

“The Indian Army” as pictured by Manohar Malgonkar in his *Distant Drum and The Princes: A Note*

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Received Nov. 12, 2015

Accepted Dec. 03, 2015

ABSTRACT

This is a humble attempt to project Manohar Malgonkar essentially as a novelist of action who is partial to the Indian Army and the erstwhile Princes of India, dwelling at length in his *Distant Drum* on the traditions of the British Indian Army and to show how Princely interference occurs in army affairs.

Key words: The Indian Army,

Manohar Malgonkar, born in 1913 in Bombay, is one of the best known Indian English writers. Educated at Dharwad and Bombay, he joined the British army and became a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Indian army. Since his maternal grandfather was the Prime Minister of a Princely State in India, he grew up among princes and courtiers and knew the ways of life of the royal households of India.

It is generally held that Manohar Malgonkar has attempted every genre, i.e he has written novels, short stories, drama, film stories, non-fictional prose, histories, biographies, travelogue and literary criticism and his novels have been translated into several Indian and European languages: His novels are : 1) **Distant Drum** (1960), 2) **Combat of Shadows: A Novel** (1962) 3) **A Bend in the Ganges** (1964). 4) **The Princes** (1970), 5)

The Devil's Wind : Nana Saheb's story (1972), 6) **Bandicoot Run** (1982), **The Garland Keepers** (1986) and **Cactus Country** (1991). An important aspect of Malgonkar's writings is his special focus and interest in portrayal of historical events and picturing of the past. Most of his novels are based on events from the past and they may even be regarded as either historical novels or period novels.

Malgonkar's varied experiences and interests have very much influenced his practice of fiction. He is essentially a novelist of action. As a novelist, he is partial to the Indian army and the erstwhile princes of India. Since Malgonkar served in the Maratha Light Infantry of the Indian army, he writes about the Indian army with accuracy and authority as an insider. His novels **Distant Drum** and **The Princes** present traditions and the

goings-on in the Indian army. **Distant Drum** tells the story of the army career of Kiran Garud and his love-affair with Bina Sonal. **The Princes** tells the story of Maharaj Kumar Abhayraj of Begwad amidst the anxiety of the ruling Princes of India during the last decades of British rule, the crookedness of Indian politicians and the British strategy of playing the one against the other and the private life of the princes with emphasis on its venial side.

To Malgonkar, the Indian army is a hallowed institution, with hoary codes of conduct, high standards of honor and a high degree of professionalism. So he dwells at length in **Distant Drum** on the traditions of the British Indian army. He provides minute details of the breaking-in of new officers known as bum warts, the motive behind the practice, the role of the senior most wart, the meticulously observed ceremonies in the officers' mess, the rituals and the drills observed to the letter, the protocol for different occasions, the qualities required of the officers and those displayed by the commanding officers, the embarrassment caused by uncommitted and unprofessional Emergency. Commissioned officers, the danger posed by political officers and politicians and even the peccadilloes of the officers and their wives. In **The Princes**, the British Indian army is incidental to the narrative since the protagonist, Abhay, opts

for a stint in it before taking on his responsibilities as a prince. All the same, all the rigours of army life are presented with fidelity. What has been told of the British Indian army in **Distant Drum** is eschewed in **The Princes**. It presents how the powerful princes of India could influence the decisions of the Army. It also presents how misfits among the officers, including English ones, could manipulate things to avoid fighting commands, warm a seat in the administration and build a well-provisioned civilian nest for exchange at the opportune moment. Thus, Malgonkar's **Distant Drum** and **The Princes** present a rounded picture of the British Indian army, which devolved into the Indian army. This army narrative may be regarded as Malgonkar's tribute to the Indian army which nurtured him.

Distant Drum talks about the Indian army and describes its codes and traditions by way of telling the story of Kiran Garud, an officer of the 4th Satpura Rifles, his initiation into the codes and conventions of the regiment, his friendships, his experiences during the Burma Campaign of the Second World War, his love affair with Bina Sonal, and his experience of incompetence and political interference in the army. It may be said that the story of the Satpuras is a microcosmic representation of the Indian army. Malgonkar's narrative concentrates on the codes and traditions of the regiment. In the

Indian army, the regimental codes and conventions are sacrosanct and ensure spirit de corps. In a preamble to the novel, entitled "Some years Earlier", Malgonkar describes how a subaltern is accepted into a Satpura regiment. A young officer assigned to a Satpura regiment 'lives' with the regiment for a few weeks and is 'accepted' only after the commanding officer has made up his mind to take him in permanently. When the commanding officer has so made up his mind, the subaltern is led by the Adjutant of the regiment for his second interview with the commanding officer. He salutes the commanding officer and the Adjutant withdraws. The commanding officer smiles and tells the subaltern to sit down. Then the commanding office introduces the regiment to the subaltern. During the entire interview, the only word that the subaltern is expected to utter is **Sir**. The commanding officer lists the conventions and traditions of the regiment for the benefit of the subaltern. For instance, the Satpura officers are, first and foremost, gentlemen; no satpura officer ever consciously does anything that will hurt the regiment's **izzat**; all the officers try to live up to the code of the regiment; no one can explain all that the code implies; it is a wide and elastic code which is at the same time quite rigid; the officers live up to certain broad principles of behaviour; one of the clear and strict prescriptions of the code is that a Satpura officer finishes off his own

tigers; another is that, when two Satpura officers have a bet, only one of them checks up the facts while the other one always takes his word; one more is that they never say "I don't know" but only "I'll find out," because they take their professional responsibilities quite seriously (Distant Drum 9).

