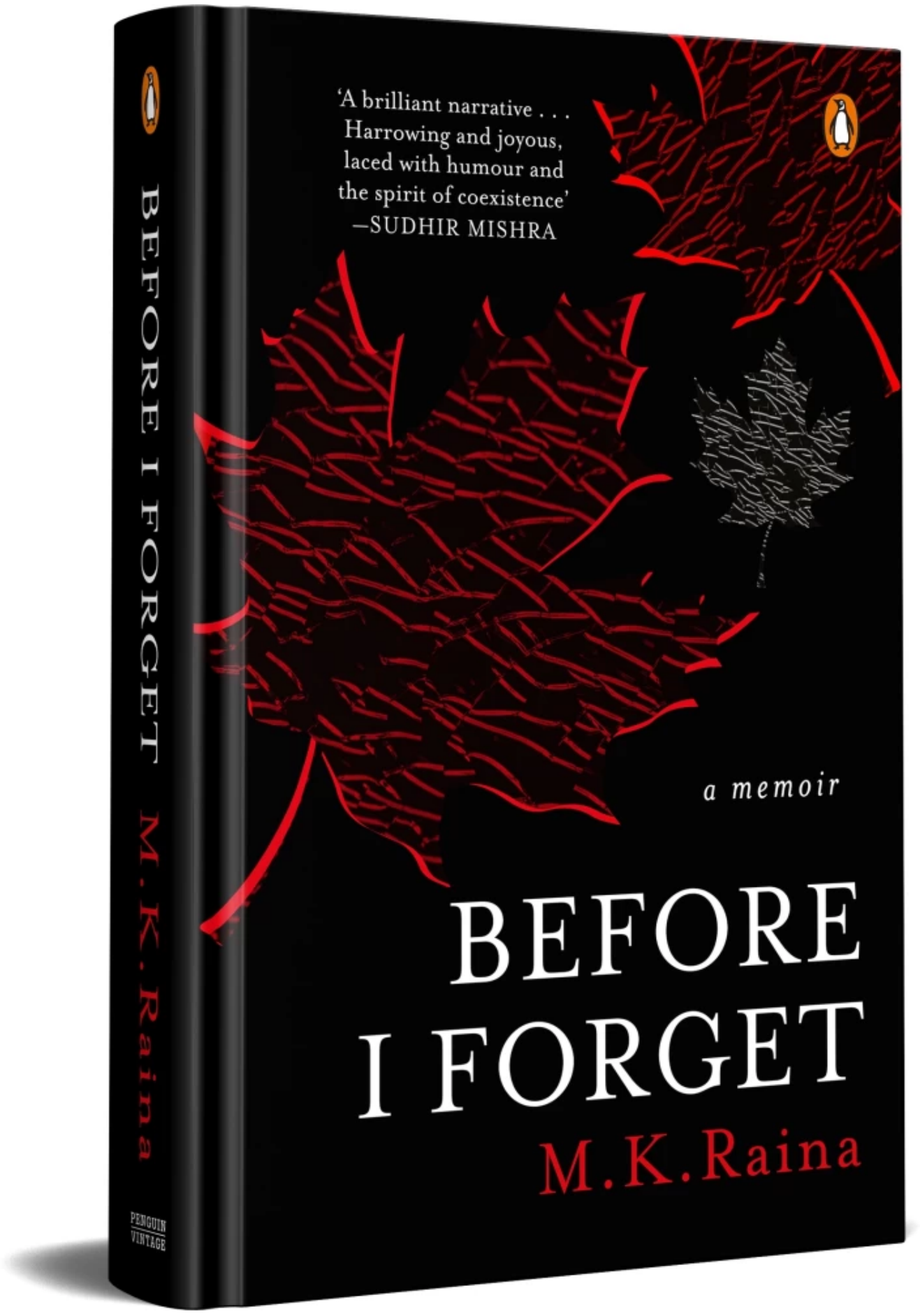
An Unforgettable Book Discussion Conducted by Sujata and Oroon

Conversations: Before I Forget

Reviewed by **Manohar Khushalani**



M.K. Raina's memoir, "Before I Forget," is a deeply moving chronicle of his multifaceted life as a theatre actor,

director, and cultural activist. The memoir weaves through various stages of his life, from his serene childhood in Kashmir to his influential role in Delhi's theatre scene, and his poignant experiences during the turbulent periods of Kashmir's history. At IIC,



Sujata Prasad and Oroon Das, conducted an extremely engaging and memorable conversation with the author.

