



Cactus country: A historical perspective

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Abstract

Cactus Country chronicles the dispute between two separate entities India and Pakistan over the new Bangla state. It does make the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, very real in human terms and highlights the tragedy of sub-continent torn as under more than once in less than three decades. By presenting in a scrupulously historical manner the sequence of events, by recording the human fallout of dull and drab situations and last but not least by giving historical forces a human habitation, Manohar Malgonkar plays to perfection the role of true historian.

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Introduction

Quite a few Indo-Anglian novelists have set their narratives in the recent political and historical milieu, weaving significant happenings therein. Manohar Malgonkar Khuswant Singh, Nayantara Sehgal and Bhabani Bhattacharya are replete with ready instances of this. A novelist opts for a factual background only with a view to find an order in the seeming welter of history.

Rightly has it been averred that in History nothing is true but names and dates, in literature everything is true but names and dates. Even the bare facts of history, the names and dates are rendered into truthful account in Manohar Malgonkar. He gives his novels a strong empirical basis and despite the focus on individuals rather than incidents, the historical veracity of his novels stands out. He seems perfectly justified in claiming: Though some would criticize my style, they don't criticize my historical veracity. I take great pains to be absolutely accurate. If I write that something happened on a Saturday or on a moonless night, you can be sure it was on a Saturday or on a moonless night.¹

Malgonkar's attempt in his novels like *The Princes* and *The Devil's Wind* evidently is to make history certainly readable. His historical works *The Sea Hawk*, *Puars of Dewas Senior* (1963) and *Chattarpatis of Kolhapur* (1971) reveal his keen and intelligent sense of history. In the words of James Dayananda, "It is the interaction of public and private lives that interests him. All the historical figures are in the right places, on the right dates doing what they actually did, though conversations are mostly made up. Yet, for all this documentary authenticity, how alive and immediate everything seems."² It is this perspective that is depicted in *Cactus Country* (1991). Though some studies have taken up here and there Malgonkar's treatment of sociological and political scenerio³ and his use of novel as a history⁴ but they have not given this critical scrutiny in the context of *Cactus Country*.

The background of the novel *Cactus Country* is that of the Bangladesh liberation movement. The Author's Note prefaced

to the novel declares unambiguously:

Cactus Country is a novel. Its characters are fictitious. Nonetheless its background is authentic and its account of Pakistan's Bengal campaign straight history. If anything, I have watered down the violence and left out the more gruesome excesses so as to keep within the norms of fiction.(n.p.)⁵ 2 The novel does have references to few historical characters, viz. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (irrepressible strong man of Pakistan People's Party) (p. 13), Sheikh Mujib (the leader of Bengal) (p.13), Tikka Khan, the governor of East Pakistan (p.23), Mohammad Ali Jinnah (*Qaide-e-Azam*, the founder of Pakistan), Zia [ul-Haq], "Zulfie's chamcha... [who] keeps him informed (p.3 8)".

The novel chronicles the dispute between two separate entities India and Pakistan over the new Bangla state. The story of the novel revolves around the hero, Aslam Chisti who is a young Pakistani army officer caught up in the conflict in East Pakistan (New Bangladesh) in 1971. The Bangla liberation movement was oppressed by the Pakistani generals of Martial Law Administration. They had staked all on the assumption that the people of Bengal were congenitally incapable of speaking with one voice. In the coming parliament they would end up as a dozen or so inter-quarreling groups. "Two Bengalis mean a quarrel, and three Bengalis mean a political party." (p. 12) They believed that Bengalis were incapable of putting up a united front and as a consequence had always been ruled by outsiders: the Sultans, the Mughals, the Nawabs, the British and now the Punjabis.

Nevertheless, *Cactus Country* does make the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, very real in human terms and highlights the tragedy of sub-continent torn as under more than once in less than three decades.

What were India and Pakistan going to war over, for the second time in six years? He could not even think of a serious territorial dispute between the two countries. Were they, then, going to war merely because both sides felt like a scrap? (p.345)

The novel chronicles the strained relations between India and

Pakistan before the Bangladesh liberation movement. There was political unrest on both ends due to the violent storms of communalism.

There were magazines on a table: *Time* and *Newsweek* which, he had an idea, were banned, or at least forbidden in regimental messes, and several others, too, which he had not seen before: the *Spectator*, the *New Statesman* and the *Nation*. There was even the day's *Hindustan Times*, an Indian newspaper, as well as a Bombay weekly called *Blitz*. (p.27)

The seeds of communalism were sown with the division of India and Pakistan and the relations even became worse when India supported the formation of new nation 'Bangladesh'. The elite class of Pakistan was unable to digest the fact that Bengalis could handle their own democratic state.

