was Western (i.e., modern), and the few times it referred to her origins, it was always “Yugoslavian” (which appeared even in 1997 in her obituary). In *Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation*, Dr. Gëzim Alpion tells us how Albanians experienced oppression at the hands of the Yugoslavian state. It would have taken one phone call from Mother Teresa to the newspaper for it to correct the misidentification.

Her birthplace Skopje was part of Yugoslavia before the nation disintegrated. That’s about the sum total of



Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation, by Gëzim Alpion (Bloomsbury: New Delhi, London, Oxford, New York, Sydney, 2022, ISBN 978-93-89165-05-0). 296 pp. Hardcover, \$115.

her being Yugoslavian. She was an ethnic Albanian Catholic living in a Muslim majority region. Why she did not publicize her Albanian roots more (or at all) in or outside India I cannot tell. Maybe she was embarrassed. Maybe she knew (was told) that the prominent party for much of her life in Calcutta (whose headquarters coincidentally is behind her own)—the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—which ruled the state from 1977 to 2011, maintained cordial relations with the (atheist) Party of Labour of Albania, which was ruling her nation by force. Mother Teresa was a pseudo-proud Albanian, but her pride was something that came to her late (except for the brief statement at her Nobel Prize ceremony), if at all. In that statement, she made it apparent that her being Indian was limited to the convenience of carrying a passport.

Alpion is a gentleman and a scholar of utmost integrity. He puts Mother Teresa in the background—the complex cauldron—that she originated from. It is indeed impossible to remain unmoved while reading his account of the sheer brutality suffered by Albanians at the hands of their neighbors (Ottomans, Serbs, Montenegrins, and Greeks) over

centuries. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians were slaughtered or made homeless often by marauding gangs. In this age of Hindu nationalism, Hindus often claim exclusive rights to suffering at the partition of India, but history teaches us otherwise. Hindu nationalists would benefit from perusing world history.

What I find surprising is that Mother Teresa, who actually lived through the Indian partition (albeit in cloisters), never mentioned the trauma that ethnic Albanians went through in her nation of origin. Reading Alpion’s excellent book, one wonders if she was at pains to even deny the suffering of Albanians.

My view is that Mother Teresa was so over-concerned with the suffering of the unborn and so keen to prevent a single abortion (even in cases of gang-rape) that day-to-day sufferings or mass sufferings, however painful, did not affect her.


I feel Alpion is resentful about Mother Teresa’s quasi-denial of her Albanian heritage. He records her reluctance to speak or write Albanian, even to her close relatives. He mentions her indifference to the Vatican’s shabby treatment of the Albanian Catholic

cause, although she was a shining star in the organization. He rightly mentions that she frequently intervened in other international political issues.

We “expats” who are born and bred in one nation then choose to live and work in a distant second one often have divided loyalties. Our views are complex and layered in how we view our country of origin and our country of domicile. In Mother Teresa’s case, the elephant in the room was the Vatican, which, I feel, was dictating much of her public (and private) sentiments toward Albania and Albanians. In today’s Albania, only 10 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, which might have colored the Vatican’s position.

In my mind, Mother Teresa’s allegiance to her nation—if by “nation” one means Albania—was tenuous. I have always believed she felt totally at ease in the United States and also at the Vatican. Each year she spent summer and monsoon season in the United States and Europe. In the United States she clicked with every politician, from either side of the divide. In my mind, that was her real nation. The possible murder of her father when she was only nine might have created an aversion in her mind to the place she was born and spent her childhood.

Thankfully, Alpin does not write about Mother Teresa’s charitable activities, because that would have taken us into conflicting territories. To people who glorify her and her order as great charity givers, I am asking these days: What have they done during the COVID-19 pandemic? In Calcutta and India, literally hundreds of organizations are working round the clock during COVID-19, including private individuals who are cooking meals for those suffering from COVID-19. The only absentees are Missionaries of Charity.

I recommend this meticulously researched book to anybody with an interest in personalities and what shapes them. Furthermore, it is a valuable treatise on the socio-cultural history of the Balkans. 

Aroup Chatterjee is the author of *Mother Teresa the Untold Story*, a critical look at the late nun.



POEMS

AUGURY

George Kalogeris

Those seven pigeons, perched on a slate-gray roof—

The highest peak on my street. Each pointed beak points

In a different direction. As if they had all

Conceivable angles of hindsight and foresight covered.

Those seven pigeons, perched on the roof next door,

And only the gray clouds moving ...

George Kalogeris’s most recent book of poems is *Winthropos* (Louisiana State University, 2021). He is also the author of *Guide to Greece* (LSU), a book of paired poems in translation, *Dialogos*, and poems based on the notebooks of Albert Camus, *Camus: Carnets*. His poems and translations have been anthologized in *Joining Music with Reason*, chosen by Christopher Ricks (Waywiser, 2010). He is the winner of the James Dickey Poetry Prize.

RETURN

Adela Redish

The green ivy

The twisting ferns

The grey fog swirling around the forest floor

All of it entwining

Over my legs and back

Standing erect in the middle of the woods

Buds and twigs

And lichen

Like sea-glass to the ocean

I came home

Adela Redish is a pseudonym.