

THE SAGA OF TRANSITION

—P. Raja—

FOR some years past I had nourished the impression that the Indo-Anglian fiction had drawn enough from the traumatic events of the pre and post-partition days. It needed a novel of the range and depth of *Cyclones* to change my impression.

But it will be wrong to describe this novel as one based on the aforesaid events. They only serve as the physical contours of this remarkable work. What the reader receives is a series of knocks on his consciousness—some sweet, some surprising and some rude. The sum total of the effect is, he emerges enriched by a new awareness of human potentiality, of a wider range along which life can be lived and, above all else, of the law of transcendence that governs our life, enabling us absorb shocks of experience and to grow with them.

It is the protagonist of the novel, Sudhir Chowdhury, who leads us to this kind of awakening. We meet him as the scion of a ruined feudal family of Nijanpur, though his birth remains shrouded in mystery for a long time. He is called from his romantic college life when the bankrupt landlord who had adopted him suddenly disappears in a dramatic but entirely credible situation. That is when the first man in the village who gets drunk at the newly cropped up colony of outsiders building a war-time jetty on the outskirts of the village, approaches the hapless landlord to offer him a half-bottle of whisky and desires to become his chum!

The young Sudhir though fresh from the town, begins to love the naive villagers after a terrible cyclone leaves them in the lurch. He is dreaming of a peaceful, settled life when communal riots rock the 'city' (the reference is obviously to Calcutta) and its echo disturbs the peace of Nijanpur and Lalgram, two neighbouring villages dominated by Hindus and Muslims respectively.

A series of interesting events oblige Sudhir to abscond for a considerable length of time and to spend a period in jail during which he meets a number of characters, constituting a shockingly different yet entirely convincing bunch, giving us an absorbing variety.

TIME may move at its own pace, but events in India move very fast during that eventful period of the country's history and by the time Sudhir is back in his village, it is metamorphosed into a hick town. His last action in the novel is dramatic; it has to be read in the novel, in order to be properly appreciated in keeping with its denouement and it is likely to cast a spell on the reader, a combined effect of the empathy, bewilderment and tension it creates, though all cul-

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minating on a grand note of peace in the protagonist's heart—a peace that can come only through a sublime process of transcendence.

There are a number of situations in the novel remarkable for their individual charm: the old eccentric Roy who announces his unilateral decision that the one who can kill the man-eating crocodile in the river should be deemed fit to contest the limited franchise election of 1947 and is himself carried away by the crocodile in a moonlit night, the fight between two angry bulls who fall into the landlord's pond notorious for its fathomless mire and sink as the helpless villagers look on and weep and so on and so forth.

The title *Cyclones* is significant. There is the absorbing description of a physical cyclone; there is the political turmoil sweeping the country which is another kind of cyclone and there is the cyclone raging in Sudhir's mind. A great feature of the novel is its authentic portrayal of rural India on the eve of freedom, in a style that is at once lyrical and real.

"A great novel can combine in itself all the breadth and sweep of an epic, the tension of a drama, the emotional drive of a lyric and the intellectuality of an objective essay," wrote a distinguished Indian scholar, the late Professor Taraknath Sen. *Cyclones* fulfils these conditions incredibly well.