The Indian army has officers of several religions. Not every Muslim officer of the British Indian army opted to go to Pakistan when the country was partitioned and the British Indian army was divided into Indian army and the Pakistani army. Lieutenant Colonel Ayub Mullah is a Muslim and a pathan, but his family has lived for five generations in Lucknow. He is one of the few Muslim officers of the Satpura Regiment who opted to stay on in India and in the Satpuras (Drum 13). Arun, one of the Satpura officers, mentions the fact that because of the withdrawal of many English officers on the occasion of Independence, many officers in the Indian army are holding high ranks years ahead of the time they would have normally taken to reach such ranks (p 20). Some Satpura officers recall the incident wherein Kiran Garud, as a Second Lieutenant, "ticked off" his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Manners. Kiran maintains that the incident has been blown out of all proportion. Manners was one of the few prejudiced English officers of the British Indian army who looked down on Indian officers and sepoys. Manners, being an incompetent

misfit, disliked India and Indians and openly disparaged Indian civilization, religion, art and music. One evening, in the regimental officers mess, in a tipsy mood, Manners questioned the very loyalty of the Indian men of the regiment. Kiran was offended by the remark and sought Manner's permission to leave the mess. After Kiran had left the mess, Manners realized his error and apologized to the remaining officers in the mess (Drum 24).

In the course of his narrative, Malgonkar mentions that Captain Kiran Garud was awarded the Military Cross for exemplary devotion to duty in the field of battle during the Burma Campaign of the Second World War and that he was also mentioned in despatches-both important distinctions in an army career (Drum 24). The commanding officer forced Kiran to go on a Sanga's course out of turn. By the time Kiran completed the course and turned to Raniwada, Margot and her husband had left Raniwada. Two years later, during the Second World War, in the middle of 1944, Kiran was sent away from the front for compulsory rest and recuperation. Like all such officers, Kiran spent the leave in Calcutta. He saw Margot in the arms of a Major from the Flying Tigers Squadron of the American Air Corps. The Second World War brought numerous non-professional officers into the army. Known as Indian Emergency Commissioned officers (IECO), many of these officers lacked the qualities of the

professional officers. Major Rawal Singh of the 4th Satpura Rifles is a typical IECO. He was a schoolteacher in civilian life. Rawal Singh was not even put through the short course of training designed for IECOs, but was directly commissioned as a field cashier. He was stationed as of Calcutta during the last year of the war and so automatically qualified for the Burma Star and the General Service Medal. While serving as a Field Cashier at Calcutta, he was 'paper-posted' to the 4th Satpuras for the purpose of documentation. At the end of the war, the IECOs were not demolished. By the end of the War, Rawal Singh had to be accommodated in some Satpura battalion. As the commanding officer of the 4th Satpuras, Kiran tried to get rid of Rawal Singh, but discovered that the misfit had some pull in higher circles (Drum 43).

Captain Barkat Ram, the Adjutant of the 4th Satpura Rifles, illustrates another facet of the Indian army-sons of Indian rulers enlisting in the Indian army as officers. Barkat Ram is the second son of the Maharaja of Tilkata, a Rajput ruler. His bearer, a family servant who looked after him since his Mayo school days, persists in addressing him as 'Huzoor'. Barkat Ram's protests that he is not a huzoor are of no avail. The bearer adamantly refuses to give up the traditional form of addressing a member of the royal family which his family has always served (Drum 46-47)

Malgonkar provides a detailed description of how the bachelor-subalterns of the 4th Satpura Rifles prepare for the special dinner night ordered by the Commanding officer upon his return from Delhi. There are five bachelor-subalterns in the 4th Satpura Rifles. For the dinner which is scheduled at 8 pm, the subalterns are dressed and ready at 7 pm itself. They strut about nervously in their stiff starched uniforms, looking at their watches every few minutes. They do not sit down because their uniforms may crumple. At 7.30 pm, they mount bicycles and ride the half mile to the mess. They ride slowly because they do not want to raise dust that might soil their trousers. Each subaltern carries a rag with him to give his boots a final polishing before entering the mess (Malgonkar, Drum 48).

