

Village "killed" in partition riots

Colonial rule, pre-partition and partition days in India have all fascinated almost every writer of fiction or prose. This has led to a great deal of literature. This genre can be termed as "Raj" and "transition" literature. "Cyclones" by Manoj Das falls in the second category.

The transitional period — that is, the passage of India from colonial rule to Independence — and the socio-economic political complexities it created offer a wide range of situations. It witnessed the crumbling of the old feudal system and gave a big push to urbanisation. How society and the people reacted and how these changes came about is imaginatively depicted in this novel.

The novel is set in an Indian village and revolves around the heir of a village feudal lord. The period is 1944-46, hours before the dawn of India's Independence. The sudden disappearance of the feudal lord and a powerful cyclone

Cyclones — A novel by Manoj Das. Sterling Publishers, New Delhi. Pp. 183. Rs 125.

force a reluctant Sudhir, the adopted son of the chief, to come and stay in the village. His experiences and disillusionments mirror the socio-psychological order and disorder of this phase.

The author has subtly dealt with the wide changes brought in this phase, crammed with the eclipse of feudalism and the birth of "populist politics", communal riots, rise of Communism and the general awakening of the masses. The hypocrisy and selfishness of the so-called patriots and assorted leaders are brought out in a skilful fashion.

The explosive situation caused by communal riots is exploited by the so-called servants of people. Rumour-mongering, issuing of false statements and supply of weapons are the means. Sethji and Kamal are representative of the industrialist class who proclaimed themselves to be serving the interests of the nation, though every action of theirs was motivated by self-interest. Going flat out to make hay while the sun shone, this group manipulated the patriotic feelings of simple men and women so that it could extract benefits out of the resultant mass murder and mass migration.

How tactfully Kamal appeals to the nationalistic sentiments of Sudhir and makes him sell a piece of ancestral land at a throw-away price. That too for the broader cause of the nation. On it comes up a factory to manufacture liquor bottles. Sethji is one step ahead of Kamal. By egging Sudhir to contest elections, he tries to use him to gain his own ends.

This phase of history is marked by a general awakening of the people, their approach becoming practical and commercial. Some villagers are at first outraged that the river Dahiya is being filled up but hasten to complete the work to earn attractive wages.

Or take the annual mela in the Shivala. Stalls, entrance fees and an acrobatic show transform the village fair from a purely cultural affair into a commercial activity. Old feudal rivalry, which keeps Sudhir and Geeta apart, the powerful emergence of the swami, which is in full bloom today, complete the realistic depiction of the fast-changing rural scene.

Since the novel deals with a complex situation, the author's task is somewhat tedious. He has to deal with many facets without making the volume bulky. But he emerges triumphant in the task.

Character depiction, an important ingredient of a good novel, is simply superb. For instance, various incidents involving Geeta project her as strong-willed but a silent sufferer and Kamal's reactions betray his hypocrisy and ruthless pragmatism. Reena is a confused girl, caught between her father's selfishness and her own generous nature; she is finally led astray by the swami.

However, sad to say, Sudhir, the central character, confuses the reader the most. At times he is stupid (swallowing a frog) and fails to see through Kamal's wicked deal; at other times he is thoroughly practical (as in conducting the village fair and cleverly taking the place

of the acrobat); in between, he hits the spiritual path. All this makes him inconsistent.

The novel is absorbing and thought-provoking. It is a study of human behaviour, caught in the vortex of uncontrollable transition.

— Sunita Puri

From Ramgarh with pride

The post-independence history of the Punjab Regiment is very vividly captured by Brig V.R. Raghavan, another fellow-Punjabi, in his slim little book "By Land and Sea". The Punjab Regiment is the oldest infantry regiment of our Army, and Raghavan has carried on his account from "The Golden Galley" (the official history up to 1947), authored by British officers. The book, replete with maps, sketches and some rare photographs, is basically based on the main battles fought by the regiment and takes up the historical threads of India's Independence from partition to 1984. This is as good a history as any, for it is battles and the honours gained in war that are the final testament of a truly professional army.

Some of the battle accounts are so absorbing that the reader could well imagine that he was himself there standing atop the Brachil pass in Jammu and Kashmir, or in the desert sands of Rajasthan astride a knocked out Pakistani tank. The stirring account of an infantry battalion that bore the brunt of the 1962 Chinese attack

By Land and Sea by Brig V.R. Raghavan. The Punjab Regimental Centre, Ramgarh. Cantt. Pp 186. Rs 150.

in NEFA also brings into focus the varying perceptions in Delhi and the men on the Thagla Ridge, the missed chances, and heroism in a situation that could at best be described as confusing. The ruthless and high attrition battles of Shakargarh are described in detail, and what is particularly rewarding is the fact that the level has been kept up to a battalion, for that is exactly where issues of defeat and victory are really decided.

There is the description of the now-famous Zoji La battle in 1947, where a civilian Muslim porter with the 1st Patiala battalion earned the coveted Maha Vir Chakra. The account of this man later falling into Pakistani hands and his rescue by the battalion makes fascinating reading. Incidentally, the number of gallantry awards won by this battalion in one campaign is perhaps an all-time record anywhere in the world.

It is interesting to see that Lieut-Gen J.S. Aurora, presently a Member of Parliament, was a Colonel of the Punjab Regiment, and the most famous one after Field-Marshal Alexander. General Aurora's contribution in the 1971 war and the unforgettable campaign he waged in the erstwhile East Bengal now Bangladesh, are well known.

The book highlights the battles that went right and also those that did not. The relationship of the battalion-sized battles as they were actually fought on the ground to the lofty plans of the higher commanders, makes the book good study material in the art of conducting such warfare. Fortunately, the detailed maps that accompany the account make for an easy assimilation of the description.

Raghavan's account is different from most other battle accounts and brings out the grit, determination and initiative of each and every soldier who belongs to the Regiment. It is pleasing to see a serving Brigadier taking to the pen and sharing with us this comprehensive slice of the doings of one of the most famous infantry regiments of the Indian Army.

— H. S. Gill

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