



Intizar Husain (b. 1925) is a journalist, short-story writer, and novelist, widely considered the most significant living fiction writer in Urdu. Born in Dibai, Bulandshahr, in British-administered India, he migrated to Pakistan in 1947 and currently lives in Lahore. Besides *Basti*, he is the author of *Naya Gar* (The New House), and *Agay Sumandar Hai* (Beyond Is the Sea). Collections of Husain's celebrated short stories have appeared in English under the titles *Leaves*, *The Seventh Door*, *A Chronicle of the Peacocks*, and *An Unwritten Epic*.

Asif Farrukhi is a Pakistani doctor, writer, and translator who translates from Urdu to English. He has edited several anthologies of Pakistani writers in English, including *Urdu Stories* and *Short Stories from Pakistan*. He has also published six collections of his own short stories, and two collections of literary criticisms.

Frances W. Pritchett has taught South Asian literature at Columbia University since 1982. Her books include *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics*, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Hamzah*, and (with Khaliq Ahmad Khaliq) *Urdu Meter: A Practical Handbook*.

BASTI

by Intizar Husain

Translated from the Urdu by Frances W. Pritchett

Introduction by Asif Farrukhi

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“Intizar Husain does not live in the past, so much as he draws from it. His nostalgia is not comforting, there is that disquiet air that runs through his works, and *Basti*, arguably the finest novel on Partition, is no different. Distance in time often diminishes emotion, but in Husain's case it only serves to distil it: what goes away is the peripheral, what is retained in the essential.”

—Ziya Us Salam, *The Hindu*

“It is a compelling read—a fine work of fiction that foreshadows in so many ways the Pakistan that exists today. . . Mr. Husain's fiction is marvelous for the writing alone. As a translator, Ms. Pritchett has done wonders to preserve many of the nuanced elements of the original. . .” —Paul Overby, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Basti is the great Pakistani novel, a beautifully written, brilliantly inventive reckoning with the violent history of a country whose turbulence, ambitions, and uncertainties increasingly concern the whole world.

In Urdu, *basti* means any space, from the most intimate to the most universal, in which groups of people come together to try to live together. The question at the heart of *Basti* is how to constitute a common world—What brings people together? What tears them apart?

“When the world was still all new, when the sky was fresh and the earth not yet soiled, when trees breathed through the centuries and ages spoke in the voices of birds, how astonished he was, looking all around, that everything was so new, and yet looked so old”—so the book begins, with a mythic, even mystic, vision of harmony, as the hero, Zakir, looks back on his childhood on a subcontinent that had not yet been divided between Muslims and Hindus. But Zakir is abruptly evicted from this paradise—real or imagined—into the maelstrom of history. The new country of Pakistan is born, separating Zakir once and for all from the woman he loves, and in a jagged and jarring sequence of scenes we witness a nation and a psyche torn apart again and again by political, religious, economic, linguistic, personal, and sexual conflicts—in effect, a world of loneliness. Zakir, whose name means “remember,” serves as the historian of this troubled place, while the ties he maintains across the years with old friends—friends who run into each other in cafés and on corners and the odd other places where history takes a time-out—suggest that the possibility of reconciliation is not simply a dream.

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FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Urdu word “*basti*” can be translated as “human settlement” in a grouping of any size. Why do you think Husain used this as his title and how is this theme explored in various ways throughout the book?
2. *Basti* is probably as notable for what it doesn’t say as for what it does. Does this make the novel difficult to read? How does it contribute to its overall feel?
3. Husain makes few concessions to the non-South Asian reader perhaps unfamiliar with the history of the region. Was this a problem for you?
4. Some readers of *Basti* have felt that Husain expresses undue nostalgia for the pre-Partition (1947) world, neglecting the primacy and vitality of modern society. Do you agree or disagree with this? Does it matter?
5. What are some of the key family/generational dynamics in *Basti* and how do they inform the characters and events surrounding them?
6. Memory is a major structural and thematic part of *Basti*. The name Zakir even means “he who remembers.” How effectively does Husain handle memory and how does it contribute to the overall feeling of the novel?
7. Husain has made Zakir a historian. What is the significance of this career in the novel and how might it explain Zakir’s behavior and responses to events?
8. The relationship between Zakir and Sabirah haunts much of the book, though remains tantalizingly ambiguous. What does their relationship tell us about them and about the conflicting forces at work in the world around them? How do you feel about Zakir’s renewed decision to write a letter to Sabirah near the book’s end?
9. Husain is very spare in providing physical and even emotional details about his characters. Were there particular characters that stood out for you? By what means did the author make them memorable?
10. Zakir and his friends are often thought to be frustratingly passive and noncommittal. Is this a weakness or a strength of the book? How does it reflect Zakir’s (or Husain’s) approach to political and historical events?
11. Much has been made of *Basti*’s open ending (p. 203), the suspense of waiting for “a sign” that may or may not come. How do you interpret this, and where do you think events are heading? Do you find the book ultimately hopeful or pessimistic?
12. *Basti* is generally considered a modernist novel because of its sudden shifts in time and place, stream of consciousness, etc. Did you find this type of approach effective in telling this story? What sort of challenges did it present to you as a reader?
13. It has been written that a major theme in *Basti* occurs in the Koran, a line that occurs several times in the book: “I swear by Time, man is surely in loss.” What does this mean to you and how would you relate it to *Basti*?