... The Bengalis had been always like a race of untouchables. It was presumptuous of them even to think of sharing power, and for Bhutto and Tarik to press for a dialogue with them was an act of heresy. It was up to the army to bring the Bengalis to heel, squealing and cringing. (p.14) 3

Why Mr. Bhutto, Aslam wondered, the Pakistan Prime Minister is trying to camouflage his nervousness on the Bengal issue. Even though he is conscious about their losing control over the Eastern part of his country, he is not, 'that mad man' as would put his country's security at stake. "But surely no one could be so demented as to send out half of the nation's army to distant Bengal and thus leave mainland Pakistan exposed to the Indians waiting at the borders to march in?" (p.45)

The novel projects how various political tactics were used by the cunning, opportunist, higher political leaders to serve their natural interests. "And remember, Aslam, that in politics, there are no friends – only allies of the moment... people who have come together for mutual gains." (p.38) The ominously lengthening shadows of fundamentalism and obscurantism in Pakistan ('It's the Mullahs who are telling us what to do,'... 'Soon we'll be taking orders from them.' p.33) and the hegemonistic proclivities of the Punjabis in the country could but lead to one denouement, the pogrom in the eastern wing of the country.

The Punjabis who virtually monopolized the armed and the civil services, had appropriated for themselves the mantle of the ruling elite, and they had put up barriers even against the other indigenous tribes of Pakistan to protect their privileges (p.34).

How could the democratic verdict of the National elections of 1970 in Pakistan be acceptable under such circumstances? "For the Punjabis, whom even Mr. Bhutto had taken to calling the Brahmins of Pakistan's caste system, it had been axiomatic that they were the ruling race, the Prussians of the subcontinent, the masters, the chosen people. It was unthinkable that they should now sit back and allow themselves to be governed by the despised Bengalis" (p.12). Given these inputs the scenario as it unfurled itself was predictable: military onslaught on the unsuspecting eastern wing.

It was to be a midnight raid against a country, which was why the army was to be used in a novel role: as batches of

policemen sweeping down at a hundred places at once. Sheikh Mujib and his principal lieutenants were to be nabbed in their homes. If they resisted, they were to be shot. (p. 85)

The inevitable outcome was the rise of Bangla nationalism:

Amar Sonar Bangla. Ami tomi bhalobhashi

Chardin tomar... (p.134)

Even as the invading Pakistani army sought to split the Bangla ranks by raising a Razakar Army formed of Bihari immigrants to be used as a counterweight to the Bengali insurgents (p. 208), in classical gurilla fashion the ill-equipped, untrained but highly motivated Bangla Nationalists engaged the Pak army in sporadic fighting, sank the ships carrying reinforcements and ammunition (p.166) and inflicted incalculable damage on the invaders' efforts as well as their morale. The despicable raids on University hostels, the mass rape and torture of women and the burial of those "dead... or nearly dead" in mass graves, "bodies had been dragged by their legs and pushed into those holes" (p. 145) 4

On the one hand Pakistani military was propagating the slogan 'Thrash Bengal, Crush India' (p. 11), the Bengalis were preparing a new flag and new national anthem for their own democratic *Desh*. There hatred and bitterness towards the Pakistani political leaders could be easily resolved in the words of Wahida, Major Pirzada's daughter when she bluntly told Aslam that:

'No, captain. It is not for bloody Pakistan day that I shall be singing, but to observe that day as our 'Day of Resistance'... to show our determination to fight brute force. No, we shall not be saluting *your* flag, but raising a new flag, our own... and saluting it. We will sing our own National Anthem, *Sonar Bangla*... that's what I have been practising. (p. 69)

There was even split and conflict of views between the rulers of East Bengal.

... What is all this about a split in the Junta, Abbu?

'It was always there: those of us who wanted to give the Bengalis a share in government and those who wanted to crush them'

'And the crush-them chaps won? And managed to loose Bengal for us?'