His narrative began with memories of his early years in Kashmir, painting a picture of harmony and cultural richness. He describes the idyllic days in the Sheetal Nath Sathu Mohalla, where Hindus and Muslims lived together in peace, and his nurturing education at Lal Ded Primary School. This nostalgic recounting provides a stark contrast to the later chapters, which detail the descent of Kashmir into violence and chaos in the 1990s.

The core of Raina's memoir focuses on his efforts to use

theatre as a tool for social change and healing. Despite the insurgency and violence in regions like Kashmir and the North-East, Raina set up theatre workshops aimed at reviving folk traditions and fostering community spirit. His work often put him in danger, yet he persisted, driven by a cause greater than activism—a belief in mending the fabric of society. One of his significant achievements was the successful theatre workshop in Kashmir in 2000, where he taught young locals not just theatre, but values of rationality and responsibility.

Raina's reflections on the political and cultural history of India are profound. He recounts witnessing turbulent times, the Emergency period, Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Delhi riots, and the death of playwright Safdar Hashmi. These events are narrated with a historian's precision and a poet's sensitivity, capturing both the joy and sorrow of living through India's tumultuous times.

The memoir delves deeply into the traumatic period of the 1990s in Kashmir. Raina's mother's illness during the violence-ridden winter. Amidst curfews and security checks, he navigated the challenges of getting medical care for his mother, only to face the heartbreak of her passing. The exodus of Kashmiri Pandits during this period is another painful memory, highlighting the erosion of centuries-old communal bonds.

Raina's narrative does not shy away from the complexities and mistrust that grew among communities: How even brothers became strangers, emphasizing the profound impact of fear. His return to Kashmir in the 2000s to conduct theatre workshops marked a significant effort to rebuild trust and revive cultural practices like the traditional folk theatre, Bhand Pather.

Raina balances personal anecdotes with broader socio-political observations. His encounters with cultural luminaries in Delhi, such as Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, and Om Puri, are interspersed with reflections on the decline of the city's

once-vibrant theatre scene

“Before I Forget” is a testament to M.K. Raina’s unwavering dedication to his craft and his cause. It is a poignant reminder of the importance of cultural heritage in fostering understanding and unity in times of conflict. His declaration, “We should never forget but always forgive”

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A Rich Tapestry of Events and Anecdotes

TALK: *Before I Forget*

CONVERSATION BETWEEN: *M.K. Raina, Sujata Prasad, and Oroon Das*

COLLABORATION: *Ahad Ashad*

29 May 2024

M.K. Raina's memoir *Before I Forget* is a deeply moving chronicle of his multifaceted life as a theatre actor, director and cultural activist. The memoir weaves through various stages of his life, from his serene childhood in Kashmir to his influential role in Delhi's theatre scene, and his poignant experiences during the turbulent periods of Kashmir's history.

His narrative begins with memories of his early years in Kashmir, painting a picture of harmony and cultural richness. He describes the idyllic days in the Sheetal Nath Sahu mohalla, where Hindus and Muslims lived together in peace, and his nurturing education at Lal Dad Primary School. This nostalgic recounting provides a stark contrast to the later chapters, which detail the descent of Kashmir into violence and chaos in the 1990s.

The core of Raina's memoir is his efforts to use theatre as a tool for social change and healing. Despite the insurgency and violence in regions like Kashmir and the northeast, Raina set up theatre workshops to revive folk traditions and foster community spirit. One of his significant achievements was the successful theatre workshop in Kashmir in 2003, where he bought young locals not just theatre, but values of rationality and responsibility.

Raina's reflections on the political and cultural history of India are profound. He recounts witnessing turbulent times, the Emergency, Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Delhi riots of 1984, and the death of playwright Sahibar Hashmi. These events are narrated with a historian's precision and a poet's sensitivity, capturing both the joy and sorrow of living through India's tumultuous times.

The memoir delves deeply into the traumatic period of the 1990s in Kashmir and Raina's mother's illness during the violence-ridden winter. Amidst curfews and security checks, he navigated the challenges of getting medical care for his mother, only to face the heartbreak of her passing. The exodus of Kashmir Pandits during this period is another painful memory, highlighting the erosion of centuries-old communal bonds.

Raina's narrative does not shy away from the complexities and mistrust that grew among communities. His return to Kashmir in the 2000s to conduct theatre workshops marked a significant effort to rebuild trust and revive cultural practices like the traditional folk theatre, Bhand Pathar.

Before I Forget is a testament to Raina's dedication to his craft and cause. It is a poignant reminder of the importance of cultural heritage in fostering understanding and unity in times of conflict.

• MANOHAR KHUSHALANI