The dinner in the officer's mess is almost a ceremony, governed by time-honoured traditions and minutely compiled with Kiran, as the Commanding officer, arrives by a staff car at the mess. He loiters in the garden for a few minutes, listening to the pipe band playing a customary English tune. When the pipe is over, he claps dutifully and enters the mess anteroom. All the assembled officers snap to attention with almost one click and greet him in a chorus. Kiran calls the aabdar of the mess and tells him to serve drinks to everybody. At this the Senior dining member points out that it will mean a third drink before dinner for some, where as orders

restrict all dinners to two drinks before dinner. Kiran relaxes the orders. At nine o'clock the mess Havaldar comes in and announces dinner. Kian and his officers empty their glasses and go in to dinner (Drum 49-51) pointing to the traditional character of the army, Malgonkar says:

It was like a thousand other mess nights. At least in the army messes, so little had changed that even Kipling might have felt perfectly as home. Mess nights were all well-preserved, neatly-tied-up bundles of faintly musty customs; some of them quite meaningless, one or two even shockingly opposed to the sprit of the times, but all of them were inflexible, just because they were regimental customs, carried over from close on two centuries" (Drum 57).

While the meat course is served, the pipers march into the dining room and play airs as they go round and round the dining table- a regimental custom. The President of the Mess Committee rises and calls upon the Vice-President of the Mess Committee to propose a toast to the President of India. The subaltern sitting at the other end of the table stands up and gives the toast. All the others standup, while the first six bars of the National Anthem are played by the band outside. Then everyone drinks to the President of India, saying so in unison. The Pipe Major enters, sits by the side of the President of the Mess Committee of the evening and solemnly drinks three fingers of neat whisky. He is

complimented on the performance of the band. The very special dinner night itself is an army tradition. Whenever the Commanding officer returns from a Conference, he calls a very special dinner night so that he can pass on to them news of the other battalions of the regiment. Now Kiran proceeds to do so upon his return from the Infantry Commanders Conference at Delhi. Kiran is a good army officer and as such, he is quite familiar with the details of the ground where he has trained his soldiers.

Thus, as Rao puts it, "Manohar Malgonkar has been able to create a very realistic picture of the Indian army in the throes of change-marked by the Second World War, the dawn of Independence, the vivisection of the nation, the departure of the many British offices of the Indian army, the division of the army, the quick promotion of the Indians to the higher echelons in the army, the Kashmir war, the Emergence of national spirit in the army. But what is most important is not the description of army life but the human touch to the normal scene of the defence services in Indian life.

In the Novels of Males Malgonkar: A Study in the Quest for fulfillment,

M.Rajagopalachari says:

Malgonkar's first novel **Distant Drum** derives from his personal experience as an army officer. He is able to give an inside picture of army life in this novel as

he served in the Infantry, in counter-intelligence and on the Army General Staff during World War II as Lieutenant colonel. He dwells on the critical juncture of the Partition days"(p 23).

In **Indo-Anglian Fiction: An Assessment**, P.P.Mehta says:

"**Distant Drum** tells the story of that [i.e. the Indian] army and yet it is far more than a war book. It is a sincere attempt to depict a generation of men against challenges typical of the time stresses [sic] greater than war itself".....**Distant Drum** is indeed a story about the Indian army, navy more a documentary of the 4th Satpuras than history or fiction" (p 267).

In **Manohar Malgonka**, G.S. Amur says that Malgonkar's **Distant Drum** is "a symbolic presentation of the Indian encounter with the British in the Army and its value for India" (p 46). In the words of Bhattacharya, "In **Distant Drum** Malgonkar attempts to present various facets of army life in India during the period of transition from the last years of the British regime to the beginning years of congress rule. (p 17).

Malgonka's novel **The Princes** recounts the historical event of the passing of the Indian princely order. It tells the story of the growing up of Maharajkumar Abhayraj of Begwad amidst the historic developments in the Indian Subcontinent between the First

World War and Indian Independence. His father Hijoji is the autocratic Maharaja of Begwad. Abhay grows up amidst the Splendor and the intrigues of the palace and the needling of nationalist politicians determined to root out monarchy. Abhay has been brought up like many Indian Maharajkumars and is about to be sent to Travancore for training in administration under the able Dewan Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer (Princes 14). At this juncture, the pattern of life of the Indian Princes is disturbed by the onset of World War II in Europe. Accorwad, to stand by his fathering to history, several young princes from several royal households joined the Armed Forces, underwent training and fought in the War and some of them distinguished themselves on the battlefield. Begwad's heir-apparent Abhay too does so in **The Princes**. Abhay wishes to join a Cavalry regiment, preferably the Royal Deccan Horse. Colonel Gibson approves of the preference (Princes 126 can no longer remain a more spectator. So, two weeks after the birth of his son, Abhay resigns his commission in the Army and returns to Beg ving.

To conclude, **The Princes** is essentially a novel about Princely India. However, the prince-protagonist of the novel, Maharajkumar Abhayraj of Begwad,opts for a

stint in the British Indian army and so Malgonkar presents army life again. This time, however, he eschews the training and the cantonment phases of army life and concentrates on active duty. Besides, in the character of Captain Farren, Malgonkar presents the shameful side of army life, namely an officer avoiding the front and preferring to warm a seat in administration. Princely interference in army affairs is also depicted in the novel.

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The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.
~ Nelson Mandela