Mr Bhutto doesn't think so—believes there is still a chance. (p. 37)

The novel limits itself to no political or geographical boundaries as it relentlessly unfolds the cataclysmic though chameleon developments in this part of the world placing the fictional protagonist Aslam Chisti at the centre stage through whose medium all political developments are projected. Aslam, well meaning son of a top ranking Pakistani army officer seems a natural extension of the Malgonkar tribe of heroes comprising Kiran Garud (Distant Drum), Prince Abhayraj (The Princes), Debidayal, the reformed Gian Talwar (A Bend In The Ganges), Nana Saheb (The Devil's Wind), Om Prakash Aggarwal, Visram Lal and A.B. Chopra (The Garland Keepers) who fight valiantly against the repressive forces – political as well as human. His inculcation of humanistic heroic values is rendered credible by making him the inheritor of the mixed Hindu (Sikh) and Muslim legacy, his mother- a brave sikh girl, having married an intrepid

muslim army officer. He often wonders that was there a time before partition when marriages outside religions were not a taboo; was the inter-religious marriage of his parents the result of communal harmony which has lost its tentacles in the present political scenario now.

... How it could have come about that Ammi, strikingly good-looking, college-educated and belonging to a wealthy family, had met Abbu, someone outside her *religion*, and come to *marry him*. Was there a time then, before the birth of Pakistan, when the taboos were a little less rigid? When social intercourse between people of different faiths was possible, and even intercommunal marriages could take place without causing irreparable estrangement? (p. 30)

Aslam is a brilliant sportsman, a cricketer playing the gentleman's game in the real and literal sense of the term He is the father's son in this respect for General Tank is portrayed as equally hero. This is how the father-son duo is described. Aslam did know much about politics, and privately he did not believe that his father was a politician either. Politics was for crooks, which his father was not. He was a man of character, born to wealth, honour, a family that went back to Mughal days and, oddly enough for someone who acknowledged no God, God-fearing. Above all he was courageous for he had come out openly for an honourable adjustment with the Bengalis even at the risk of falling out with his colleagues. Aslam had no doubt whatsoever that his father was right, and the other generals of the Martial Law Administration, wrong. (pp. 10-11)

Despite repeated warning by Aslam's Abbu, who is a top ranking officer in Pakistani army, about the mastermind plans of the political hawks, Aslam is categorical in his condemnation. His unadulterated praise for adherence to the code values even in humble persons indirectly shows him off in a heroic light, for his commitment that way is revealed to be not contingent upon rank or class. Subedar Gulabdin dies a martyr and Aslam salutes his memory.

There lay the *saab*, whom he would never consult again looking grubby as at that time when he had first seen him, his blouse caked with dried blood and mud, this *soldier* of Rupert Brooke's poem who was going to make a richer dust in this soil; looking solemn as ever because of his shut eyes, like a fallen statue of Joseph Stalin. (p. 295)

Aslam has his own ideal and Malgonkar reveals him asking himself repeatedly the question, whenever he is confronted with a difficult choice:

His brain was in a whirl. He put on the pyjamas and kurta and combed his hair. Then he went and sat in the upright office chair near the window, trying to collect his thoughts. How would Abbu have dealt with such a situation? he kept asking himself. Or the Subedar? (p. 234)

But forthright in his mind, Aslam is never indecisive.

This was typical of the army's way. No matter what happened routine had to go on. As to problems, there was, after all, nothing new in the world; problems had been encountered before and solutions devised for them – why even for desperate situations there were laid down drills, even for

retreat and for surrendering to an enemy force. But no matter what the difficulty, routine had to be maintained. (p. 239)

The Malgonkar code of values incorporating bravery, the ability to put up with strenuous work, a stiff upper lip, loyalty, camaraderie, belief in a simple 'jungle' code –all are demonstrated by Aslam Chisti. The manner wherein he uses whatever human and material resources he has at his command, to expose the machinations of the scheming Pakistani top-brass and the unholy nexus between the army, the bureaucracy and the 6 intelligence, is a certain pointer to the qualities of head and heart possessed in abundance by him. But how then to account for the volte face towards the close when he seems to sever his link with his country and he seems to opt for India? But the protagonists opting for India far from being a betrayal of his home land is just a strategic retreat to recoup and reassesses the modus operandi with a view to uprooting more effectively the more pernicious forces which for the time being have stifled life in Pakistan.

The coalescing of the political and the personal in *The Cactus Country* is accomplished not in a multi-faceted A Bend in the Ganges way where political ideology is shown casting its ubiquitous shadow on the personal lives of the individuals involved but in a simpler way by peeping in to the misgivings filled psyche of a character placed in a key political situation and thereby facilitating the projection of political development of a tumultuous nature.

On the basis of foregoing analysis it is obvious that by presenting in a scrupulously historical manner the sequence of events, by recording the human fallout of dull and drab situations and last but not least, by giving historical forces a human habitation, Manohar Malgonkar plays to perfection the role of true historian.

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